



The December massacre in the Gambella region
and its political aftermath: Analytical report

(July, 2004)

On December 13, 2004 Gambella town experienced one of the worst violence ever occurred in the region. Although estimates vary, a good number of civilian Anywaa who were living in Gambella town perished in number. A conservative estimate put the figure to 67 whereas Anywaa and human rights accounts estimated more than 400. The perpetrators of the violence were people locally referred to highlanders, group of people who come from different parts of the country in search of work opportunities¹. The trigger for the violence is the attack of a UN plated Van which killed eight highlander officials and workers of ARA (Administration for Refugee Affairs), a government partner organisation to the UNHCR. This incident was preceded by a series of ambushes by armed groups of Anywaa on the highlanders.

Various explanations have been put forwarded to explain what caused the violence. For the Anywaa, it is a culmination of the genocidal project which their neighbours and the state have been plotting for long time. Accordingly, this is so because the Anywaa have occupied strategic resources such as fertile land, gold and in recent times oil. Thus, the Anywaa employ a theory in conspiracy to explain the violence. Anywaa`s neighbours define the conflict situation differently. Accordingly, the underlying reason for the escalation of conflict is the Anywaa`s claim for a political ownership of the Gambella region on the basis of history (first comer right) and current settlement pattern². This political aspiration has been materialised in terms of the dominant position the Anywaa have occupied over more than a decade in the newly created Gambella regional state. It is this exclusionary political practice, argue their neighbours, which have collided the Anywaa with the Nuer, the Majanger and now with the highlanders. The Ethiopian state, on its part, has variously located the root cause of the problem; from a resurgence of “ancient hatreds” to sabotages by “anti-peace” forces, to problems of underdevelopment and lack of good governance.

What happened on December 13 was a violent expression of the highlanders pent up grievances. It was preceded by a series of indiscriminate killings of the highlanders by armed Anywaa groups. The targets were largely civilians (construction workers;

¹ The boundary between the highlanders and the local people is marked at different levels. Above all, it is constructed through a discourse on color: the black Nilotes are contrasted with the red highlanders. By definition, all the non-Nilotic people are considered highlanders which in practical terms mean Ethiopia minus Gambella. A similar discourse on color is made socially relevant in the neighboring Benishangul regional state (See Feyissa, Evaluation report on Pax Christi`s Gambella Peace Project, 2003, for a comprehensive description of the social setting of the Gambella region)..

² Six of the nine districts in the Gambella Peoples National Regional State (GPNRS) are recognized as Anywaa constituencies.

teachers, nurses, passengers and daily labourers). During the months of August and November more than 20 highlanders were ambushed along the Itang and Pinyudo road. In early September, the highlanders petitioned to the regional council to stop the killing and they expressed their anger at what they called the unwillingness of the Anywaa dominated regional council to ensure the safety of the highlanders and bring the perpetrators to justice. It is this bitterness which contributed to the mob violence that culminated on December 13. As some of the victims of the Anywaa violence were members of the army it would not be too speculative to say what happened on December 13 was a mix between mob violence and the complacent and partisanship of the federal establishment in the region. Although the violence had its extreme manifestation on December 13, ultimately it is located in the complex inter-group relations and the changing relations between them and the Ethiopian state. In the following I will make an attempt to analyse the background which led to the December violence and its aftermath.

. Ethnic federalism and new relations of dominance

The people of the Gambella region have long occupied a marginal position on matters of local governance and degree of participation in national politics. Phenomenologically, 'integration' into the Ethiopian polity had meant loss of political autonomy, economic marginalisation and assumption of a spoiled identity (experience of slavery and the social stigma associated with it)³. Against the backdrop of a limited and largely failed integration of the local people during the imperial and Derg periods, the implementation of ethnic federalism in 1991 has created a new political space and institutional design to further promote local empowerment. Whichever criteria was used to determine the establishment of regional states, the creation of the Gambella Peoples National Regional State (hereafter the GPNRS) appears to be one of the most visible political steps ever taken by the Ethiopian state to integrate its historic minorities. By a sheer political fiat Gambella was initiated from an obscure district to a regional state. This has principally meant a tremendous flow of financial resources from the federal government to the GPNRS to meet the demands of the new political reality, which is above all reflected in the form of a construction boom and expansion of social

³ It is the experience of slavery, which accounts for the root causes of the stigmatization of the border people, a stigma that still survives in some sections of mainstream Ethiopian society. The people of Gambella still experience social discrimination in the streets of Addis Ababa. They are referred to bariya or euphemistically Lemma.

services. Local empowerment is also reflected in redistribution of administrative power. Well beyond the tenuous imperial cooption of local leaders and appointment of few local people in the regional administration during the Derg period, in post 1991 Gambella all administrative post are occupied by the local people. In fact, in a dramatic reversal of power relations the highlanders who had long dominated the region's politics have now assumed a subordinate political status. On the social scene measures have been taken to promote local languages although for practical reasons Amharic is retained as the language of the new regional government. The three major languages of the region– Anywaa, Nuer and Manjangir- are taught in the schools as a medium of instruction and as a subject. The regional bureau of education has supported popular culture through printing folkloristic literature. Although developing the local culture has a long way to go it had already the effect of regaining ethnic pride and individual dignity. Confidence in one's culture is evident in aspects of retraditionalisation. In 2001, for instance, four *kwaros* (Anywaa village headmen) were reinstated in different districts.

As part of local empowerment affirmative actions have also been taken especially in the field of education and in the job market. As a result, educational facilities in Gambella showed remarkable growth; an 83.6% increase in the number of elementary schools with a 75% increase in the student population⁴. The number of secondary schools rose to six; facilities in the Teachers Training Institute were enlarged. In 1997 the Institute was upgraded to include junior secondary school teachers training and in 2001 the Institute was promoted to a college with a diploma program in Education and Health. New training opportunities were created and between 1996-2001 more than 650 short-term and 158 long- term training positions abroad were offered; 270 in- country positions were organized and around 120 personnel were admitted to the Open University program. A particular point of attraction for the new generation of educated local population is, however, the new government sponsored Ethiopian Civil Service College (hereafter the ECSC). The ECSC was established in 1995 with a view to create conditions under which civil servants working in the newly created regions can better serve the people by training them in various skills and professions, giving special emphasis to admission of women and students from backward regions. It was established specifically to meet the urgent manpower needs of the regional governments in the context of decentralization and devolution of power from the central government, such that

⁴ Data from the Bureau of Education, Gambella town.

nations and nationalities have the right to determine their own affairs and the capacity to do this⁵. This has created unprecedented new career opportunities for local aspirants in the modern sector, which otherwise needed to overcome the stiff competition in the national school exit examinations to join any of the colleges and universities. More than 200 students from Gambella have been enrolled in the ECSC, out of which around 50 graduates are currently working in the Gambella regional state at various capacities.

The affirmative measure also includes preferential treatment of the locals in the job market. This policy has introduced new entitlement categories: *tewelaj* (locals) and *mete* (outsiders/ the highlanders). Under the category of *tewelaj* (which literally means 'one who is born there' in Amharic) are people of descent from one of the five 'indigenous' ethnic groups: Anywaa, Nuer, Majangir, Opo and Komo; those who are of mixed parentage from one of these nationalities (either through their father or mother); one who has a brother or a sister from one of the nationalities (through either the mother or father's line); and those who are married into one of the nationalities⁶. The preferential treatment includes employment opportunities for the *tewelaj* as a 'birth right' and a two years experience bonus to give them a more competitive edge vis-à-vis the *metes*⁷. Fifty seven percent of the civil servants in the Gambella regional state are highlanders. At a national level educated Anywaa and Nuer have assumed important portfolios such as ambassadorial posts and in other federal institutions.

