Africa Development, Vol. XXXI, No. 2, 2006, pp. 243–260

(ISSN 0850-3907)

Decentralisation as Ethnic Closure, with Special Reference to a Declining Negotiated Access to Natural Resources in Western Ethiopia

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Abstract

Between the Anywaa and the Nuer, the two neighbouring people in the Gambela regional state in western Ethiopia, the Anywaa are better endowed with access to and control over vital natural resources. Occupying an economic fringe, the Nuer have used various strategies to access these resources. After their initial violent expansion into Anywaa territories, the Nuer have largely reoriented their strategy to peaceful means: social networking and the instrumentalisation of inter-ethnic exchanges. This was due to their capacity to create a shared cultural space centring on the notion of the first-comer to regulate entitlement issues. In this paper, I explore the process of local-level integration and how decentralisation and the new political order have shifted the mode of inter-ethnic relations from compromise and negotiation to competition and confrontation. The paper argues that this is so partly because, despite the decentralisation rhetoric, the state maintains a hegemonic status by claiming ultimate ownership over the vital means of production—the land. Drawing on the experience of the Gambela regional state, the paper argues that decentralisation in Ethiopia has not brought its intended result—local empowerment. Instead, decentralisation is experienced in the form of elite political competition, while seriously undermining local forms of integration. Above all, decentralisation and the new political order have meant the growing relevance of extra-local bases of entitlement over natural resources.

Résumé

Entre les Anywaa et les Nuer—des populations voisines vivant dans l'état régional de Gambela, Ouest Ethiopie—les zones des Anywaa sont mieux fournies en ressources naturelles. Occupant une frange territoriale, les Nuer ont mis en œuvre

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plusieurs stratégies pour accéder aux ressources contrôlées par leurs voisins. Après une période d'expansion territoriale régie par la violence, les Nuer ont réorienté leurs stratégies vers des procédures plus pacifiques: le réseautage social et l'instrumentalisation des échanges interethniques. Cette nouvelle forme d'intégration a été possible grâce à leurs capacités à créer un espace culturel partagé, qui s'appuie sur la notion de premier occupant comme mécanisme de régulation de la propriété foncière. Dans cet article, j'explore la question de l'intégration locale et j'explique comment le processus de décentralisation et le nouvel ordre politique en Ethiopie ont déplacé le mode de relation interethnique du compromis et de la négociation à la compétition et la confrontation. L'article soutient que cette situation est partiellement due au fait qu'en dépit de la rhétorique sur la décentralisation, l'Etat continue à exercer son hégémonie sur la propriété foncière. S'appuyant sur l'expérience de l'Etat régional de Gambela, le présent article démontre que la décentralisation en Ethiopie n'a pas généré le résultat attendu, à savoir le renforcement des pouvoirs des acteurs locaux. Au contraire elle met en œuvre un processus de compétition politique élitaire et sape les formes d'intégration locale. Avant tout, la décentralisation et le nouvel ordre politique ont conduit à la pertinence croissante des bases extra-locales de la définition des modalités d'appropriation des ressources naturelles.

Introducing Gambela and its people

The Gambela region is located in western Ethiopia along the boundary with Southern Sudan. It covers an area of 23,000 square kilometres and according to the 1994 census the population figure is 200,000. Various registers of identification are invoked in social interaction, but two emic categories feature prominently in contemporary Gambela: ethnic and pseudo-racial. There are five ethnic groups living in the region: Anywaa, Nuer, Majangir, Opo and Komo. Demographically, the Nuer form the majority with 40 per cent, followed by the Anywaa (27 per cent), and Majangir (10 per cent). Anywaa and Opo are cultivators, Nuer are agro-pastoralists, while the Majangir are hunter-gatherers. The settlement pattern straddles the international boundary and both the Anywaa and the Nuer live in Southern Sudan, where the Nuer are the second most populous ethnic group and the Anywaa form a small minority.[1] Taken all together, more Nuer live in the Sudan than in Ethiopia, although they form the majority in the Gambela region. Meanwhile, more Anywaa live in Ethiopia than in the Sudan. Demographic incongruity is further complicated by settlement pattern. Anywaa numerical minority contrasts with their occupation of a larger area. In the Gambela region, six of the nine districts are inhabited by the Anywaa, whereas the Nuer inhabit two.

