ESSAY

THE CHANGING MEANING OF SMALL ARMS IN NUER SOCIETY

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The economic value, social status and symbolic meaning of small arms are particular and temporal in nature. This is demonstrated through a historical account of the dynamics of cultural change and adaptation in Nuer society. Specifically, the article shows how attitudes towards small arms shifted over time from a positive valuation of guns as prestigious objects, to ambivalence between the need for protection and the experience of increased local lawlessness and violence. More generally, it demonstrates how weapon-related activities can only be fully understood when seen against a specific cultural background. Even if the display, use and circulation of weapons appear to carry cross-cultural references, typically as expressions of power and masculine identity, the meaning is always primarily local. Therefore, strategies to reduce the destructive impact of small arms through demand side programs, based on voluntary participation, can only be carried out successfully if built on an in-depth understanding of a particular cultural context.

Introduction

The proliferation and use of small arms has become an issue of increasing concern among the international political community. NGOs and NGO networks like IANSA (International Action Network on Small Arms) have lead the way in attracting attention which perhaps peaked with the UN Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects in July 2001. Quite naturally, the focus of these forums has been the human suffering and socio-economic costs following uncontrolled spread and use of small arms in civil societies. Most calls for action have thus tended to concentrate on the large-scale political/legislative level. The result is a victim-oriented, top-down political/managerial attempt to control production and a particular segment of circulation, which is generally referred to as 'illicit trade'.[1] In other words, focus has been on the supply side of the weapons trade.

Unfortunately, the present availability of small arms makes supply side regulations insufficient to handle the negative impact of weapons on civil societies. Even at its most efficient, supply side regulation and control have to go hand in hand with a far more challenging approach, which is to address the root cause for small arms *demand*. Following the increased focus on the impact of armed conflict on

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children, UNICEF and other child rights oriented NGOs, has developed a youth centred approach, oriented towards the demand side. This strategy expands the 'victim' concept by encouraging participation of both victims and perpetrators.[2] Consistent with this trend, Angela McIntyre suggests a strategy for exploring the linkage between youth, violence and small arms based on "the identification of where and how arms invade children's social, political and economic spaces".[3]

Supporting the intentions of the demand side strategies, the purpose of this article is to raise the awareness of concerned outsiders to the importance of grasping the varying cultural (and localised) contexts in which small arms circulate.[4] This means taking one step back from the approach recommended by McIntyre to include an analysis/interpretation of the wider cultural setting against which weapon related activities is played out. A central aspect of such an analysis is to reveal the range of life-path options available for youth seeking identity and self-confirmation. This is in turn crucial for rationalising the actors' choices and personal strategies while restricted to limited opportunities. Although the focus of this article will not be on youth, but on the changing cultural meaning of weapons in one part of the Nuer society, the specific historical development will shed light on the "(…) complex relationship between arms proliferation, youth and security in the African context".[5] Unlike McIntyre's seemingly pan-African aspirations, the context of this article will be local rather than continental.

To illustrate how the dynamics of culture adaptation and change shape the local and temporal meaning of weapons, we will present a historical account of the penetration, proliferation and, to some degree, impact of small arms in a geographically confined part of South Sudan. More specifically, this article refers to the situation of Nuers in the eastern part of the Upper Nile Region.[6] Through this historical perspective, we will explore how guns developed from a high-ranking possession of common ownership, to be seen as individualising and responsible for withering of cultural values, breakdown of local concepts of 'law and order' and increased exposure to violence.

The historical perspective is vital for the insight we are offering. In this we borrow heavily from the brilliant historical ethnography by the social anthropologist Sharon Hutchinson: *Nuer Dilemmas – Coping with Money, War and the State.*[7] Reviewing and updating the classic ethnographic work of Evans-Pritchard,[8] she presents fresh perspectives on Nuer life and challenges. Her writings are in large parts based on fieldwork in 1982-83, some later revisits, and various historical documents.

The present day part of this article is based on the experience from a UNICEF-led pilot-project to disarm civil Nuers younger than 18 years of age. Although the project never reached the level of full scale implementation, significant insight was gained during the pre-study which was carried out in close cooperation between members of the relief wing of the Nuer dominated liberation movement[9] and UNICEF. The study employed multiple genres. It combined questionnaire-guided interviews with both individuals and groups, with the insight from fieldwork and a series of in depth interviews by the authors. The questionnaire-guided interviews where conducted by Nairobi based Nuers who combined indigenous language skills and cultural understanding with fluency in English.