Despite a promising start (formal and symbolic aspects of local empowerment) the political blessing has turned out to be a curse for the majority of ordinary men and women who are phenomenologically experiencing the federal experiment as escalation of conflict. Conflict has occurred among the various groups of people for long time but since 1991 it has assumed a more violent form further solidifying the boundary-making process. In 1991 militant Anywaa killed a number of educated Nuer when a party, which claims to represent the Anywaa, took control of the regional state of Gambella. In the same year Anywaa villagers massacred hundreds of highland farmers. In 1992 the highlander business community in Itang district perished in numbers when a Nuer prophet campaigned to liberate Gambella from the

⁵ Ethiopian Civil Service College Brochure.

⁶ Gambella People National Regional State, Civil Service Bureau, Guidance on recruitment procedure.

⁷ Despite the preferential treatment of the *tewelaj*, the *metes* still have incentives to work in the Gambella region, where there is job opportunity for professionals. In fact, the new

“red people”. Feeling insecure and angered by the massacres the highlanders burst into mob violence killing any “black people” in Gambella town. Meanwhile, a series of violent confrontations erupted between the Anywaa and the Nuer in 1992 that lasted until 2002. These clashes cost the lives of many people, destroyed entire villages and produced thousands of internally displaced people. Since 2003 there is a renewed tension between the Anywaa and the highlanders that culminated in the massacre of hundreds of Anywaa in Gambella town on December 13, 2003. More than a decade after local empowerment the Gambella regional state has been plunged by political instability. Far from being in order the new political house has proved to be a nightmare. Ironically a periphery where ethnic federalism and group right are supposed to have a better ideological purchase has turned out to be one of its weakest points where the system is seriously faulting. What has gone wrong?

The primary reasons why the federal experiment is faulting are because the post 1991 political order has produced new political minorities and the various groups have failed to strike a political bargain and articulate a regional interest. Instead they have sought to capture fragments of the regional state and its institutions. In the event, they have all increasingly realized the “rationality” of violence in the politics of group entitlement.

Gambella regional state is still deficient in local professionals such that it has to rely on professionals from other regions and from the center.

Natives and outsiders: The highlanders as 'inconvenient' minority

The politics of inclusion that aims at promoting the local people has contained within itself exclusionary currents. In fact, by definition the highlanders emerge as a residual category in the new political dispensation because they “belong” to one or the other ethno regional states. They are neither recognized as a separate political constituency nor reorganized by their ethnic affiliation. Individually, despite the constitutional right that accord any citizen the right to elect and be elected as long as he/she is competent in the local languages practically a more primordial classification is adopted in the politics of group entitlement, a local political practice which is initially validated by EPRDF’s exacerbated notion of group equality. At the height of local empowerment in the mid 1990s attempts were made to force out the highlanders from the Gambella region. Despite their formal political subordination, the highlanders constitute an inconvenient minority in demographic, economic, linguistic and political terms. According to the 1994 census the highlanders constitute 25% of the region’s population that makes them the third largest group. Economically they dominate the exchange sector. More decidedly they provide more than 50% of the skilled labour in the new regional bureaucracy. Although the affirmative actions have already produced a generation of educated local manpower the highlanders are still predominant in the civil service sector. Better competence in the language of the regional government has also offered them an additional competitive edge in the job market, a gap, which will even be more evident in the future unless efforts are made to enhance the local people’s competence in Amharic as a practical, if not hegemonic language. As it stands, the language policy will ultimately disadvantage the local people who are increasingly becoming less competent in the language of the regional and federal governments. The political status of the highlanders is also further complicated because of their identification with the national state. Like its predecessors, the central government is still represented by people who are readily categorized as highlanders both by the local people and resident highlanders. On the discourse on colour, therefore, the federal state falls on the “red” side of the equation. This has created a structural incongruity. On the one hand, the highlanders are formally removed from the region’s politics. On the other hand they are connected, albeit discursively, with a higher form of power, turning them into “significant others” in the political struggle among the natives.

In everyday life such structural incongruity is reflected in a steadily growing sense of insecurity both in physical terms and economic wellbeing. This state of affairs seems

to have generated an extractive mindset in economic terms, which is above all reflected in repatriation of capital. To date, there is no serious investment by resident highlanders in the region. Whatever profit is made it is promptly repatriated to their “home” regions. In the civil service the anxiety that they are replaceable by the locals sooner or later has brought about apathy for work. Denied of any political representation and a growing sense of insecurity, the highlanders are attributed with, perceived or real, a dubious political stance in inter-group relations among the natives. Under the circumstances they have found themselves in, the highlanders are far from playing a constructive role in the political economy of the new regional state of Gambella.

The political status of the highlanders in the Gambella regional state raises fundamental question at the national level: balancing group and individual right and what it takes for categories of individuals to attain group right. Apparently, the notion of citizenship (embedded in liberal political values) could solve the problem if it were pursued in the manner, which would not endanger group right. But empirically population movement in Ethiopia is uni-directional, from the north to the south, following the resource logic. Although the reverse movement is possible in principle (such as the people of Gambella making a living in other regional states), it is not a practical reality. This unidirectionality has political connotations in identity politics.

Competing bases of entitlement among the natives

The problematic of group right is also acted out among the natives, making the issue of entitlement and ownership ever contestable. Groups, which appear natives in one context, found themselves outsiders, latecomers or junior partners in another context. The object of struggle is the new federal pie. In the competition to dominate the new political space created by ethnic federalism the groups are variously positioned in the degree of “nativeness”, thus invoking different ideologies of entitlement. This is so not only because of difference in settlement history, settlement pattern or demographic size but also lack of a standard in the politics of entitlement at the national level. The problem starts in the very definition of the social units. The constitution vaguely puts three categories of people as the legitimate form of social organization and unit of political action: nation, nationalities and peoples. Nowhere these units are properly defined except for what they collectively stand for: “common language, similar psychological makeup and those who live in a contiguous territory”. If the reference point is the Stalinist definition of “the national question”, these terms have a direct

bearing on issues of entitlement. Nations are historically well developed and attained a higher form of collective consciousness. Under the context of a repressive regime nations are thus qualified to form a state of their own. Nationalities, on the other hand, are those, which have attained a lesser degree of historical consciousness, thus qualify only for a regional autonomy. Which ethnic group is qualified for which status is not spelled out in Ethiopia but we do hear the official use of these terms for one or the other ethnic group. Thus, the Amhara, Oromo or Tigreans are often referred to as “nations” (*biher*) whereas the rest are referred to as either nationality (*behereseb*) or peoples (*hizboch*). Apparently the difference in usage seems to be related to the demographic size of the groups. But to add to the terminological confusion, the Harari, one of the smallest ethnic groups, is also referred to as nation, thus accorded with the status of a regional state. In the absence of a standard definition the politics of entitlement in the multi ethnic regional state draws on a wide array of ideologies of entitlement.

Judged by their demographic size, settlement pattern and experience in modern politics the two “native” groups which have dominated the political process in the Gambella regional state are the Anywaa and the Nuer. Here a different exclusionary rhetoric is invoked in identity politics. The Anywaa claim to own the regional state or at least aspire to be the dominant political force in the GPNRS. Various bases of entitlement are forwarded to justify this claim: settlement history (indigenism); current settlement pattern (land size), contribution to the regime change and degree of connection with the national centre. Confronting a competitive ethnic other armed with a wide variety of ideologies of entitlement, the Nuer have gone defensive through counter narratives and creative strategies of entitlement.