The second most important taxonomy in identification—apparently ecological, but with a strong political connotation—is the distinction between the highlanders and the lowlanders. Ecologically, a highlander is one who is

not from Gambela and comes from a highland region.[2] Ethnically, the highlanders are highly differentiated but the majority of them are ethnic Oromo, Amhara, Tigre and Kembata. Above all, this line of distinction represents a 'physical' boundary. The 'black' people (the Nilotic lowlanders) are contrasted with the 'red' people (the highlanders). According to this taxonomy, the Anywaa and the Nuer fall within the same category. The Anywaa use the term gala and the Nuer bouny to refer to the highlanders, with more or less the same connotation. Politically speaking, the term highlander signifies state power, for the highlanders have been identified with the Ethiopian state ever since the incorporation of the Gambela region in the late nineteenth century. In fact, both the Anywaa and the Nuer use the same term (gala and bouny, respectively) to refer to the Ethiopian state as well. As such, the highlanders constitute the 'significant others' in contemporary Anywaa-Nuer relations. One of the main features of contemporary Anywaa-Nuer conflict is, therefore, the various strategies they use to access the Ethiopian state (itself perceived as a highlander) in the local struggle for resources that underlie ethno politics. The highlanders comprise 25 per cent of the population of Gambela and dominate the business sector, although a growing number of re-settled highland farmers are engaged in cultivation and livestock keeping. Except in the regional capital where all the groups are represented, the highlanders are not neighbours of the Nuer and live with and in Anywaa villages.

Following the regime change in Ethiopia in 1991, Gambela was organised as one of the nine ethno-regional states within the new federal government. The new political order has reduced the highlanders to a residual category, for every highlander now belongs to one of the nine ethno-regional states. As a result, the Anywaa and the Nuer are the two major political actors in the new regional state of Gambela. Nevertheless, as the highlanders represent the federal government from the centre, the category of highlander is still a code word for the Ethiopian state in Gambela.

Natural resources

Key natural resources

The majority of the people in the Gambela region make a living from three key natural resources: cultivation land, grazing land and fish. The availability, quality and distributive pattern of these natural resources are regulated by the major rivers that flow through the region. One of the wettest in the country, the Gambela region is watered by four major tributaries of the White Nile River: the Baro, Akobo, Gilo and Alwero. The river system of the Gambela region involves a long flooding period that lasts for four months (between the months of August and November). Though detrimental when it

is intense, the flood nevertheless creates and regulates the distribution of key natural resources in the region, and is particularly vital for moisture cultivation and dry-season pasture. It is the ebb and rise of the rivers that regulate both crop and livestock productions. The Gambela region contains 129,014 hectares of cultivable land but currently only 2.4 per cent of this is being cultivated (GPBED 2000). Land holdings on average are 0.5 ha. Cultivation in the region involves three farming systems: sedentary rain-fed cultivation, moisture cultivation, and shifting cultivation.[3] Of the total cultivable land, 65 per cent is savannah, 30 per cent forest land, and 4.5 per cent marshland. Only 0.5 per cent is suitable for moisture cultivation, but it nevertheless supports a significant number of the farming population (Ellman 1972). In this fertile land, the Anywaa and the Nuer harvest maize and sorghum twice a year.

Grazing land is another important key resource in the region. The plains of Gambela are one of the most suitable areas for cattle production. Major sources of livestock feed are the open woodlands, riverine forest and woodland during the wet season, and the savanna grass land during the dry season. No other food supplement is provided to livestock. The relatively scarce pasture type is the savanna grassland which provides the main source of animal feed during the dry season. Settlements near the major rivers are best positioned to access these lands .Of the total land area classified as natural grazing area, only 64.2 per cent is currently utilised by livestock.[4] Livestock production is sustained by transhumance between wet season villages and dry season camps. Depending on the availability of grazing lands, the movement might also entail a third temporary dry season site in some parts of the region.

Fish is an important source of food particularly at the height of the dry season when cereal and diary food sources are in short supply, and in some parts of Gambela, there is commercial fishing in the form of sun-dried fishes. Gambela is one of the main riverine fishing regions of the country, next only to the Rift Valley lakes. The total amount of fish produced along the major rivers is 2409 tons a year and the average per capita fish consumption is estimated at 10 kilogrammes a year, which is considered to be the highest in the country.[5] The availability of fish in the river and the various lagoons created by the overflow of the rivers is one of the pull factors for the seasonal population movements in the region. As the river goes down, lung fish and turtles replace fish as a major source of food.