A historical account of weapons, violence and values in Nuer society

> *"War—that is the goodness of our hearts!"*
> The Nuer image of themselves as courageous warriors remained strong throughout the 1980's according to Hutchinson.[10]

The Nuers live in the northeastern corner of South Sudan where they are situated on both sides of the massive sump area surrounding the White Nile. As a semi-nomadic agro-pastoral group, they have traditionally moved with their cattle between wet season gardens at savannah plains and dry season pastures closer to river sources of the sumps. Their traditional political organisation, presented to the outside world through the ethnographic work by Evans-Pritchard,[11] has become a classic example of a political structure without a single

leader or leader group. Although the Nuers are still largely pastoral, Evans-Pritchard's picture of a simple, well-structured, cattle-centred life has been challenged by expanding economic interest and weathered by the impact of long lasting civil wars. Since independence in 1956, two civil wars have inspired rage in the country, caused immeasurable human suffering[12] and made weapons and violence an issue of daily experience and concern.

In the remains of this section, we will explore how guns initially penetrated and proliferated in the eastern part of Nuerland[13] and how they acquired value, status and meaning. Following Hutchinson's interpretation, we will explain how a particular economic adaptation allowed guns to enter the reproductive sphere and thus become a key symbol of Nuer culture.

Weapons and violence in Nuer society

The introduction of guns to Nuer society follows the historical steps of colonisation and civil war. The following summary combines an excerpt from Hutchinson's pre-war account[14] with recent testimonies and the latest development.

Among the eastern Nuers, rifles started to make their presence felt around 1910. Partly as a response to the arming of competing groups, particularly the Anyuaks, a trade network based on ivory, weapons and cattle developed across the Ethiopian border (then Abyssinia). The British attempt to put an end to the violent confrontations between Nuers and Anyuaks led to a massive build up of troops and arms on the hands of the colonial powers from 1920. The British administration also supported government appointed chiefs and 'police' with weapons. Towards the end of the Second World War, British troops crossed South Sudan from Zaire to challenge Italian forces remaining in Gambella, Ethiopia. After defeating the Italians, remaining arms and ammunition were left for Nuers of the Gajaak section who assisted in carrying arms and supplies and also participated more actively on the British side of the war. Following the world wars, attempts to check cross-border arms trade largely failed, and the flow of weapons continued to increase. Groups on both sides of the border played governmental powers against one another and moved strategically from one side to another to avoid taxation and attempts to crack down on civilian-owned weapons.

Just prior to independence in 1956, a civil war broke out in the southern part of the country. It spread slowly throughout South Sudan and eventually included Nuerland. Nuer territory on the Ethiopian side of the border became important training ground for rebel groups and the weapon flow increased correspondingly. After 18 years of unrest, a peace agreement was negotiated in Addis Ababa in 1972.

In 1983, fighting broke out again with Nuers actively involved in the secessionist groups. Rebels became familiar with guerrilla warfare, and interest in guns among the civil population was further stimulated. In the late seventies and early eighties, some Nuers from the Lou section used to go all the way to the border of Uganda and former Zaire, to smuggle arms back home. Later, the Ethiopian communist regime of Mengistu became a strong supporter of the rebel movement and gave massive weapon support until its fall in 1991. The weapon penetration was further boosted by efficient use in ambushing government forces and supply lines for additional restocking. As military demands for small arms eventually approached a saturation level, the flow of 'surplus' weapons into the civil community picked up to reach its present form of semi-official market sale, providing some income for unpaid soldiers.