The exact settlement history of the Gambella region is not yet established. Existing historical works and oral tradition, nevertheless, accrue a relative seniority to the Anywaa in most of the current districts of the Gambella region. Although both groups have a history of migration and a shared Nilotic origin somewhere in present-day southern Sudan, the Anywaa are said to have migrated to their present-day settlements since the 18th century (Ogot, 1967; Perner, 1994). Nuer migrations to the Gambella region, on the other hand, started in the second half of the 19th century. The Nuer migration to the east had resulted in the displacement and assimilation of many Anywaa and other neighbouring peoples. This difference in settlement history and memory of loss is one of the Anywaa’s arguments for ownership right over the Gambella region, a claim that is reinforced by current settlement patterns. The

Anywaa live in six of the nine districts of Gambella, although dispersedly along the major rivers of the region⁸. Nuer settlements, however, are largely confined to two districts. Pastoral expansion that is primarily driven by access to vital natural resources (dry season pasture and water points) and the nascent process of urbanization however has brought groups of Nuer into areas which are traditionally regarded as Anywaa territories⁹. Nuer resource expansion has occurred largely through micro processes (inter-ethnic marriages and friendship networks), a social process which has nevertheless assumed a new political visibility in the context of post-1991 group politics. As the unit of administration and political action of the federal establishment is the *wereda*, who owns how many *weredas* has direct bearing on the power and wealth sharing arrangements.

The political significance of the land, on the other hand, has activated a particular kind of social memory with an accent on the narrative of loss. Thus, the 19th century Nuer pastoral migration has become the historical scope of reference to define who is an 'authentic' native to Gambella. In the politics of memory that is intimately tied with issues of entitlement, history of interdependence and symbiotic exchanges has been under-communicated. Instead, memory as a political resource and current empirical processes (continuing expansion of the Nuer) are wedded to produce evidence for a belief in conspiracy: The fear that the Nuer will ultimately take over the Anywaa lands. The new scheme of interpretation has generated a deep sense of anxiety and a discourse on fear of extinction, which further legitimate an ideology of power and animate a political practice, which appear a project of containment. In the event, the crucial political significance of the land has also made Nuer access to vital natural resources increasingly precarious.

These historical and moral claims, however, needed to be validated by the 'meta' power – the relative political distance or closeness the various groups had with the winning EPRDF. Relatively speaking, Derg's projects of control and the cultural revolution had pressed Anywaa ethnic sensibilities more than the Nuer. Moreover,

⁸ The Anywaa land claim makes up at least 70% of the region's land mass. Some Anywaa even entertain an irredentist claim over the two districts of Jikaw and Akobo, which are currently predominantly settled by the Nuer.

⁹ With a low level of production technology only 2.4 % of the arable land is cultivated. Further, the scarce land type is the fertile alluvial riverine land, suitable for moisture cultivation during the dry season. This land type covers only 0.5% of the total land area of the region, most of which falls within Anywaa territories.

the power sharing arrangement reflected an imbalance¹⁰. By the 1980s the political alienation of the Anywaa has crystallized into a liberation movement called the GPLM. The Anywaa based GPLM carried out sporadic attacks on the Derg establishments in the Gambella region, including the resettlement villages. In 1989 the GPLM made contact with the EPRDF and participated in its offensives against the Derg in the western front. It is this political alliance that ultimately determined the nature of the political process in post-1991 Gambella. When the Gambella regional state was created in 1991 it was the GPLM, and through it the Anywaa, which took control over the regional government whereas the Nuer were associated with the defunct regime.

The terms of the political debate among the natives has also extended to the level of citizenship. Apparently this debate features a twist to the political parameters at the national level. At a time when the national identity has been busily deconstructed it is fiercely and discursively (re) constructed at the periphery. This is because the Ethiopian state has for the first time substantially delivered at the periphery. Ascertaining or claiming Ethiopian national identity has, therefore, connotes a category of entitlement. In the competition for power the Anywaa elites have defined their Nuer counterparts as foreigners. This definition is made plausible at a number of levels. One frame of reference is settlement pattern. Although both the Anywaa and the Nuer live in southern Sudan and in Ethiopia, the 1902 boundary agreement has placed the majority of the Anywaa into Ethiopian domain whereas the majority of the Nuer became British subjects in southern Sudan. The most convenient evidence in the citizenship debate is, however, the alternative citizenship widely practiced by the Ethiopian Nuer in the 1980s depending on the changing opportunity structures in the two countries. In the 1980s it was more rewarding to be a southern Sudanese refugee than an Ethiopian citizen. Denied of access to basic social services a number of Nuer youth joined southern Sudanese refugee camps in Gambella. Besides, refugee camps were safer than villages¹¹. It is this category of Nuer who have become vulnerable to the politics of exclusion in post-1991.

Equipped with a wide variety of ideologies of entitlement the Anywaa elites have dominated the new political space. This has above all reflected in inequality in power

¹⁰ The administrator and party secretariat were Nuer. This greatly aggrieved the Anywaa who felt taken over by the latecomers.

¹¹ The second half of the 1980's witnessed a series of conflict between SPLA and the Ethiopian Nuer in Jikaw district. As a result of this conflict all the schools were closed down.

and wealth sharing. In the three rounds of local and regional elections the Anywaa have disproportionately dominated the political representation in the regional council and have occupied key managerial posts in the regional bureaucracy.

Table 1 Political representation in the regional council

<i>Groups</i>	<i>1992</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>2000</i>
Anywaa	9	24	28
Nuer	7	10	19
Majangir	3	5	4
Opo	-	1	1
Komo	1	1	1
Highlanders	1	-	1
Total	38	42	55

Table 2 Allocation of posts in the regional ministries

Year	Regional ministries	Anywaa	Nuer	Majangir	Opo	Komo	Highlanders
1992	20	15	3	1	-	1	-
1995	19	14	4	-	-	1	-
2000	19	13	5	-	-	1	-
2002	18	11	6	-	-	1	-

Reacting to the Anywaa exclusionary practices the Nuer have resorted to various strategies in their politics of inclusion. Historically they invoke wider scope of historical reference that ascertains a common Nilotic origin with the Anywaa. This is further substantiated by an invocation of a myth that connects a section of the Nuer (the Jikany) with the Anywaa. The contestation in the historical plane is reinforced by a cultural logic. According to Nuer culture the time frame for localization is shorter and very flexible. Individual Nuer could easily change his clan affiliation and place of residence. In the new exclusionary context they have found themselves in, the Nuer defend their movements as part of the “natural” order of things. From this perspective, let alone a century old migration, recent and ongoing population movements are culturally made plausible and morally defensible. Besides, the Nuer

have invoked their concept of ownership in the contestation. According to Nuer culture ultimate ownership of natural resources belong to *kwoth*/God (Evans-Pritchard, 1956). Access to rivers and land not directly occupied by another group is defined as part of the economy of commons. These levels of contestation, however self-serving and animate local political practice, have failed to bring the desired results. As a result the Nuer have resorted to extra-local strategies of entitlement.