Distribution pattern

The Anywaa and the Nuer are variously positioned in the distribution of these key natural resources and they practice different livelihoods. The Anywaa are predominantly cultivators while the Nuer make a living off live-

stock production, although they are increasingly becoming agro-pastoralists. Access to natural resources is regulated by the settlement pattern and population densities. Thus, the Anywaa areas are better endowed with resources, for their major settlements are along the banks of the rivers and their scattered settlements explain low population densities. Their earlier settlement along the rivers gives the Anywaa ownership rights not only to the best part of the cultivation land, but also provides them a symbolic right over the adjacent rangeland. Nuer settlements, on the other hand, are far from the rivers and exhibit higher population density. As Table 1 demonstrates, there is a stark difference in the population densities of the districts:

Table 1: Land Size and Population Density of the Districts

District	Population	Area (sq. km)	Ethnic group living the district	Population density
Itang	21,613	1,837	Anywaa/Nuer	11.8
Gambela	33,217	2,859	Anywaa	11.6
Abobo	16,064	3,515	Anywaa	4.6
Gog	17,448	7,138	Anywaa	2.4
Jor	8,035	2,488	Anywaa	3.2
Akobo	28,712	3,830	Nuer/Anywaa	7.5
Jikaw	48,785	2,192	Nuer	22.5
Godere	37,104	1,939	Majangir	19.1
Total	210,999	25,802		8.2

Source: Ethiopia Statistical Abstract. Population density is in persons per square kilometres.

The variation in the population density becomes even more acute if we divide the districts by ethnic group. Of the nine districts, the Anywaa inhabits five; two by the Nuer and Itang is a mixed settlement area with a roughly equal population of both groups. The 1994 census results put the Nuer population at 40 per cent and the Anywaa at 27 per cent, indicating a stark incongruity in the land-people ratio. As a result the two Nuer districts (Akobo and Jikaw) show the highest population densities in the region. Such a human–land ratio explains the relative scarcity of land in the Gambela region. The scarcity becomes more evident if we take two variables into account: land type and production technology. There is three land types in the region:

riverine lands, marshland and forest lands. Of these land types the one in shortest supply but with the greatest demand is riverine land. These lands offer an ideal eco-system for agro-pastoralism of the type practised in the region. The four major rivers that flow through Gambela have created a productive regime sustained by the flood pattern of the plain lands. For one, these rivers replenish the fields with inexhaustible alluvial soil. In this soil, the Anywaa and the Nuer harvest twice with moisture cultivation during the dry season in addition to rain-fed agriculture. The riverine lands are also valued for the dry season pasture that supports livestock production. Most of these lands are found in traditionally Anywaa territories between Gambela, Itang, and Jikaw—districts that support the lion's share of the region's population. Furthermore, the low level of production technology accentuates the relative scarcity. Both the Anywaa and the Nuer practice hoe-cultivation. Thus, only 2.4 per cent of the cultivable land is utilised. Technological factors have also increased the attraction of the riverine land where the moisture cultivation does need labour intensive or high tech farming. Nearly 60 per cent of the moisture cultivation is in Itang district. Like the human population density, the livestock population density exhibits a strong variation which further compounds resource scarcity.

The natural grazing area of the region covers an area of 1,804,800 ha. A potential grazing area of 947,000 ha of the total estimated grazing area is extended over the eastern part of the region (Abobo, Gambela, Gog and Jor districts) with a minimum livestock population, thus under-exploited. Of the potential grazing area, about 47 per cent is utilised and is seasonally overstocked as the transhumant herds range over the area. They trek from the rivers during the wet season to use the accessible upland grazing area back to the perennial rivers during the dry season to use them for drinking water, and to take advantage of the new grass growth that persists in wetland areas. The remaining 452,000 ha of the grazing land is used only to a limited extent because it is too far from water sources during the dry periods or suffers from frequent inundation during wet-season flooding. There is, therefore, a growing pressure on a specific type of land, which is in short supply: the alluvial lands (moisture cultivation) and the dry-season pasture. Both are regulated by proximity to the major rivers, and, most importantly for inter-ethnic relations, largely fall within traditionally Anywaa territories. Access to moisture cultivation and dry season pasture, therefore, entails the Nuer transhumance between their wet season uplands and temporary dry season settlements along the rivers.

Overlapping language game and negotiated access to natural resources

Erickson (1991) introduced, drawing on the works of Wittgenstein (1983), the concept of language game to the field of ethnicity in order to identify inter-ethnic contexts. Applied in the field of inter-ethnic relations, the concept of language game 'indicates the local, contextual character of culture seen as the production and reproduction of shared meaning' (p.139). Accordingly, Erikson identified three inter-ethnic contexts where the degree of shared meaning is variable: same language game, where there is a wide consensus over values and modes of discourse; incommensurable language game (to the extent that there is disagreement over the rules constituting the relationship); and overlapping language game, a type of inter-ethnic relational context 'with an agreement as to the form and content of only some relevant aspect of the interaction' (p.140).