Having described how guns penetrated the society of the eastern Nuers, it seems important to stress that this is not parallel to the Nuer history of violence. Weapon-based violence was introduced neither with single shot nor self-loading rifles. On the contrary, the Nuers have historically taken pride in the image of themselves as courageous warriors. Hutchinson refers to traditional violent practices based on club and spear fighting and symbolic/religious rituals connected with violent deaths.[15] However, new technology has pushed the traditional cultural mechanisms for tempering the escalation of conflicts and violence beyond its capacity. While inter-Nuer homicide caused by

spears demanded immediate ritual purification by the perpetrator, this custom lost its moral weight as firearms penetrated deeper into the local pattern of warfare. Some of the personal responsibility of a spear wound was lost with the impersonality of a bullet.[16]

It is also important to keep in mind that although guns have been part of the material world of the eastern Nuers for a century, they did not fully replace the spear in inter-community combat before 1980.[17]

Weapons in Nuer economy

To realise the combined symbolic and economic value of guns, it is necessary to understand the economical structure in which they move. Summarizing the detailed work of Hutchinson,[18] we will present a brief outline of the traditional structures of the Nuer economic system, with special emphasis on the movement of objects between what Hutchinson refers to as 'spheres of exchange'.[19]

Cattle and women are, and have always been, the central objects of reproductive exchange and cornerstones of the distinctive Nuer culture. This is seen in the transfer of cattle at the bridewealth exchange, which is considered crucial for the reproduction and survival of the agnatic line. Through the second half of the 20th century, the range of exchangeable objects expanded to include weapons and cash. This development, which allowed for cattle to be exchanged not only against women, but also against money, challenged the special relationship between man and cattle. To explain how the Nuers adapted to this situation, Hutchinson suggests an analytical distinction between two spheres of exchange. Objects associated with blood and reproduction circulate within one sphere. Sterile and bloodless material, including cash, circulate within the other sphere. The border between these spheres of exchange is not absolute and Hutchinson shows how the Nuers have adapted to wage labour and commercial trade in cattle by introducing 'hybrid wealth' that allows for movement between the spheres without disrupting the unity between man and cattle.[20]

For instance, bridewealth negotiations were traditionally settled with what Hutchinson refers to as 'cattle of girls' (i.e., cattle collectively acquired through the agnatic line's exchange of daughters). If 'cattle of money' (i.e., cattle bought by individually earned salaries) is accepted as part of the bridewealth, it means that wealth has moved from the market sphere of wage labour into the reproductive sphere of women and cattle. Significant to the topic of this article is the concept of 'cattle of the gun', where guns are introduced into the reproductive spheres of exchange through the bridewealth negotiations.

Weapons as a key symbol

With the increasing penetration of guns in Nuer society, they achieved a special status, distinct from other material objects. According to Hutchinson, guns were considered collective possessions, typically bought with cattle from the ancestral herd and thus shared by groups of brothers.[21] Due to this collective ownership, guns were accepted in the reproductive sphere as 'cattle of the gun', representing a specific cattle value. Unlike cattle bought with individually earned money, which undermines the social and communal aspects of the bridewealth exchange, Hutchinson found that "(…) guns directly reinforced a socially expanded sense of self and of community (…)".[22]

While the gun could not match the sacrificial role of spears, it became a vital marker of wealth and masculine identity. In contrast to the individually owned spears, the guns as collective possessions became a counterweight to 'individualising' forces such as wage labour, money and commercial trade in cattle. The ideological and material linkages between guns and masculinity developed swiftly, making guns and oxen "(…) increasingly fused as complementary symbols of wealth, physical strength and, hence, marriage worthiness."[23] Hutchinson emphasises the positive symbolic power of guns by referring to male self-confirmation through use of weapons, and as a display of male potency and strength through metaphorical language, ritual actions, songs and other aesthetic expressions.[24]

The integration of guns in ceremonial expressions is exemplified by the eastern Nuer tradition of the potential groom-to-be shooting over the girl's home at night[25] or directly

over the girl's head at dancing ceremonies and weddings.

From cattle protectors to the white army

The Nuers have a long tradition of defending their cattle against rival groups and, at least until the pacification by the colonial power, replenishing their own herd by raiding neighbouring groups.[26] The young Nuers would traditionally spend most of the year in cattle camps, living with and off their cattle. A Nuer boy would reach manhood only after passing through an initiation rite that includes the 'marking' of six incisions on his forehead. Entering the world of men, the newly initiated individual would receive a spear from his father or uncle and be expected to participate in cattle raids.[27]

As already described, the initial arming of eastern Nuers stemmed from both the need of these cattle protectors to improve their defence against raids by neighbouring tribes and also as a response to increasing levels of inter-Nuer conflicts. With the escalation of the civil war from 1983, the weapon flow into the area increased massively, first to the rebel groups and later to civil society. With increased access, the social significance of guns rose to compete with the spear as a symbol of juvenile masculinity. From the early nineties, it would be all too common to see young boys strolling through the cattle camp with their arms resting on an assault rifle hanging in a worn strap from around their necks. As the war intensified at different levels, their responsibility expanded from being focused on the cattle camps, to include more militarised defence of the village.