In 1992 the Nuer established a political party called the GPDUP (Gambella People Democratic Unity Party) to challenge the political dominance of the largely Anywaa based GPLM. Operating within multiple constraints the GPDUP had remained a minor political force throughout the transitional period. The 1994 census result is the first political capital, which the GPDUP has used to renegotiate the asymmetrical power relations between the two parties and through them between the Anywaa and the Nuer. The census has produced a new political fact in identity politics. According to the census the Nuer constitute 40% and the Anywaa 27% of the region's population. This seemingly denotative description has induced a performative act. Overnight the Nuer were transformed from a largely "foreign" people to an ethnic majority. This new political context has aggravated the Nuer sense of relative deprivation. Ever since the census result has been made public Nuer politics has gravitated towards a demographic strategy of ethnic entitlement:

The Anywaa have fiercely contested the census result. They argue that the census has left many Anywaa kebeles uncounted. Above all, they consider that the Nuer population figure is inflated because many of the Nuer who were counted are either migrant from southern Sudan or from the refugee camps. The controversy surrounding the census has questioned the historical and moral legitimacy of the Nuer political strategy. This has induced mutual contestation and ultimate radicalization of their respective political strategies. The more demographic the Nuer go the more the Anywaa cling to the landed political strategy. It is these conflicting political strategies of entitlement that have underlined the escalation of conflict in the Gambella region. The entitlement issue has permeated various domains of life: from power sharing to access to natural resources; from wealth sharing to language choice. In 1998 there were series of conflicts between the Anywaa and the Nuer villagers in Itang district where Nuer pastoral expansion has assumed a new political visibility. Resource-related population movement is no longer a matter of local affairs but it has come to designate the expansion of Nuer political constituency, and ultimately threaten the Anywaa's land-based political strategy. Similarly there were series of student riots between 1999 and 2001 in Gambella and Itang towns because

of the entitlement issue engendered by the new language and education policy. Although the GPNRS has adopted Amharic as the language of the regional government the issue of language choice is suspended. In the event both the Anywaa and the Nuer have anticipated that the language, which grows faster, would replace Amharic as the language of the regional government. Besides, which language is taught in which district has come to signal political ownership of the district under contestation and the region in general. Thus, when Nuer students demanded to learn in their language in Gambella and Itang towns the Anywaa officials promptly rejected the demand on the ground that both towns fall within historically Anywaa territories.

Obsession with group right has raised the question of who “owns” the regional states. Six of the nine regional states that constitute the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia bear the name of one or the other ethnic group sending a political signal on matters of ownership. This is the political context within which ethnic groups in the multiethnic regional states such as the Anywaa have sought to capture or at least dominate a regional state by invoking a wide variety of ideologies of power. Although Anywaa territoriality is embedded in their mode of identity formation (rooted in a historical sense of place) it is (re)constructed in its radical manifestation in the context of the post-1991 identity politics that has imbued the land with a new political significance. In Anywaa perspective, if the Amhara and the Oromo are given their own regional state they do not see why they should be deprived of the same right over a region which they regard as their home or at least take their late comer neighbours as junior partners at best. The question of ownership, which is initially raised in relation to a competing ethnic other, has ultimately extended vis a vis the federal state, manifested on issues related to control over strategic resources¹².

2) The Anywaa-highlanders conflict as an extension of the Anywaa-Nuer conflict

The contestation between the Anywaa and the Nuer reached its pick in 2002 when the two communities were locked into violence conflict for over half a year. It was

¹² Currently this is expressed in the controversy that surrounds the discovery of oil in the Gambela region. The Anywaa claim this strategic resource by invoking Article 39 of the constitution which ensures self determination whereas the Federal government invokes Article 40 which accrue ultimate ownership of all natural resources. In a situation where the whole is defined as a mere sum of its parts, a lot remains to be desired before the full consent of the regional actors is secured to sacrifice sectional interest for the sake of the federal good.

only after the 2002 conflict that the federal government seriously intervened to settle the political problem in the Gambella regional state. One of the main political measures taken was a new-power sharing arrangement in which the Nuer's perennial political demand (proportional political representation in the regional council) was met. For more than a decade the Anywaa had been the politically dominant force. This they achieved through various ideologies of entitlement: from a first-come right (indigenism) to the politics of memory (the narrative of loss linked with the 19th century Nuer pastoral expansion and Anywaa territorial loss); from contribution to the regime change (the Anywaa resistance against the Derg regime) to manipulation of the land-based electoral regime (electoral constituencies are districts and the Anywaa claim six of the nine districts of the Gambella regional state). This electoral regime has long offset the Anywaa's demographic minority.

The Nuer have contested Anywaa political dominance through counter-ideologies of entitlement: from majoritarianism to appropriation of state discourse on the land ("land is for the state"). They capitalised on the census result which has produced a new political fact in inter-ethnic relations by suddenly redefining what was hitherto regarded by the Anywaa elites as Sudanese (thus "foreign") to an ethnic majority. The Nuer have also renegotiated their "foreignness" by producing new evidence for their citizenry status through national strategies (particularly during the Ethio-Eritrean conflict of 1998-2000). Although some of their strategies bore fruit, ultimately the Nuer resorted to violence as an act of 'noise-making' to receive a national political audience. By 2002 they became ready for a confrontation with the Anywaa and went for an offensive to dramatise their political subordination¹³. Much to their expectation the 2002 violent conflict between the Anywaa and the Nuer has attracted the attention of the federal government when the political crisis in the GPNRS became a source of political embarrassment. Responding to the Nuer majoritarianism framed in democratic rhetoric, the federal government introduced a new power sharing formula and administrative restructuring. This power-sharing formula was applied at different levels: in terms of redistribution of political power (the cabinet system) and administrative powers (equity in the distribution of regional ministries).

¹³ The political problem was focalized in the succession issue that surrounded the death of the Nuer vice president in 2001. More than a year the office of the vice president, which has been de facto allocated to the Nuer, had been vacant because the two parties in the ruling coalition (the Anywaa based GPLP and the Nuer based GPDUP) did not agree on their respective candidates. Although there were some Nuer members in the GPLP this party was for all practical purposes and intents represented Anywaa interest. At the height of the political rivalry the Anywaa helped establish a new Nuer opposition party called the GPDU which fielded its own candidate. The Nuer found this irritating and provocative.

In the new 'cabinet' system of the regional council which consists of 12 executives, the Nuer were allocated six (which they are supposed to share with the tiny Opo minority) while the Anywaa got the remaining six which they share with the relatively larger minority of the Majangir and the Komo.

Table 3 The new power sharing arrangement

Name of ethnic group	Number of seats in the Cabinet	Regional Ministries
Anywaa	8	15
Nuer	6	15
Majangir	2	5
Opo	1	1
Komo	-	1
Total	17	37

Although the pattern of allocation of the upper echelon's of power remained the same (the Anywaa have retained the office of the Presidency which they have been defacto allocated since 1991, the Nuer the vice president and the Majangir the regional Secretary), the 2003 power sharing arrangement has significantly redressed the Nuer's political demand – equitable political representation in the regional council and in the regional ministries. What the Nuer and the federal government consider as an act of political redress is, however, viewed by the Anywaa as usurpation of power, fuelling once again the question of who “owns” the GPNRS? As the Ethiopian state is ultimately identified by both the Anywaa and the Nuer with the highlanders, the Anywaa have represented the new power-sharing arrangement as an evidence for an emerging alliance between the Nuer and the highlanders. Even if there are some indications of the growing softening of the federal government towards the Nuer (that is related to a new inclusive rhetoric at the national level in post-1998 EPRDF)¹⁴ such state pragmatism is being represented by the Anywaa as yet another evidence for their theory in conspiracy: that the Nuer and the highlanders are conspiring to take over their land and destroy their identity.

¹⁴ This is in turn related to the resurgence of Ethiopian nationalism at the wake of the Ethio-Eritrean war (1998-2000) which the government appealed to as war mobilization rhetoric.