The cultural context of interaction between the Anywaa and the Nuer largely exhibits an incommensurable language game insofar as there is a fundamental difference in the modes of ethnic identity formation that introduce a certain degree of cultural opposition. For the agrarian Anywaa, villages are the centre of their social world; ethnic identity is territorialised and this is the basis for inter-ethnic exchanges. Ethnic identity is something which one is born into. Thus, claiming Anywaa identity entails both parents needing to be Anywaa. The Nuer life world (pastoral), and the identity discourse it embeds, is mobile—a contrast which is also evident in the constitution of their respective local communities. Unlike Anywaa villages, Nuer local communities could be transplanted into a new territory with new members who could claim full membership. To some extent, therefore, the Anywaa and the Nuer play a different 'language game'; when they use the term ethnic group, they refer to different ideas of collectivities. This underlying difference in their concepts of ethnicity is partly related to the conditions of their material existence and the life world each engenders. Nuer social and territorial mobility is partly dictated by economic imperatives, especially the uneven distribution of natural resources (particularly dry season pasture) that support the pastoral economy. Most of these key natural resources are found in areas inhabited by the Anywaa. Despite the qualitative difference in the nature of their, ethnic boundaries and the apparent Anywaa closure, the Nuer manage to have access to the Anywaa riverine lands through a transhumance production regime.

The initial encounter between the Nuer and the Anywaa dates back to the second half of the nineteenth century, resulting in the Nuer conquest of a large area of Anywaa territories.[6] The Anywaa made attempts to regain the

lost territories (Bahru 1976). Although they were not successful in their irredentist project, their resistance had the effect of re-orienting Nuer strategies of access to resources from violent to peaceful means, parallelling the symbiotic exchanges between herders and farmers elsewhere in the world. After the nineteenth century dramatic expansion, organised Nuer territorial expansion halted and various Nuer clans entered into peaceful exchanges with Anywaa villages (Jal 1987). This expansion has largely occurred through micro-demographic processes: instrumentalisation of inter-ethnic marriages and friendship networks. Typically, a Nuer man marries an Anywaa woman. This is initially beneficial to both partners. For the Nuer it is cheaper to marry an Anywaa whose bride wealth payment is lower; and for the agrarian Anywaa, the marriage ensures the flow of cattle wealth.[7] The Nuer anticipate additional gains from such exchanges: marriage ties are then used as a legitimising discourse in establishing settlements in Anywaa territories. These settlements gradually come to serve as a nucleus for more immigrants and, in due course, the immigrants outnumber the Anywaa, who are then left with the option of joining the Nuer kinship and political structures or leaving their villages in order to maintain their identity.

This social process is mediated through an incipient overlapping language game that centres on the notion of a first-comer. The Anywaa and the Nuer subscribe to different notions of a first comer. The notion of the first comer is tightly defined among the Anywaa, for territoriality is one of the principles of social organisation and governs inter-group relations. This is expressed in two interrelated Anywaa concepts: jobur and welle. Jobur are the original settlers of a village (first-comers), and welle are the guests who temporarily settle in villages other than their own (late comers). Some of the welle might stay for a generation or so and could have access to land and other natural resources but they will always retain the status of being a guest (Feyissa 2003a). Thus, the furthest a welle could go is earning the status of an 'honorary' village citizen, not full localisation.

As compared with the Anywaa, the Nuer recognise a very loose sense of territoriality. This is reflected in their three interrelated concepts: diel, rul and jang. A diel is a first-comer—what Evans-Pritchard (1941) called the aristocratic clan. A Nuer is diel only in a tribe where his clan has superior status (Evans-Pritchard 1941). If he goes to other areas where his clan is not diel he is considered rul, stranger. The general trend is that a rul attaches himself to a diel by marrying into the diel family and over generations his descendants will fully localise in the new place. A third category of persons is called jang, designating the non-Nuer who are either captives or join the diel on their own accord by relinquishing homeland ties. In a sense the

integration of the jang into the diel is more effective than the rul as they are cut off from their homeland relations. This partly explains why the diel Nuer are more interested in outsiders than fellow Nuer whose loyalty to a local community is precarious, as they could drop out and rejoin their natal community.

In both cases, however, newcomers are encouraged to join the diel, with the ideology eventually creating real social and economic ties. Being a guest among the Nuer is temporary, not a permanent statuses, like the Anywaa. Unlike the Anywaa jobur, therefore, the Nuer diel is an inclusionary framework. Despite such fundamental cultural difference, economic necessity and local forms of power have entailed an articulation of a shared cultural space for an overlapping language game to develop. Thus the jobur of the Anywaa was more or less equated with the diel of the Nuer, which led to the generalised Nuer acceptance of Anywaa seniority to the Gambela region, particularly those Nuer clans which border the Anywaa.