When the majority of the Nuers separated from the joint rebel movement of South Sudan (Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement/ Army, SPLM/A) and formed their own faction (SPLM/A United, later South Sudan Independent Movement/Army (SSIM/A), South Sudan Defence Force (SSDF), and until recently SPDF),[28] they found it practical to raise the level of organisation of the individual cattle protectors to a common leadership under their respective head chiefs. Though its form and philosophy remained individualistic, this irregular 'civil defence force' came to be known as the "jeic in boor", literally "white army". The name was given mainly to distinguish it from the regular armed forces and groups operating in Upper Nile region. The designation of these armed civilians by the term 'white' is a reference to their lack of identification as a 'real army', to their "not having a uniform", to the fact that they are "not distinguished". The 'jeic in boor' or 'white army', is not a parallel to the historical "Red Army" which were regular rebel platoons made up exclusively of children. Including the word 'army' in the group's name is thus strongly misleading as it raises associations of an organised, trained and well-disciplined fighting force. Contrary to this, the term 'white army' might rather be seen as a common reference to all armed civilians in the community. By obtaining a weapon, they will be 'members' of the white army whether they like it or not.

The main organised activity of the white army is to defend the community against attacks and raids by Government of Sudan (GoS) supported militia groups and neighbouring tribes. The white army may either respond locally to an immediate threat, or mobilise at the request of the liberation movement (SPDF). Except for these situations, they only meet in small groups. All their weapons (mainly assault rifles) are privately owned, and there is no formalised training. Basic weapon training takes place at home while hunting is an encouraged form of practise.

However, not everybody let his newly acquired weapons rest in times of peace. Privately owned guns gave male youth new opportunities in an environment where options were few and life prospects worse. With war, modernisation and foreign aid already having worn heavily on traditional cultural norms, there were few structures left to uphold 'law and order' and little to prevent the new opportunities from being realised through antisocial behaviour. 'Sub-groups' of the white army, usually male youth, sometimes including older relatives, started to 'hang out' together and engage in everything from hunting to banditry, looting, cattle raiding, eloping and raping of women. These are, at least, the accusations.

Following this development, the white army became a reference for a double set of activities and a double set of associations. On the one hand there is still the physical defence of the local community, usually appreciated and valued by the affected. On the other hand, there is the parallel activity by some members, youth in particularly, which contributes to further tearing down social norms, leaving the same communities with a feeling of insecurity and lawlessness. It is this last peer group of armed youth that will be our focus when discussing how guns came to lose their privileged position in the range of wealth objects.

The changing meaning of small arms

> *"A community without weapons shall be blessed by God and shall be peaceful and harmonious and we will see rapid development in the area.*
>
> Female youth, Pagak, 2002

In our reference to the use of guns in ceremonial settings, the example with the wedding ritual was not chosen arbitrarily. Rather, it sets the stage for presenting the flip side of a tradition of weapon glorification. During one of the last visits to Pagak,[29] reports came of a tragic event in a neighbouring village. Preparing for a wedding, the groom wanted to tell the world about his love by shooting above the head of the bride, as recent tradition would prescribe. Inexperienced in handling his assault rifle, he aimed too low and killed the bride. The bride's brothers later killed the groom. When the news reached us, the bride's brothers were sought by the groom's male relatives.

Unfortunately, accidents resulting from weapon-based expressions during joyful ceremonies are but one grotesque example of the deadly and destabilising consequences of the proliferation of small arms in Nuer society. In the next section, an account will be given of present day experience of an overwhelming presence of arms. Following this, we will discuss the increased accessibility, individualised ownership and the raise of a weapon-based youth culture. These more or less consecutive stages of development eventually lead to a devaluation of guns at both the economic, social and symbolic level.