The federal intervention also introduced a change in the administrative structure. The restructuring of the administrative units was considered as part of the solution to the root cause of the Anywaa-Nuer conflict. The previous administrative structure consisted of two zones and nine weredas. Unlike in the other multi-ethnic regions, the zonal administration in Gambela was not ethnic based. In some multi-ethnic regions such as the SNNPR the main unit of administration and political action below the regional state is the ethnic-based zonal administration. Such territorialisation of ethnicity, no matter how contentious it might be in terms of long-term inter-group integration, it has nevertheless successfully contained competing territorial claims. This has enabled the evolution of a relatively stable and more cohesive administrative unit and political communities. This institutional design has not been set in place in the GPNRS¹⁵. When it was implemented in 2003 it was too late and under the circumstances of a deadly conflict. The reasons for this structural anomaly are many. For the Anywaa it has ensured double political representation in the two zones. For the Nuer it has made population movement a lot easier and with it an expansion of their political constituency. For the federal government ethnic zonation would be administratively costly should this entail the creation of at least zones for the three main indigenous groups (Anywaa, Nuer and Majangir). Whatever the reason(s), the delayed territorialisation of ethnicity is one of the root causes of the conflict in Gambella, generating and nurturing fears and a belief in conspiracies. For, one of the main political issues in the GPNRS is the discourse on fear of extinction. Perceived or real, there is a growing fear among the Anywaa that the Nuer will ultimately take over their riverine lands and with that ensure their political hegemony. In the absence of a constitutional guarantee, Anywaa politics has crystallized in the form of a project of containment. Here an ideology of power (a landed strategy of political entitlement) connects with an articulation of ordinary's people's fear. Anywaa political domination of the GPNRS is thus legitimated not only by settlement history (first-comer ideology) and contribution to the regime change but also the need to contain the ultimate "extinction" of Anywaa society. This mix between ideology and fear has made the political struggle appear existential. Thus, any move by the federal government towards an equitable power sharing is perceived as an emerging political alliance and conspiracy between the Nuer and the highlanders against the Anywaa.

¹⁵ The GPNRS is divided into two zones. Both zones represent mixed ethnic groups. Zone 1 consists of the Nuer, Anywaa, Komo, Opo and the highlanders (residents of Gambella town). In Zone 2 live the Anywaa, Majangir (in a special wereda) and the highlanders (resettled farmers).

The ongoing violence between the Anywaa and the highlanders needs to be situated in this inter- group dynamics.

According to the new administrative structure, the GPNRS is reorganised into two zones and one special wereda and the number of weredas is reduced from nine to six. The three weredas, which were abolished, are all Anywaa¹⁶. The abolition of the Itang wereda in particular has pressed Anywaa's ethnic sensibilities. For one thing, the division of the Itang wereda into Anywaa and Nuer seems to have legitimised the Nuer's claim over some parts of the Itang area which the Anywaa regard as theirs. Moreover, Itang has long remained the frontier of Nuer expansion into Anywaa territories. The Anywaa have thus perceived this administrative act as a plot by the EPRDF/highlanders to make them vulnerable to Nuer expansion. The Anywaa argue that without a strong Anywaa administrative power in Itang there would be nothing which would contain the Nuer.

The federal intervention also included the abolition of the various competing political parties which were identified as one of the root causes of the conflict in the GPNRS. At the time of the conflict there were four competing parties: the Anywaa based GPLP (Gambella People Liberation Party); the Nuer based GPDUP (Gambella People Democratic Unity Party). In 1998 the GPLP and the GPDUP merged, after a series of deadly confrontation, to form a ruling coalition called the GPDF (Gambella People Democratic Front). This merger was initiated and presided over by the EPRDF. Reacting to what they considered an imposition disgruntled Anywaa formed an opposition party the GPDC (Gambella People Democratic Congress). Although the GPDC included some Nuer and Majangir, it was largely an Anywaa initiative. In 2002 power struggle among the Nuer elites led to the formation of a splinter group called the GPDU (Gambella People Democratic Union). The GPDU enjoyed the support of the Anywaa. At the wake of the conflict between the Anywaa and the Nuer in 2002 the federal government/EPRDF abolished all the existing parties and helped establish new explicitly ethnic based parties. These are the APDO (the Anywaa People Democratic Organisation, the NPDO (Nuer People Democratic Organisation)

¹⁶ These are Itang, Gambella, Gog and Jor. Itang is apportioned between the Anywaa and the Nuer and the Anywaa part is lumped together with Abobo to form a new wereda called Alwero-Openo wereda. Part of Gambella wereda is also merged with Alwero-Openo and the remaining part, including Gambella town, is made a multi-ethnic district consisting of the Anywaa, Nuer and the highlanders. Gog and Jor weredas are merged to form a new wereda called Gilo wereda.

and the MPDO (Majangir People Democratic Organisation)¹⁷. Besides, these ethnic parties formed a new ruling coalition called the GPDM (Gambella People Democratic Movement). This has created a new political space for radical Anywaa (who militantly claim ownership right over the Gambella region, largely extracted from the former GPDC) to regroup into the new Anywaa party, the APDO. The APDO was swiftly dominated by the GPDC¹⁸. This new political space has narrowed the political difference among the Anywaa elite who have been deeply divided since 1998 when they were split into the GPLP and the GPDC.

At a more individual level, many of the prisoners of the 2002 Anywaa-Nuer conflict were Anywaa (from the regional president to the highly educated elites). This is partly because the group which had long dominated the regional state machinery before 2002 were the Anywaa some of whom have tried to use the administrative power in their struggle with the Nuer. Many more Anywaa were dismissed from their jobs, including 50 policemen. This category of disgruntled Anywaa have found it increasingly difficult to sustain themselves and their families and they see in banditry the only way out. It is this group of Anywaa who started the "shifita" movement which categorically killed the highlanders as a strategy of attention seeking and ethnicise their predicament. One of the frequently noted saying of the shifita was their threat towards the Anywaa who were still working with the government whom they consider as insensitive to their plight: "if we keep on killing the gaala [the highlanders] the state would turn on you as well and then you will join us", a strategy which appears to have carried the day. It is the repeated killings of the civilian highlanders which ultimately provoked the December massacre of innocent Anywaa in Gambella town.

3. The precedence of political control over a political bargain

Ever since the establishment of the GPNRS the federal government has been active in the political process. The overriding motive for the involvement has been, however, ensuring political control than facilitating the evolution of a political community that articulates a regional interest. Prior to the establishment of the Federal Ministry in 2002 the dubious and quasi-legal office of the political advisers represented the federal government. Ostensibly the office was designed to provide services as part of capacity building of the new regional states. Practically however the office functioned

¹⁷ This is much in line with the EPRDF's PDO strategy, establishment of People Democratic Organizations as satellites to control the political process in the regional states.

¹⁸ The last Anywaa president, Okello Akuway, is a member of the GPDC.

as defacto 'king-maker' wielding substantial clout in the region's politics. The political mandate of this office was never clearly defined but its tentacles were ubiquitous in the political economy of the region. One of the main "achievements" of this office was brokering an imposed merger between the two competing political parties. In 1998 the EPRDF presided over the merger between the GPLM and the GPDUP to form an umbrella political grouping called the GPDF (Gambella People Democratic Front). The GPDF was not a member of the EPRDF but it is affiliated with and controlled by it¹⁹. Within the GPDF the GPLM and the GPDUP continued to function as the Anywaa and the Nuer parties, respectively. When discontented group of Anywaa established an opposition party, the GPDC (Gambella People Democratic Congress), the EPRDF affiliated GPDF fiercely reacted to suppress it. Instead of being a new forum to build confidence and trust between the two conflict-ridden communities, the Anywaa and the Nuer, the political motif of the GPDF became elimination of the GPDC. No serious effort was made to strike a political bargain and accommodation between the competing elites. This was justified on the ground that the GPDC represent the militant Anywaa whose project is getting rid of the Nuer and the highlanders from Gambella. Although some ordinary Nuer and highlanders entertained a similar fear, the GPDC never got the chance to go public. If at all there is anything to judge its political orientation, its spectacular rise into pre-eminence at least among the Anywaa during the 2000 election suggest that it is a political force with a wider social base than its labelling as anti-peace and narrow by the GPDF²⁰. In the run up to the 2000 election members of the GPDC were imprisoned and their electoral success was cancelled in some districts. With the violent suppression of the GPDC the first attempt towards a meaningful opposition to the ruling GPDF was nipped in the bud, leaving an embittered constituency of largely an Anywaa extract. Having removed an opposition, the GPDF fractured into its rival units and ultimately dissolved in 2003 at the wake of the deadly conflict between the Anywaa and the Nuer. The GPDF was replaced by a new coalition called the GPDM

¹⁹ This represents yet another political anomaly in the federal experiment. The EPRDF has initiated and presides over the federal experiment as the dominant political force. The front consists of four parties that represent the four highland regions: the TPLF (Tigrean People Liberation Front); ANDM (Amhara National Democratic Movement), OPDO (Oromo People Democratic Organization) and SEPDF (Southern Ethiopia Peoples Democratic Front). None of the lowland/border regions and their parties are members of the EPRDF. In fact, these regions are referred to "backward" and "developing regions" and the parties are not yet democratic enough to join the EPRDF.

