

## THE CHURCH'S COMMITMENT TO RECONCILIATION IN SOUTH SUDAN

I was asked to write about my commitment as a religious in South Sudan. The first section of this essay provides an insight into how the Gospel has spread in South Sudan, especially among the Nuer. The second section describes the country's violent conflicts and some of their causes. In the third section, I reflect upon the work of reconciliation which is an integral part of the mission of the Church.

### The Arrival of the Gospel in Sudan and South Sudan

In the book of Isaiah there is a reference to the peoples of Sudan: "*At that time gifts will be brought to the LORD of hosts from a people tall and smooth, from a people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide, to Mount Zion, the place of the name of the LORD of hosts.*" (Is 18:7) The "rivers" are the Nile with its numerous tributaries that cut through the territory. Isaiah foresaw the time when these peoples would bring gifts to the Lord in Zion. It did not happen in his lifetime, but rather in New Testament times. The African in Acts (Chapter 8), baptized by Deacon Philip, was the first Sudanese Christian from the Meroe Empire of Queen Candace. The man himself, whose conversion happened even before the Gospel reached Europe, left no historical traces. From the third century, contacts were documented between Egyptian monks and Christians of Sudan (Nubians). From the sixth century onward, all royal dynasties were Christian. There was a long period in which Christianity flourished in Sudan until the 15th century. However, the memory of the Christian faith disappeared completely under the influence of Islam and was only made known – for the second time – by Saint Daniel Comboni almost 400 years later. It took until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century before the Nuer, the Nilotic people with whom I live, became Christians in large numbers. In colonial times, there were only sporadic conversions.

The Nuer were displaced during the Sudanese Civil War in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Expelled from their homeland, some became Christians as refugees when they met with Catholic and Protestant missionaries in Khartoum and Ethiopia. During the liberation struggle against their Islamic government, which discriminated against black people as second-class citizens, and enslaved and killed countless non-Muslims, they discovered the God of the Bible as the Holy One who hears the weeping of his suffering people, just as he heard the enslaved Israelites in Egypt. The Gospel spread under the Nuer like wildfire during the 1980s and 1990s when returning converts shared their new faith with their families in the villages. The vision of Isaiah that the "*people tall and smooth*" of the Nile would worship God has also come true for them. Today, there are hundreds of thousands of Nuer Christians: mainly Presbyterians, Catholics and Episcopalians (Anglicans). A Catholic catechist reported that he baptized more than 20,000 converts during his time on duty. This shows that the local church in its beginnings has been essentially a lay movement without clergy.

The Comboni Missionaries were invited in 1998 by the Bishop of the Diocese of Malakal to accompany Catholics who live scattered in the villages of the Fangak region in the Sudd, the wetlands and marshes of the Nile. Our young Christian community, whose first generation of believers are still

alive, is extremely hospitable and generous. In order to keep the parish together, we missionaries visit people regularly in their villages. We walk on foot because there are no roads and accordingly no vehicles. The most distant chapels are up to four days away from the parish center. The parish territory is about five times the size of the administrative region of Greater London area. Paths that are not used disappear within a few weeks in the constantly growing vegetation. During half of the year, the waters of the Nile and the rains flood the region, which is as flat as a disk. There are no hills except termite hills. On our hikes, we cross waters that reach up to our necks. Tropical diseases are part of everyday life and safe drinking water is rare.

The basic food of the Nuer consists of sorghum (millet) with milk or with fish. They plant and harvest with hand tools, as the ox plough has not yet been introduced in this region. Furthermore, there is no telephone/mobile phone network, no postal service, no power grid – we depend on solar power – and no local radio station; only shortwave radio works to receive BBC and VOA. In recent years, some humanitarian organizations have set up satellite dishes for internet communication. If it makes sense to speak of the "ends of the world" on this round planet, I maintain that the marshes of the Nile are a good contender for this title. I am grateful to testify that the Triune God is worshipped in one of the most unlikely places on earth.

The main task of the missionaries is to train men, women and the youth to become competent prayer leaders and teachers of faith (catechists) in their chapels. Our parishioners have a strong, sincere faith in Jesus as their Redeemer, but little Christian education. We also offer catechumenate for adults who ask to become Christians. About half of Fangak County's population is now baptized. There are many followers of traditional religion who are attracted to Jesus Christ. Because more than 95% of the population in this part of South Sudan are illiterate due to their isolation (nationally, the illiteracy rate is at about 75%), we offer education programs in Nuer and English. Since 2014, we have been operating a primary school at the parish center. So far, around 250 Primary Eight students have graduated with a certificate. It is a tiny seed considering the fact that only less than 1% of the county's population have obtained a primary school certificate. This document is as prestigious as a doctorate title in developed countries. Lastly, due to the current civil war, reconciliation between the various ethnic groups has become an important task, not only for us but for all the churches in South Sudan.

## **A Violent Society**

South Sudan is in the news only because there is a civil war. And the tacit assumption is that there would be peace in the country when this conflict ends. However, we are dealing with archaic societies in East Africa (not only in South Sudan) whose culture is rather violent. A comparison with murder and manslaughter among the Israelites, who were themselves shepherds, is a good introduction for Western readers (e.g. 1 Chr 7:21; Gen 34). The polygamous patriarchal family and value system is very similar: among other things, the revenge killings. They are based on an equilibrium recognized by all which demands that a human life must be taken in order to atone for the death of a victim. Unlike the Old Testament (Gen 9:6), however, it is not important to find the murderer. It is enough to assassinate a close male relative as a "compensation", because the individual person represents the clan.