Present day perceptions and implications of small arms proliferation

The following citation is from the group discussion among male youth in Waat:

> Traditional weapons such as spears, clubs, knives and sticks have been exchanged for small arms. This has brought lack of respect, recklessness, murdering, looting, robbery and open stealing into the Nuer society. This was not there before proliferation of small arms into our area. It has also increased the frequency of raped girls and women and led to more direct aggressions towards other Nuer sections and tribes. It has brought great fear, hostilities and suspiciousness into the Nuer society at large, and at the same time made those with guns feel very brave and material minded.[30]

A similar discussion among the elder men indicate how much of this is blamed on the rapid growth of a weapon-based youth culture:

> …the traditional cultural norms that governs every Nuer person in the community [have been] dropped, nobody respect them at this time due to presence of guns. The parents and leaders of the community [have] lost control of their children [who] carry guns. Nobody has control of the present situation.

A group of female youth also made a similar conclusion when discussing the influence of small arms:

> It has increased crimes and anarchy within the Lou Nuer community in Bieh state and contributed to destabilisation in the Nuer society. … They [the white army members] do not value our parents as the sources of their lives who [have] shown them this wonderful world they are enjoying.

Although one must keep in mind that these are reflections made in times of war, it is clear that the proliferation of small arms among the civilian population, in itself, has a severely negative impact on the human rights situation at both local and regional levels. It undermines efforts to uphold a structure of law and order thereby

reducing the individual's protection from arbitrary abuse, including sexual exploitation. Ultimately, protection of private property becomes a matter of individual capacity.

Furthermore, criminal acts, of which armed youth of the white army are accused, fuel a central feature of the war in Sudan, the so-called 'second-tier' conflicts. It is in this context that many of the most serious violations of human rights take place. 'Second tier' is to be understood as 'regional' conflicts, often rooted in local competition for scarce resources, such as access to grazing, water and fisheries. These disputes or conflicts are co-opted and exploited as part of the wider war through support of one side or the other.

This is also where the tradition of segmentary response comes into play, drastically worsening the effect of antisocial behaviour by individuals or youth groups. Based on a strong association with the patrilinage and the clan, every Nuer has a group with which to identify or oppose at each level of the society. Evans-Pritchard illustrated this as concentric circles around ego that embraces larger and larger segments of their social world.[31] Theoretically, a criminal act by a brother will trigger a response within the family. Disputes between different families within a clan will remain at the family level, while the killing of a member of another clan or section may trigger a full-scale response by the victim's clans or section. In this way cattle raiding, or rape committed by armed youth against other clans and sections might not only lead the victims to seek revenge or justice by addressing the perpetrators themselves, but whole clans or sections. In the worst case, this could result in violent conflict or war between Nuer clans and sections.

Although this traditional system has been weakened by the rise of a hierarchical civil and military leadership, generations of war, and other outside 'modernistic' influences, it is still a relevant factor in Nuer politics. Numerous examples exist where recent and ongoing conflicts were triggered by armed youth and then escalated in accordance with this segmentary scheme:

"The Maiwut based Nuer section Cieng-Waw have been involved in armed confrontations with the Ethiopian based Cieng-Yajani since 1994. The direct cause of the conflict was the aggressive behaviour of a young boy from the Cieng-Waw, looting a cow from a Cieng-Yajani. A group from the Cieng-Yajani decided to follow the raider and eventually killed the boy. The Cieng-Waw wanted to revenge this killing and the conflict quickly escalated to a full scale sectional war that is still going on, having caused more than 1,000 casualties on the latest account."[32]

"A three-year fighting within the Cieng-Chany was recently ended by forced negotiations by authorities. The case was settled through the traditional way of compensatory payments. The direct cause of this fighting, which have left 300 persons dead was cattle raiding by a group of armed youth."[33]

"One girl from Cieng-Puol was raped by eight white army youths from Cieng-Tiang, near Weideng village. That incident has resulted in fighting within the clan of Gabaal this year (…) [and left] 23 people killed and 37 wounded. The fighting has also killed [a person from] another clan by mistake and this will cause another conflict [with clan members] of the person killed by mistake."[34]

Devaluation of small arms

The above situation differs from what Hutchinson experienced 10 to15 years before this study. Although guns are still seen by many as both a prerequisite for personal defence and survival, a safe economic investment, and a strong symbol of masculine identity, these attitudes have been tempered by negative experiences, obviously related to unsanctioned spread and use of arms.