²⁰ Professionalism was also one of the main election issue championed by the GPDC. Although the kind of professionalism they raised was mainly an exclusionary strategy against

4. Political pragmatism versus a pro-active approach in addressing political demands

To date, none of the political demands of the various groups is addressed for what they are. The overriding framework of federal intervention is political expediency. Thus, the Anywaa were initially promoted by the EPRDF not so much because of the plausibility of their historical claims for ownership of the Gambella region or sympathy to their struggle for cultural identity. It was rather because of their contribution to the regime change, a political alliance that resonates the axiom, “new rulers, and new allies”. EPRDF’s sympathy with the GPLM had the effect of empowering the Anywaa whereas the Nuer were associated with the defunct Derg regime. This political favoritism has long remained the context within which Nuer politics of inclusion has escaped the attention it deserves. Even their extra-local strategies of entitlement such as instrumentalisation of the census have long failed to secure a national audience. It is only when the Nuer managed to frame their political demands in national terms that they have readily received recognition. In the event the Nuer went national to be local. They needed to go to Badime (participation in the 1998-2000 Ethio-Eritrean border conflict) to earn proportional political representation in the GPNRS. This war has created a new political space for the Nuer, a political capital and a new basis of entitlement. Thankful of their “gallant” contributions to the defeat of the enemy the federal government went extra miles to meet their perennial political demands. Circumventing the land-based political representation, the Nuer got eight additional seats in the regional council by the “grace” of the federal government. Still a more equitable political representation and the relevant institutional design to alley group fears had to wait for a deadly conflict between the Anywaa and the Nuer. It was only in 2003 when the conflict had become politically embarrassing to the federal government that a new power-sharing arrangement and an ethnic-based form of zonal administration were introduced, too late to earn the confidence of the parties to the conflict. Expectedly, the new power sharing arrangement that aims at greater inclusion of the Nuer in the regional politics is perceived by the Anywaa as usurpation of their ‘legitimate’ and a decade long political dominance.

Similarly the highlanders were initially defined as a political leftover and ‘guest workers’. No effort was made to integrate them into the political process despite their demographic size and economic clout. The post 1998 inclusive rhetoric at the

their “non-educated” competitors in the GPDF some members took it to mean a much needed

national level and the sudden shift towards professionalism (at the expense of the affirmative actions) has created a new political space for the highlanders to assert their group demands. The new federal civil service reform and the professionalism it implies is perceived as an infringement of local empowerment and the 'coming back' of the highlanders to regain their dominant position in skilled labor, further magnifying the categorical association between them and the federal state. Such pragmatically informed political intervention by the federal government has thus introduced fluctuating power relations in inter-group relations.

5. Informalisation of politics and the political rationality of violence

Against the backdrop of contestable bases of entitlement and in the context of the absence of a neutral and mediating centre, local agency has gravitated towards informalisation of politics; noise-making efforts in order to get a political audience, and ultimately the resort to violence as an effective strategy of entitlement. Thus, in lieu of formal participation in the political process, the highlanders' politics has gone underground in the form of lobbying to get a 'highlander-friendly' local leadership elected or bypassing the regional politico-military establishments and getting connected with the federal establishments, thereby creating dual centres of power. This dual centre of power is reflected in the social composition of the federal army and the regional police. Like other federal institutions the army is also manned by the highlanders, whereas the regional police force is manned by the local people. In the context of growing mistrust between the highlanders and the local people both seek justice to their 'respective' centre of power further consolidating the impression that after all the term highlander is a metaphor for state power.

Two anecdotes also aptly illustrate the degeneration of politics into noise-making and resort to violence. During the 1995 constitutional establishment of the GPNRS the minority ethnic groups were left out from the power sharing arrangement on the ground that they are *anasa*, numerically insignificant. Angered by this blatant act of exclusion, the representative of the Komo ethnic group fired in the regional council. It was only after this incident that his group was given a seat in the region council²¹. Similarly, the Nuer demand to learn in their language was met only after a series of school riots that cost the lives of many people and destruction of property. When the

transformation and development of the new regional state.

²¹ This incident is remembered as Duac Mac; in Nuer language it means firing gun, a name given to the representative of the Komo who fired the gun.

Majangir felt under-represented in the regional politics they sarcastically framed their political demands as “should we also throw stones like the Nuer to be heard?” It is no wonder that by 2002 the Majngir grew politically restless and violently confronted the Anywaa, the politically dominant force in the regional politics.

6. New policy issues and their effect on local politics

6.1 The new federal law and the question of regional autonomy

In 2002 a new law was proclaimed to enable the federal government to intervene in regional affairs when it finds it necessary such as the Anywaa-Nuer conflict. The new federal law is perceived particularly by the Anywaa power elites as an infringement of regional autonomy and through that subverting the Anywaa power. This new political leverage of the federal government is culminated in the eventual take over of the GPNRS as a care-taker government at the wake of the December massacre.

6.2 The new civil service reform and the political economy of professionalism

Contrary to its previous anit-intellectualist stance, the EPRDF has embarked on a new civil service reform²². The objective of the new civil service reform is to promote the development of an efficient, transparent, accountable, ethical and performance-oriented civil service. This macro level policy has, however, played into local politics. Above all, it has

- Affected the Anywaa power elites because most of them are not educated while occupying important managerial and administrative. The policy, on the other hand, has created a new career opportunity for the newly educated Nuer elites who, excluded in the power game by the dominant Anywaa, spent most of the 1990s making use of, the new educational opportunities.
- Created a new opening for the politically incapacitated highlanders to have a "come back" to the regional bureaucracy given their greater share in skilled

²² Political loyalty was the main criteria of party recruitment and EPRDF officials used to explicitly scorn intellectuals as conservatives and vestiges of the “old establishment”. In fact, during the Peace and Development Conference of 1991 that established the Transitional Government of Ethiopia, the University was given a chair in the national parliament representing the opposition block. Now professionalism is hailed as a critical factor in the very survival of the regime.

labour. This appears to have compromised the affirmative measures, which have been taking place throughout the 1990s designed to promote the "indigenous" people better compete in the job market²³. The reform has also created a new political space for the highlanders to be assertive over what they now regard their legitimate citizenry rights. Previously, they were considered by the "indigenous" power elites and the federal government "guest workers" at best and a political anomaly at worst.

6.3 The new resettlement program as a threat to regional autonomy

The Ethiopian government has embarked on a massive resettlement program to tackle the country's perennial problem of food insecurity since 2001. Dubbed as "voluntary resettlement", and designed to be implemented for three years, the program aims to remove 2.2 million people with a cost of US 220 million dollar. This program is contested at different levels. At the policy level, the resettlement drive has been criticised as complex, costly and in the end, wasteful. At a local level, although the program is apparently designed at intra-regional level, it has created a certain anxiety especially in the peripheral regions, which had hosted the bulk of the Derg's "involuntary" resettlement schemes. The issue has become more explosive in these regions because the pattern of population movements in Ethiopia is largely unidirectional. Whether spontaneous and voluntary population movement or state sponsored involuntary resettlement schemes it is often from the north to the south/west, not the other way round, i.e. people from the highlands have moved to the lowlands. In the context of Gambella this is perceived by the Anywaa elites yet another plot to take over their land, a political practice which ultimately leads to their extinction.