The majority of the Nuer who live on the Ethiopian side of the border, belong to the Gaajak tribe of the eastern Jikany. The Gaajak tribe comprises five clans: the Thiang, the Cieng Cany, the Cieng Wau, Cieng Nyajani and the Cieng Reng. Of these clans, the Thiang and the Cieng Reng have managed to invest more in the shared cultural space, allowing them better access to natural resources. In the early phase of the Jikany Nuer expansion to the east, the Thiang had occupied the position of an advance guard because of their genealogical seniority and occult power.[8] The traditional pattern was that the Thiang move into new (Anywaa and Dinka) territories, leaving their own behind to the following Gaajak clans. In the course of time, however, the Thiang have now occupied the best part of the rangeland between Itang and Jikaw districts, and have become more sedentary than all the other Gaajak clans.

The permanent settlement of the Thiang in these lands not only brought them into closer contact with the Anywaa but also deprived other Gaajak clans of their traditional avenues of expansion. Expansion as a strategy was pursued as long as the Nuer was not in competition with natural resources. Scarcity was addressed by continual eastward expansion, mainly at the expense of Anywaa territories, where most of the unused dry season grazing lands and the riverine cultivation lands are found. An increase in population and a growing pressure on the riverine land has generated competition over resources among the various Nuer clans, for they all compete for the same economic niche. In this changing economic context, the Thiang Nuer opted to invest in inter-ethnic peace not only to secure access to the riverine lands most of which fall within Anywaa territories but also to keep other Nuer out

of the economic game. As a result, the various sub clans of the Thiang have entered into economic exchanges with the Openo Anywaa through social networking, particularly inter-ethnic marriages and on the basis of mytho-history.

Although inter-ethnic exchanges involve a certain degree of asymmetry that favours the Nuer, it also involves elements of reciprocity and symbiosis. For the Anywaa, this has meant, in the context of continuous encroachment of their lands by the Nuer, creating a buffer zone to shelter them from less familiar, and often more hostile Nuer clans. For the Thiang this has meant unrestricted access to the Anywaa's riverine lands, particularly the under-utilised dry season pasture. In fact, the Thiang have come to consider all unoccupied Anywaa land as their 'hinterland', which they call nyam duar (frontier). Thus, they have developed a vested interest in the status quo and see themselves as strategically vulnerable in a strained relationship between Anywaa and Nuer, a view that is not shared necessarily by other Nuer clans.

Thiang settlement areas are coveted by other Gaajak clans, as they ideally combine fresh rangeland, access to Anywaa riverine lands and abundant fish reserves, and proximity to towns (as market outlets). Other Gaajak clans followed the Thiang example with various degrees of success. Coming from a war-ravaged part of Southern Sudan and a relatively resource-poor area the Cieng Reng clan has come to rival the Thiang in cultivating amicable relations with the Anywaa. The Cieng Reng were originally living at a place called Yom in the Sudanese Jikaw district along the border. In 1983, a small group of Cieng Reng from the Yom district in Southern Sudan came to Itang district and settled at a place called Makot, some 15 kilometres south of Itang town, strategically situated near the Baro River.

The settlement of the Cieng Reng at Makot was organised by a local political entrepreneur called Kong Diu. At the time of the settlement, Makot was a forestland that traditionally falls under the Anywaa village of Pinyman. Thus, Kong sought the consent of the neighbouring Anywaa for a settlement. Although the Anywaa were already committed to the Thiang clan, they welcomed the Cieng Reng settlement for the additional flow of cattle wealth it promised, and possibly as a caveat should the Thiang grow too powerful. From Makot village the Cieng Reng managed to establish exchange networks. They managed to obtain access to riverine lands through inter-marriages, sharecropping arrangements and informal purchase from the neighbouring Anywaa.[9]

By the early 1990s the Cieng Reng settlement extended into Itang town with the establishment of two satellite settlements. The successful insertion of the Cieng Reng into the local communities and the subsequent expansion

of their settlement have encouraged more Cieng Reng migrations from Yom and different parts of Jikaw to Makot village. At present, the number of Cieng Reng at Makot is estimated at around 2,000—one of the biggest Nuer villages in Ethiopia. Makot village has become very prosperous, combining a pastoral economy with an increased cultivation of rain-fed and riverine land, as well as developing new market outlets in Itang and Gambela towns. The Cieng Reng became de facto members of the kebele (the smallest unit of government administration) of the neighbouring Anywaa village.