Let us illustrate the ambivalence felt by many Nuers by referring to the population of Waat. All of the 56 interviewed said they had personally experienced some form of attack, looting or raid by an external group. The large majority experienced both attacks by GoS militia and recurrent looting by Murle cattle raiders. For this reason, there is a clear appreciation and

gratitude for the courage shown by the white army in facing enemy attacks. However, the general behaviour of the sub-group of armed youth is described as aggressive, disrespectful, foolish and irresponsible. Their attitude is said to create a feeling of insecurity and lawlessness within the community, as they steal, raid and rape with impunity.

Following these increasingly more pronounced negative experiences of armed citizens operating outside traditional norms, guns' prestigious position could no longer be maintained. Hutchinson writes about the use of weapons as part of the bridewealth, sometimes even a preferred part.[35] During our study, it was frequently confirmed that weapons were sometimes given as part of the bridewealth. However, this was usually expressed in an apologetic kind of 'see-what-is-happening-to-us' sentiment. When asked for concrete examples, nobody was able (or willing) to come up with one.

Even the weapon display as a sign of wealth and prestige, seems to be losing ground. Although six of the seven white army members interviewed in Pagak think that carrying a gun positively affects how their wealth is evaluated, these conceptions are not shared by other members of the society. Only seven of the 28 non-white army members agree that a man's wealth correlates to whether or not he is carrying a gun.

In attempting to explain the changing attitude towards small arms during the last 15 to 20 years, we should not underestimate the impact of continuous civil war. It is not surprising that this would challenge any belief in a socialising capacity of guns. While keeping this more general point in mind, we suggest that the described development can be traced back to three more or less consecutive points:

- The increased influx of weapons lowers the market price and makes access for individuals generally easier.
- Greater individualised ownership of weapons compromises the prestige of guns.
- The result is the development of a weapon-based youth culture that operates at the edge of cultural norms.

Although these may seem initially like obvious and general points, they can only be fully understood when seen as an integral part of the dynamics of Nuer cultural change and adaptation. The context is already described in some detail, and the final step revealed as the armed youth groups operating beyond cultural norms. To complete the picture, the two first points are discussed.

Present day commerce in small arms

Present gun prices have dropped from a maximum of up to fifteen head of cattle (Hutchinson reported twelve in 1981),[36] down to the 1910 level of around four head.[37] Prices are not fixed, but agreed through barter on a case-by-case basis. There seems, however, to exist a fairly general understanding of the value of the most traded models - presently three to four heads of cattle of varying size and quality. Even though this represents a major price drop, shrinking herds, caused by the combined effect of war, raids, famine and diseases, still make it an onerous investment for most Nuers. Given the civil war setting and the extensive weapon trade, the price seems very high compared to what has been reported from similar conflict situations. We have no definite explanation for this apparent 'overpricing' but it might be related to the traditional prestige status of weapons and its linkage to the reproductive sphere of Nuer economy.

Procurement of a weapon is, not surprisingly, seen as a straightforward process. Different kinds of rifles are often available within the local community. If this is not the case, there are several trade options, depending on the geographical setting and relations with both friendly and hostile military units. There are also other, more controversial, ways for youth to acquire weapons. These include recruitment among the rebel movement or hostile militia groups. Some tell of how they volunteered for recruitment at the GoS supported militia and then defected immediately after being armed. Another example involves unapproved use of the family wealth. One mother tells of a dire situation when her son came back from the dry season cattle camp with only one of the three cows the father had left behind. The other two were exchanged for an rusty old rifle. The lack of milk left the family on the brink of starvation.

Individualised ownership

In her comprehensive discussion of Nuer adaptation to a changing external reality, Hutchinson emphasises the modifications of the Nuer economic system. As described above, she shows how objects of the market sphere can pass in and out of the reproductive sphere by the use of hybrid wealth, evaluated in both spheres. This process can be seen as individualising, or personally liberating if one prefers. It allows for individuals to procure cattle for the bridewealth exchange, and obtain a wife, independent of access to the ancestral herd (i.e., independent of the family's preferences). However, at the time of Hutchinson fieldwork, guns, like the cattle of the ancestral heard, were collectively owned. This left the 'cattle of the gun' with the same socially binding effect as the 'cattle of daughters', the traditional exchange object for women. With the described development of falling marked prices and generally increased access to guns, the collective aspect diminishes. This is a development foreseen by Hutchinson:

> Were the exchange value of guns ever to drop low enough to make widespread individual purchases possible, the 'cattle of the gun' in bridewealth transfers would probably share the individualizing impact of the 'cattle of money' on Nuer concepts of personhood and sociality.[38]

Hutchinson might be overemphasising the importance of the market price. As we have seen, there are additional ways to procure weapons. Nevertheless, the important point is that the accessibility of guns has passed the critical level where they become individual possessions.