7. The political economy of oil exploration in the GPNRS

The first venture for exploring oil in the Gambela region was conducted by Chevron, an American company which discovered oil in the Sudan in the 1970s. Chevron conducted a study and discovered similar structures with that of the Sudan, although neither seismic survey was conducted nor were wells drilled in the region. More importantly the study identified the potential of up to 200 million barrels of petroleum deposit in Gambela. The interest in oil exploration in Gambela has been resumed

²³ This is more of a perception because some of the major tenets of the affirmative action are

since 2001 when a Canadian oil company, Pinewood Resources, through its local partner Gambela Petroleum, signed a memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Mines to take a concession in Gambela. The agreement was cancelled after the company failed to settle the five million dollar guarantee that the Ministry demanded. Next to sign an agreement was Ratia, a Swiss oil company. But like Pinewoods, Ratia also failed to observe the same demands²⁴. In June 2003 an agreement was signed between the Malaysian oil company Petronas and the government of Ethiopia²⁵. This multi-million dollar exploration deal is hoped to be “a major break through for the Ethiopian economy and bring about a positive change in the image of Ethiopia”²⁶ This has undoubtedly increased the significance of Gambela in the national interest of the country, a region so far relies on the federal government subsidy for more than 90% of its budget. The exploration deal includes 15,000 sq kilometres, largely falls within territories traditionally claimed by the Anywaa but currently settled by the Nuer. In return for the 25 years license it secured, Petronas agrees to pay a 5 % royalties for the Ethiopian government.

The prospect of oil discovery in the Gambella region has further fuelled the question of political ownership of the region. As “first-comers” the Anywaa put a claim on this strategic resource. To legitimize their claim they invoke Article 39 of the Constitution that ensures self determination which is above all understood as local control over resources. The federal government on its part invokes Article 40 of the constitution that which accrues to it ultimate ownership of all natural resources. In a situation where the whole is defined as a mere sum of its parts (EPRDF` s preoccupation with difference and deconstruction of the national center), a lot remains to be desired before the full consent of the regional actors is secured to sacrifice sectional interest for the sake of the federal good.

The oil issue is particularly propounded by the Anywaa diaspora in North America, which has been doing advocacy work ever since the exploration of oil in the GPNRS has been announced. Already in 2001 the ACANA (Anywaa Community Association in North America) wrote a petition to Talisman (the original company which won the oil concession) to pool out on environmental and political grounds. Although most of the designated oil fields found in areas currently settled by the Nuer (Akobo and

still in tact. The local people still enjoy the preferential treatment as long as they are available.

²⁴ Reporter, June 11, 2003

²⁵ Petronas ranks among the Fortune Global 500 companies. Currently it operates in 15 African countries

²⁶ Mohammed Dirdir, Minister of Mines, Irin, June 16, 2003)

Jikow) the Anywaa put a claim and advance their ownership right to these areas on historical grounds (Jikow and Akobo as traditionally Anywaa territories before the Nuer took them over). This is unfortunate political error made by the Anywaa elites - their failure to articulate the oil issue at a regional level. Otherwise, the oil issue will ultimately rekindle the Anywaa-Nuer conflict if the Anywaa persist on the ownership issue.

8. Access to military power

In the context of an increasingly marginalized political position in the politics of liberation in Southern Sudan, the Anywaa have taken a divided position. The atrocities of the SPLA in the late 1980s precluded any official gestures by the Anywaa politicians in the Gambela regional state, whereas the Nuer officials openly advocated for diplomatic recognition and military support for the Nasser faction (led by Riek Machar). The recapture of Pochala (the seat of Anywaa royal power) by the SPLA in 1996, the 'coming back' of the SPLA into the Gambela region (after Ethiopia severed diplomatic relations with the Sudan)²⁷, coupled with the new political reform in the SPLA (localization of power), on the other hand, has opened up new lines of political networks. The Anywaa SPLA commanders now frequent Gambela town and are in close touch with the Anywaa refugees in Kenya. It is through these Anywaa SPLA commanders that part of the 'project of containment' was planned to be materialized²⁸.

²⁷ The geo-politics of the Horn changed in the mid 1990s when the government of the Sudan, hitherto a staunch supporter of the EPRDF, adopted the project of political Islam. Fear of the spread of Islamic fundamentalism and diplomatic pressure by the US finally precipitated a major rift between the two countries which finally led to the resumption of mutual subversion by supporting each other's rebels, over night changing foes to friends. Despite the memory of a bitter fight in the early 1990s between the SPLA and the EPRDF, by mid 1990s both were ready to make a common cause against the new enemy: the government of Sudan.

²⁸ In the conflict between the Anywaa and the Nuer in Itang district between June- October 2002, the Anywaa were unusually armed heavily and the village of Eliya in Itang district became the military base for a final showdown with the Nuer.

Anywaa-SPLA connections



(In the middle stands nyieya Adongo; to his right and left are Anywaa SPLA commanders and administrators of Pochala district, March, 2001)²⁹

This has above all meant access to firearms and a sanctuary in the event of confrontation with the Ethiopian state. This seems to have enlivened the Anywaa's spirit of resistance. As events transpired later on, the two border districts of Pinyudo and Pochalla have become the main strongholds of Anywaa resistance.

There is also a latent SPLA political ambition over the Gambella region on the basis of racial solidarity and historical grounds. The SPLA capitalises on the salience of the discourse on colour in Gambella (the black Nilotic people versus the red highlanders) and define the people of the Gambella region as part of southern Sudanese people in geographic, racial and cultural terms. After all, two of the main ethnic groups in Gambella, the Anywaa and the Nuer, live on both sides of the international boundary. SPLA's territorial claims over the Gambella region is also legitimated by "historical" reason. There is a new historical account circulating in Gambella that Gambella was ceded to Ethiopia by the British upon the independence of the Sudan in 1957. This is a conscious manipulation of historical facts. The British were only leased an enclave in Gambella town as a trading post. According to Article IV of the 1902 boundary agreement, the British were allowed to establish a trading post along the Baro River, which came to be known as the Gambela enclave:

²⁹ This is despite *nyieya* Adongo's declared neutrality in the war between the SPLA and the government of the Sudan. In fact, the SPLA organized a high profile welcoming party for *nyieya* Adongo in Pochala and an elaborate speech was made by the Anywaa SPLA commander. The message was clear: 'Do your part for the New Sudan'. Like the NGOs operating in Pochala district, *nyieya* Adongo has no other alternative than making a *modus vivendi* with his superiors.

His Majesty the Emperor, King of kings, of Ethiopia, engages himself to allow his Britannica Majesty's Government and the Government of the Sudan to select in the neighborhood of Itang, on Baro river, a block of territory having a river frontage of no more than 2000 meters in area not exceeding 400 Hectares, which shall be leased to the Government of the Sudan to be administered and occupied as commercial station, so long as the Sudan is under the Anglo-Egyptian Government. It is agreed between the two High contracting parties that the territory leased shall not be used for any political or military purposes (Article IV, Treaty between United Kingdom and Ethiopia Relative to the Frontiers between Sudan and Ethiopia, Signed at Addis Ababa, May 15th, 1902)³⁰.

It is this piece of territory which was given back to Ethiopia when Sudan became independent. This historical fact does not legitimise, however, construction of new political communities. Whether Gambella joins southern Sudan or remains part of Ethiopia, however, depends on not only the political process in post-conflict Sudan but also how far Ethiopia manages to survive as a state. If the colonial boundary continues to be the main basis of maintaining or establishing a sovereign state the burden of history weighs in favour of inclusion of the Gambella region within Ethiopia.