Decentralisation as ethnic closure

In 1991 the ruling EPRDF (Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front) took an unprecedented political measure by radically reorganising the Ethiopian state and society by institutionalising ethnicity as a unit of political action and mode of social organisation. Empowering ethnicity is justified as part of the democratisation process and as a lasting solution for the 'nationality question' that has for long plagued the Ethiopian polity (Merara 2003). Accordingly, a federal system was set up with devolution of power to the newly created ethno-regional states.

At the local level, however, the decentralisation process has been primarily experienced in the form of heightened political competition among the ethnic elites and a growing inter-ethnic hostility. In the new Gambela regional state, decentralisation and the new political order that ensued has fundamentally altered the process of inter-ethnic integration that has been crafted through compromise, negotiation and newly shared interests (Feyissa 2003b). In the modern sector, decentralisation (ethnic federalism in the Ethiopian parlance) has been experienced as heightened competition between the Anywaa and the Nuer elites to dominate the new political space and the derivative rewards. In this struggle, the Anywaa and the Nuer elites employ different strategies of entitlement partly drawing on their respective cultural repertoire to enhance the plausibility of their claim as well as seek creative strategies. The Anywaa elites have appealed to two issues in order to facilitate political mobilisation. They organised a narrative of loss by invoking a particular kind of collective memory (the Anywaa territorial loss during the nineteenth century Nuer expansion) and connecting with the culturally embedded notion of Anywaa territoriality as ideologies of power and ownership right over the Gambela regional state. The Nuer elites were forced to resort to counter narratives. The initial outcome of this struggle was determined by their differential access to the Ethiopian state. The ruling EPRDF, largely on the basis of political expediency (contribution to regime change), validated the Anywaa claim. Thus, the Anywaa elites were politically promoted to dominate the new regional state of Gambela on the basis of their contribution to regime change,

while the Nuer were reduced to a political minority because of their association with the defunct regime.

Out-manoeuvred by their rivals, the Nuer have engaged in the politics of inclusion at a different level. Unlike their fellow Nuer villagers who have largely accepted the seniority of the Anywaa as long as this allows them access to vital natural resources, the political elites have contested the Anywaa ideology of a first-comer and its political use by invoking a longer historical scope of reference: common Nilotic origin. As the intensity of the struggle became acute the Nuer elites have sought new counter narratives and a new political audience. This they have done by appropriating state discourses in the local struggle. The census result and the symbolic empowerment of the state over land became important instruments for access to and control over natural resources.

In 1994, Ethiopia conducted its second nation-wide census. The objective of the census was defined to help better design development policy. A seemingly denotative description, however, has had a performative political effect. The census produced a new political fact in the local struggle. Overnight, the Nuer was transformed from latecomers to an ethnic majority. According to the census result, the Nuer constitutes 40 per cent while the Anywaa 27 per cent of the Gambela regional state. Ever since the census result was announced, the Nuer elites have employed majoritarianism as a counter ideology of power to the Anywaa territoriality. The more the Nuer play the numbers game, however, the more Anywaa elites have invoked territoriality, which further politicises the land issue. Now it is the Anywaa's turn to come up with a counter narrative to the Nuer claim: contesting the census result by defining the Nuer not only as latecomers but also as refugees, thus non-citizens. Accordingly, the Nuer population figure is inflated because of the influx of refugees from Southern Sudan.

More challenging to the Anywaa is, however, the new discursive connectivity between the Nuer and the state's discourse on the land. Contemporary Nuer accrue ownership rights over the land to the state, while Anywaa territoriality is destined to disconnect with the state's own claim over the land. This is as much Nuer's exit strategy from Anywaa's closure as it is playing real politik.[10] For, the Ethiopian state, across regimes, has claimed ultimate ownership of the land as its principal means of social control and legitimating power. Neither the imperial nor the socialist regime acknowledged individual or collective rights over the land. Despite its high profile and populist rhetoric, the new ethnic regime followed suit by stubbornly clinging to state ownership of land despite the increasing economic and social argument for the privatisation of land (Desalegn 1994; Birhanu 2003). State

ownership of the land is constitutionalised. In the 1995 constitution, state ownership of land is explicitly stated:

> The right to ownership of rural and urban land, as well as of all natural resources, is exclusively vested in the state and in the people. Land is a common property of the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia and shall not be subject to sale or to other means of exchange (Article 40:3).