Individual access to guns means that its privileged position in the reproductive sphere is compromised. The 'cattle of the gun' becomes accessible by individuals, just like the 'cattle of money', and thus contributes to the undermining of the communal aspect of the bridewealth exchange. The declining social status of guns in Nuer society can thus, at least in part, be seen as a consequence of the increased access. This conclusion is well in line with the negative description of the use of guns as part of the bridewealth, markedly different from what was noted by Hutchinson 15 years ago.

Weapon-based youth culture

We have already seen how increased accessibility and individualised ownership has paved the way for a weapon-based youth culture. However, this development was not necessary. Some motivating force must have pushed the institution of the white army from possibility to reality, from option to action. This push cannot be reduced to a single factor, and the motivations may span the whole spectrum from purely economic, through social status, self-esteem, desperation and revenge, to protection of self, family and property. Although interesting and important, following this in detail is beyond the scope of this article. However, we could not restrain ourselves from pointing at the lack of viable life-paths for young Nuers. Present day Nuerland constitutes a political, social and cultural environment with very limited opportunities for developing an identity based on personal interests and capacity, and/or political/moral conviction. Besides the traditional life at the cattle camp, the liberation movement and other armed groups seem to offer the only option for self-realisation through achievements. Still, people continue to make survival strategies and pick their choices among the options available. As a mother from Maiwut put it: "At this age [15] a boy cannot stay idle at home. There is no schooling, so now he hangs out with the white army."

Conclusion

By putting the experiences of the present into a historical frame, we have seen how the economic value, social status and symbolic understanding of an object have shifted over time. This development has been shown to be the result of both internal dynamics of social and cultural change, and of adaptive response to an altered external reality.

In the mid 1980's, roughly 75 years after the first introduction of small arms to the Nuers of eastern Upper Nile, Hutchinson found a culture where display and use of weapons confirmed masculine identity and

Nuer-historic identification as proud warriors. Through the collective ownership and presentation in the bridewealth exchange, guns contributed to a social expansion of self. Weapons ranged high in value and status, and the symbolic meaning was in line with the general ethic of the society.

Through the next 15 years of civil war, small arms proliferated at an accelerating pace among the civil population. With increased access and a near-saturated market, the price of guns fell, making procurement of weapons a matter of individual capacity and, to some extent, initiative and creativeness. Individualised ownership led to the development of a sub-culture of armed youth, undermining the positive valuation of weapons as a symbol of a collective spirit. What used to be a strong symbol of willingness to defend families, wealth and cultural integrity became tools for antisocial behaviour and further withering of cultural values.

Through this ethnographic example, we hope to have demonstrated the importance of understanding the cultural context in which objects circulate. A gun displayed or fired in the air during a wedding in the 1980's gave the participants a different rush of feelings from an equal display or action today. Similarly, one should expect to find that the motivations behind procurement, display and use of guns among young Nuers differ from that of youth in other cultures and ethnic groups. Even if the display seems similar, the connotations may not be the same. Small arms related activities, like any other activity, are always performed against a cultural specific background, different from one society to another. These are unlikely to merge in a common youth culture or to fit into any general theory of group dynamics. This stressing of locality and particularity becomes even more pronounced by the fact that a combination of a specific sequence of historic events and cultural dispositions allowed for the described development among the *eastern Nuers* only (i.e., even within Nuer society the full meaning of small arms is local).[39] This cultural particularity explains why a demand side approach to reduce the impacts of small arms represents such an enormous challenge compared to supply side control. While the latter can be the subject of world summits, demand side interventions necessitate individually-designed programmes based on an in-depth understanding of the society being addressed.

Having made this point, it does not follow that every attempt to reduce destructive weapon-based activities requires the prescribed textual understanding. Carrying an assault rifle is not a human right. Weapons can simply be collected by a superior power. However, viable and sustainable demand side attempts to stop proliferation and use of small arms must be based on voluntary participation. The success of any such program, aiming to change attitudes and culture, will depend on an in-depth understanding of the local culture. This approach may reveal 'dead ends' and help direct efforts towards options that can serve as attractive alternatives when potential (mis)users of small arms map out the course of their life.