9. Insensitive and inconsistent response by the federal government

The original response of the federal government to the crisis was "trivialising" the issue as a mere extension of tribal feuds between the Anywaa and the Nuer. As the crisis received a dramatic global audience the government was quick to blame the Eritrean government and other militant opposition groups particularly the OLF and the AI-Ithad. When this has also failed to be a plausible reason, yet another explainanda was advanced by the government: That the conflict is caused by few Anywaa and highlander narrow nationalists in league with disgruntled ex-soldiers. More crucial to the further complication of the problem the government has fiercely denied the allegation of the involvement of the army during the massacre. The various non-governmental sources testified the opposite. My own discussions with the various categories of people in Addis Ababa and Gambella also confirm the allegation that members of the armed force indeed involved in the massacre of Anywaa civilians in Gambella town³¹. Explanation of their involvement varies, though.

³⁰ The site was later changed to Gambella town because of the unsuitability of the Itang area to establish the port.

³¹ In its report to the national parliament on July 6, 2003, the CII (Commission for Independent Inquiry) confirmed the allegation that members of the army were involved in the December massacre

The Anywaa contend that it is not an isolated incident but rather part of a wider plot to eliminate the Anywaa through genocide. They believe that a decision was made by the federal government in favour of genocide because the Anywaa are considered as a threat as owners of the strategic resources in Gambella (Gold, land and oil) as well as the only group of people who are conscious, capable and willing to resist any encroachment. The highlanders and some Nuer, while acknowledging the involvement of the army, put the blame on the Anywaa because they are considered the one who provoked the crisis by indiscriminately killing innocent highlanders. The Anywaa are also criticised for their exclusive claim on ownership over the natural resources in Gambella. They counter the Anywaa claim that "we are killed because of the oil" with "the Anywaa are killing because of the oil". The contradictory modes of representation and definitions of the situation make the issue very difficult to comprehend. The situation demands a scrupulous identification of the various actors and stake holders in the ongoing political crisis.

My own impression is that the involvement of members of the Ethiopian Defence Forces (the EDF) is by now beyond a reasonable doubt. As the following visual images indicate there were surely elements of orchestration by government officials such as the high profile given to the bringing of the eight highlanders dead bodies to the regional council instead of the hospital; the sensational story that was spread that the highlanders were not only killed but brutally mutilated. These instances had the effect of stirring the highlanders` emotion which ultimately burst into mob violence. Some pictures taken by a local photographer on the day of the violence appear to have strengthened the complacency and provocative action of the army:



This picture illustrates the parade that accompanied the dead bodies of the UN/ARA workers. It passed through the town enroute to the regional council. Unusually the bodies were not first taken to the hospital but to the council to put a strong pressure on the leadership to take the necessary measure to stop the killing. Along the parade civilian highlanders started gathering until they formed a huge crowd which also accompanied the dead bodies to the regional council:



The highlanders crowd passing through the Baro Bridge on the way to the regional council

Upon arrival, the regional council was literally invaded by angry crowd of the highlanders some of whom started throwing stones on the building and destroying cars. The president skipped out of the council and saved his life. He would have been one of the main targets:

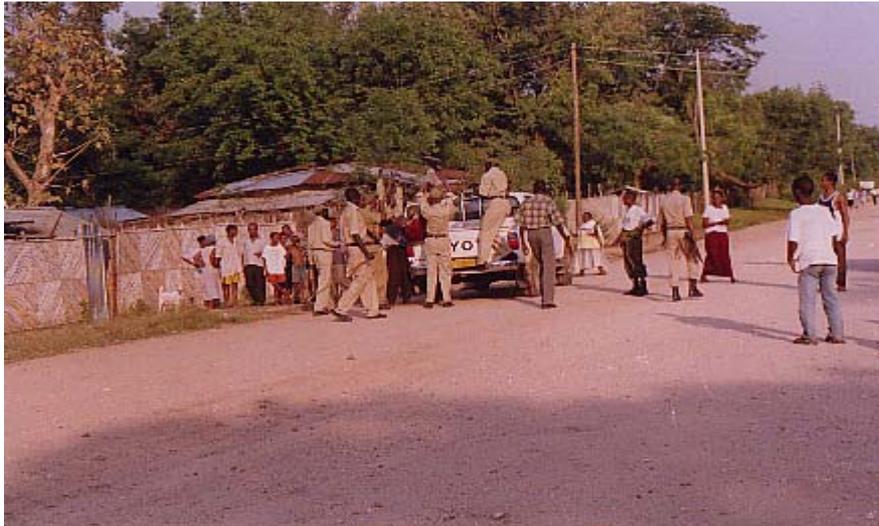


Encouraged by the absence of any force which could stop them in the regional council, the highlanders then marched to the town chanting and bragging for what appeared to have been a killing spree. As the following picture illustrates some of the highlanders were already carrying machetes and daggers while coming back from the council:



In less than six hours after the bodies were brought to the regional council the violence cost a number of Anywaa lives some of which was collected from the road:





But why members of the army were involved may not necessarily because they ordered by senior government officials to carry out a genocide, which the Anywaa seriously believe in. After all, throughout the Anywaa-Nuer conflict the police force was involved on both sides and their actions was not interpreted as a conscious decision by the Anywaa president or the Nuer vice president. Instead we need to look at deeper structural problems that have a lot to do with the new political dispensation - identity politics-in Ethiopia. I argue that the problem of partisanship should be sought in the failure to institute a neutral and professional regional bureaucracy. What we observe, instead, is that the various groups have sought to capture fragments of the state in the politics of entitlement. In no time the GPNRS has functioned non-partisan. When the highlanders were killed the Anywaa dominated regional leadership did not take it as its responsibility to bring the perpetrators in to justice. This lack of institutionalisation of the state machinery has meant the various groups have access to different forms of power. Like the police, which is parcelled out by the Nuer and the Anywaa partisans, the federal army, entirely manned by the highlanders from different parts of the country, seems to have identified itself with the highlanders. After all, members of the army were also targeted by the "shifita", provoking them to throw their lot in to the plight of the highlanders.

10. Appropriation of global legitimising discourse in the politics of ethnic entitlement

The discursive struggle for legitimacy in the definition of the situation is further complicated by differential access to human right discourses connected with global forms of power. In this struggle the Anywaa elites appear to be the winning team,

thanks to the effective advocacy work being done by their diaspora in North America. Before and after December 13 the Anywaa diaspora have launched an effective campaign to secure a global audience for their version of the situation. The Anywaa have defined the situation genocide and this has been readily validated by global human right establishments which have carried out "instant" validation research. The change in the definition of the situation from conflict to genocide (the triumph of the Anywaa discourse) is in turn feeding on to the Anywaa theory in conspiracy, a scheme of interpretation which is making a negotiated political settlement more difficult; for as Thomas noted long time ago, "if people define situation [the theory in conspiracy] is real, it is real in its consequences". The Anywaa are now militantly reacting to what they perceive as the widening conspiracy to dismember their existence.

Outlook

The main faulting line for the federal experiment in the GPNRS and the escalation of violence is the failure to form a workable political community that articulates its interest at the regional level. Far from being partners, the various groups, which compete for the political space, are locked into conflicting strategies of entitlement. As a result, the new political house is not in order. Fragments of the regional state are captured by one or the other group causing a structural paralysis. The net result of this political malaise is the escalation of conflict at different levels. Ironically a policy, ethnic federalism, which is hailed to promote inter-group harmony, has resulted in just the opposite. Unless serious effort is made to foreground the legitimate basis of each group's political grievance and rebuild trust among the contending groups, the terms of the political debate and the violent contestation of the bases of entitlement are likely to further undermine the viability of the regional state and with this the moral and political legitimacy of the federal experiment at large.