Such state hegemony has seriously undermined the regions' political autonomy, communal rights over the land, and individuals' freedom in using the land in a more flexible and pragmatic way. In inter-ethnic relations, in particular, it has created a new economic space in which compromise, negotiation and symbiosis are giving way to competition and confrontation. Above all, territoriality has increased the political importance of the land. In the given circumstances, the Anywaa villagers have shifted the strategy of buffering to the assertion of ownership rights, which has made access to key natural resources increasingly difficult for the Nuer. Meanwhile, the Nuer elites' demographic strategy of political entitlement has been translated into new interest in the territorial and demographic expansion of the Nuer villagers into areas claimed by the Anywaa. The net result of these conflicting, albeit mutually constituted political strategies, is increasing ethnic closure that threatens to break down the incipient overlapping language game. For the Anywaa elites, Nuer mobility and resource expansion have become politically visible, threatening to undermine their strategy of political entitlement, while the same process promises an expanding political constituency for the Nuer elites. This new line of disconnection in inter-ethnic relations resulted, at its height, in an explosion of the politicisation of the Cieng Reng settlement.

As it was indicated before, the settlement of the Cieng Reng clan, in what was regarded as traditionally Anywaa territories, was not originally a political issue. In fact, the local Anywaa welcomed it on pragmatic grounds. After 1991, however, and particularly after the census result was announced, the Cieng Reng assumed a new political visibility. Anywaa politicians defined them as refugees, thus stripping them off their citizenry status. Attempts were made to transfer them into refugee camps or deport them to the Sudan. In the new political context, the Cieng Reng found themselves increasingly vulnerable. Cattle rustling became rampant and access to resources was endangered. Facing a hostile local administration dominated by the Anywaa, the Cieng Reng appealed to the Nuer politicians for protection of their property and life. They readily obtained political patronage. Insecure in their villages and encouraged by a new backer, the Cieng Reng became assertive and applied for separate political recognition for their community. This meant in the local

parlance asking for a kebele, a political practice which further sensitised Anywaa politicians and villagers alike, who now saw a new evidence for their conspiracy theory: the ultimate Nuer project of dismembering their society by taking over their lands.

The increased inter-ethnic tension climaxed in one of the bloodiest conflict between the Anywaa and the Nuer in Itang district in 1998, costing the lives of many people and causing immense material destruction. At the height of the conflict so-called ring leaders, including Kong, were imprisoned for a year. Upon release, Kong went to Addis Ababa, the nation's capital, to appeal to the federal government rather than rebuilding inter-ethnic ties, as was the case in previous instances of local conflict. In his politics of recognition, Kong was armed with a wide variety of narratives of entitlement that counter the Anywaa exclusionary practices: from a projection of the Nuer concept of localisation; an empowerment of the state over the land, to an instrumentalisation of wider political processes such as the Ethio-Eritrean conflict. In 1998 a border war broke out between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The sudden need to enlarge the army entailed a massive conscription. A good number of Nuer, including the Cieng Reng from Makot village, joined the national army and participated in the war where some of them lost their lives.[11] In what appears 'going national to be local', the Nuer politicians and villagers alike found a new ideology of entitlement in their struggle for power and access to natural resources, as the following excerpt from Kong's narratives demonstrates:

> [Why] should the Anywaa say we are not Ethiopian? Did not we fight for Ethiopia as well? Even our cows have become Ethiopians. They went to Badime. Okay, we go back to the Sudan, but let them give us our people who died in Badime.[12]

After a year-long appeal to the federal government, Kong earned a 'residence permit' for his community, though a formal grant of citizenship was postponed for fear of alienating the Anywaa-dominated regional government. Meanwhile, Nuer villagers have been increasingly appropriating the state's discourse on the land. The state's right over the land includes large areas designated as national parks, periodic redistribution of land to the farmers, appropriation of land for re-settlement sites, and allocation of land as 'investment' zones. In fact, most of the rangeland in the Gambela region is designated parkland, which has further compounded the issue of entitlement. To illustrate, a settlement might be a Nuer village, with land traditionally an Anywaa territory, and the state ownership surrounding it within close proximity—being one of the two designated parklands in the Gambela region.

In the context of the ubiquity of state claims on the land, the Nuer have resorted to rhetorically empower the state over the land, as this entails only a switch of reference from kwoth (God)[13] to kume (government), as the following narrative suggests:

> As you know land is owned by the kume. Kume is the father of all people. If there is no kume, those who do not like Nuer say the land is ours. Everything is from kume. If there is hunger, if there is no rain this year, the food comes from other places. You can contact kume and it brings you food. Kume is like kwoth. Everything belongs to kume. Land is for kume. The people are for kume. That is why it asks for people when there is war. Even this tree belongs to kume. There is nothing, which kume can't do. Nobody can take away the land of kume.[14]