Note: The ethnographical data from South Sudan was collected while the first author was employed by UNICEF/OLS. Furthermore, the pre-study for disarmament referred to in the article was founded by UNICEF/OLS. We are grateful for their generosity in granting us permission to publish this material.

Notes

1. See for instance: United Nations, Program of action to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons in all its aspects, UN Document A/CONF.192/15, 2001, <www.disarmament.un.org/cab/poa.html> (23 June 2003).
2. See for instance: UNICEF, Draft regional strategy to disarm children in Africa, available through the Institute of Security Studies, Pretoria, <www.iss.co.za/Pubs/CReports/DisarmChildSep02/DraftStrategy.pdf > (13 August 2003).
3. A McIntyre, Youth violence: targeting the small arms factor, paper presented at the UNICEF/ISS workshop: Disarming children and youth: rising awareness and addressing the impact of small arms, Accra, 8–12 September 2002.
4. In the perspective of international weapon trade, I consider local circulation (i.e., local demand and supply) to be all demand.
5. A McIntyre and T Weiss, Exploring small arms demand – a youth perspective, *ISS Paper*, Paper 67, Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, 2003, p 1.

6. The ethnographical data is from the eastern side of the White Nile, mainly from the Lou and Eastern Jikany sections. (See also endnote 13.)
7. S E Hutchinson, *Nuer dilemmas – coping with money, war, and the state*, University of California Press, California, 1996.
8. The Nuer: A description of the modes of livelihood and political institutions of a nilotic people (1940), Kinship and marriage among the Nuer (1951) and Nuer religion (1956).
9. The liberation movement was then SPDF (Sudan Peoples' Defence Forces) while the relief wing was RASS (Relief Association for Southern Sudan). SPDF has recently merged with SPLA (Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army).
10. Hutchinson, op cit, p 105.
11. E E Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: A description of the modes of livelihood and political institutions of a nilotic people*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1940.
12. Overall estimates commonly referred include more than two million dead from violence and related hunger, about halve a million refugees and about four million internally displaced since 1983.
13. In explicit contrast to Evans-Pritchard, Hutchinson makes a point of *not* treating the Nuers as one homogenous culture. This article tries to do justice to this point by recognising that the development of a weapon based youth culture and the following brake down of law and order did not take place in the western part of Nuerland in any way similar to what is being described here for the eastern part. (See also endnote 6.)
14. Hutchinson, op cit, Chapter 3, *Guns, warfare, and the state: New contexts of power, violence, and leadership*, p 103–157, particularly p 111–115.
15. Ibid, p 105–106.
16. Ibid, p 106.
17. Ibid, p 141.
18. Hutchinson, op cit, Chapter 2, *Blood, cattle and cash: The commodification of Nuer values*, p 56–102.
19. Ibid, p 74.
20. Ibid, p 50 and 57.
21. Ibid, p 134 and 150.
22. Ibid, p 150.
23. Ibid, p 153.
24. Ibid, p 149–153.
25. Ibid, p 153.
26. For instance, Ibid p 115–116.
27. Evens-Pritchard, op cit, p 153–154.
28. Of recent, SPDF has again merged with SPLA (see endnote 9). We will keep referring to SPDF as during the time of our study.
29. A village in Latior state, on the border to Ethiopia, Upper Nile region.
30. A village in Bieh state, Upper Nile region.
31. Evens-Pritchard, op cit, p 114.
32. Citation from a discussion with the Commissioners of Maiwut and Pagak.
33. Citation from a discussion with the Commissioners of Maiwut and Pagak.
34. Citation from a discussion with a group of mothers in Waat.
35. Hutchinson, op cit, p 150–151. Note again that Hutchinson makes a strong point of separating between western and eastern Nuers. The use of guns as part of the bridewealth is described among the eastern Nuers only.
36. Hutchinson, op cit, p 150.
37. Ibid, p 111.
38. Ibid, p 156.
39. The Wunlit Conference, an exemplary case of grass rot peace building, which put an end to a long lasting Nuer-Dinka conflict, is given as an example of what has been achieved among the Nuers of *western* Upper Nile, where weapons are still under the control of local leadership.