Such symbolic empowerment of the state is neither a commitment to the state nor an assertion of national identity. Instead, it is a local statement used as exit strategy to counter exclusionary practices. Nevertheless, it has had the effect of reproducing state ideologies at the local level, an aspect of 'everyday forms of state formation' (Nugent 1997). The term 'kume' stands for not only the state as a set of institutions and administrative organs, but also as represented by the category of the highlanders who appear to benefit from the Nuer's flexible and inclusive discourse than the Anywaa's exclusive discourse which threatens to disown them as well. In fact, the Nuer often make an explicit statement that the land (the alluvial soil) after all comes from the highlands:

> Even all the Gaajak can't finish this soil. Anywaa and Gaajak together cannot finish this soil. After all, this river [Baro] comes from buny [highlanders] area. Pine [alluvial soil] is from buny. When it rains in the highlands, the rivers bring all the soil to us. It is red there, but when it reaches us it becomes black. This soil is important for us all. Pine is for all, Anywaa, Nuer, and buny. It is food. If we don' work on it, we would be all hungry. If we sit idle [like we do now], we will all be hungry. You can't stop a hungry man.[15]

Such statements amply capture the new shift from compromise and negotiation to new legitimising discourses to put claims on resources at a local level, a discourse initially trickled down from the elites in the struggle for power but now instrumentalised by ordinary people in the villages to alter local notions of entitlement. By 2002, the hostility encompassed the Thiang, hitherto the main bastion of inter-ethnic peace in the region. In June 2002 the political competition between the Anywaa and the Nuer elites manifested itself in the escalation of conflict between the Thiang Nuer and the Openo Anywaa that cost the lives of more than a hundred people and destruction of twenty-one villages. In the wake of this conflict, it is now common to hear

the Thiang saying 'Bar cie wat', or 'Anywaa can not be relatives', a statement of the failure of inter-ethnic peace, and sadly, with an air of despair about its feasibility in the future.

Outlook

The decentralisation project and the post-1991 political order had a promising start and the constitution contains a huge potential for local empowerment over resources. By recognising the nationalities' rights it also intended to foster inter-ethnic harmony. Praxis has shown, however, that decentralisation is seriously compromised by the state's claim over the basic means of production—land. Lacking administrative resources to realise its projects of control, however, the state has created competitive political and economic spaces which have accentuated local struggles over resources, a struggle which is progressively corroding negotiated access to resources. In the new political economy extra-local legitimising discourses and forms of power have increasingly determined access to and control over resources, a new mode of inter-ethnic interaction, which is increasingly erupting into violent conflict.

Notes

1. There are conflicting census figures from Southern Sudan but a rough estimation put the number of Nuer at half a million and the Anywaa at 25,000.
2. There is a sharp difference in altitude between the Gambela region (500 m) and the neighbouring highlands (as high as 2,800m).
3. Gambela is one of the few regions in Ethiopia where ox farming is not practised.
4. Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD) Livestock research project, 1998.
5. Out of the one hundred fish species in Ethiopia, seventy-two are found in Gambela water bodies (Conservation strategy of the Gambela region, Planning Bureau, Gambela Regional Council, 1999).
6. In their nineteenth century eastward expansion the Nuer are said to have increased their territorial size fourfold, at the expense of their Dinka and Anywaa neighbours (Kelly 1985).
7. An average Nuer bride wealth payment is 25 cows while contemporary Anywaa pay an equivalent of three cows in monetary terms. Traditionally Anywaa bride wealth was a scarce glass bead called dimui.
8. The Thiang are guardians of wiu, the sacred spear, an important relic bequeathed from Kir, the mythological founder of the Jikany Nuer.
9. Land cannot be sold in Ethiopia because officially it belongs to the state.
10. The Anywaa established a liberation movement called GPLM (Gambela People's Liberation Movement) to resist the growing political, territorial and cultural encroachments by the socialist regime, popularly known as the Derg (1974-1991), while the Nuer elites were co-opted and promoted by the regime.

The GPLM made contact with the EPRDF forces in the Sudan and it participated in some of its western military operations against the Derg.

11. Twelve people from Makot village joined the army, out of which three died. As in other pastoralist areas, the Nuer also contributed cattle to feed the army and as a symbolic gesture to national solidarity. Contribution to 'the war for sovereignty' has become an important legitimising discourse by various segments of Ethiopian society. The sympathy which the Makot people have received from the federal state, is intelligible against this new political process.
12. Kong Diu, interview by author, November 2000, Addis Ababa.
13. In Nuer religious imagination, kwoth is the ultimate owner of natural resources and individual and group rights are valid in as much as it involves effective occupation.
14. Kong Diu, interview by author, November 2000, Addis Ababa.
15. Kong Diu, interview by author, Makot village.

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