In South Sudan, deadly conflicts are taking place on three levels at the same time: for seven years until recently between the government and the opposition (with the risk of returning to the battle field), at the same time violent clashes between various ethnic groups and among sub-tribes (in particular Dinka), and revenge murders between clans at the local level. The Red Cross reported on the radio, in the middle of 2019 that, while the number of people injured in the civil war has fallen since the last

peace agreement was signed, the total number of patients with gunshot wounds is not much smaller. Regarding this issue, I point out the tragic interrelation between humanitarian food aid and local clan conflicts. Men organize themselves to fight when they are well nourished and strong. They are less inclined to engage in conflict when they are weak because of hunger. The food distribution of the UN World Food Program (WFP), which is supposed to prevent starvation, becomes the occasion to carry out deadly clan conflicts. Instead, the national conflict is determined by the change of dry and rainy season because the road network consists of paths of cotton or loamy soil. Vehicles that carry heavy armory get stuck when the soil turns into mud.

While men killed each other with spears until the middle of the 20th century, South Sudanese pastoralists have increasingly armed themselves with Kalashnikovs (AK-47) and other firearms since 1955, the beginning of their struggle for independence against the Arab rulers. They also started using these arms in cattle raids against other ethnic groups and in revenge killings against other clans. In the years following the 2005 peace treaty (CPA), before the outbreak of civil war in 2013, there were several thousands of murders committed each year in inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic conflicts in South Sudan. In the period of April 2011 to April 2012, between the Nuer and Murle alone, more than 5,000 people were killed in Jonglei State, where my parish is located. The Murle are distinguished from other ethnic groups in that they raid not only cattle but also young children in order to increase the number of tribal members. This causes enormous hatred among the neighboring peoples. Although the conflict was included in the statistics by UN observers, it was only worth a footnote in the international press and was not interpreted as a "war". Admittedly, the current civil war has increased killing tenfold, but in my experience it is more honest to say that there has been no peace between many pastoralist groups in South Sudan for decades and that the rate of violence goes up and down. If we compare ethnic violence to a disease, South Sudan is like a patient who has constant fever, sometime more and sometime less. Therefore, a ceasefire from time to time, as is now in place, must not be interpreted as reconciliation.

## **The Cultural Causes of Conflicts**

I shall describe three aspects of the South Sudanese reality in order to explain the behavior of clans and ethnic groups.

The first aspect is that these people have survived for centuries in a hostile environment, where they have all too often been threatened by other groups, by nature (drought, floods, diseases, etc.) and by wildlife (snakes, crocodiles, scorpions, etc.). The individual can only survive in the collective, which provides security and distributive justice. There is an African proverb: *I am because we are*. These are the immediate relationships that carry you. In the West, relationships and friendships are optional. Contact can be cut off even with parents and siblings because it is possible to take care of oneself in the modern state. A Nuer or Dinka, on the other hand, cannot rely on anything, except that his brothers and sons risk their lives in his defense. And in old age, only the extended family will provide for him. Therefore, there is a 100% loyalty to a close relative, whether he is right or wrong. Furthermore, one's own clan is uncompromisingly defended against others and, for the same reason, the civil war is ethnic. The clan and tribal collective almost completely overshadows the identity of the individual. Because the identity of a person is embedded in his or her collective, the "other" is also almost always perceived only as a representative of his collective.

The second aspect concerns the marriage system with the dowry (bride price). While some people in Europe are debating the need to stop begetting children as a contribution to ease the effects of climate change, in traditional Africa it is the fundamental human destiny to continue the lifeline of one's

family through one's own offspring. Marriage is the legitimate place to beget and raise children. In a patriarchal society such as South Sudan, it is necessary for the father of the children to pay the dowry in full, otherwise the children do not belong to him, but to his wife's clan. Biological fatherhood has no relevance, only legal paternity counts, which is legitimized by the dowry. Among the Nuer, the dowry for a woman is about 50 healthy cattle, among the Dinka, it can reach over 200 livestock. This creates pressure and desire. Because one does not want conflicts with neighboring clans, cattle are usually raided from farther away, from other tribes. The shepherds are killed in an attack so that they cannot sound the alarm, and the herd can be led calmly away. This practice is common, for example, in the border region of Warrap, Unity and Lakes State, and between Lou Nuer and Murle in Jonglei.

Violence among men causes a surplus of women. This surplus makes polygamy (more precisely, polygyny) necessary and stabilizes it, because a woman is only considered "grown up" and recognized in the community when she is married and has become a mother many times over. While we in the West understand women's rights as having equal human and civil rights with men, including the right not to want children, pastoralists in South Sudan know only one woman's right: to become a wife and a mother. Because there are not enough men, it is obvious to all women to accept entering a polygamous relationship. It also reduces the burden of housework (cooking, cleaning) for the individual woman as it is shared among several women. Polygyny, on the other hand, is the reason for men to crave more cattle in order to marry more women, which leads to further cattle raids and killings. Therefore, polygyny and the violent culture among men – which distorts the male/female ratio – mutually depend on each other and create a vicious cycle that the parties involved are not aware of.

However, it must be noted that the reality of cattle raiding is a complicated issue and exists for different reasons. Besides greed (for women), young people often engage in daring competitions to prove their manhood or even consider it as a form of initiation. Revenge attacks, which target only people when they start, can also escalate into cattle raids so as to inflict greater harm to the other side.

The third aspect concerns the perception of state laws and, in conflicts, the lack of understanding of the distinction between civilians and armed parties. Societies in developed countries have specialized in more and more professions and occupations. Even killing has been, in a sense, professionalized. Generally, only soldiers and others authorized security personnel (police, etc.) are permitted to kill under certain legal rules. The state's monopoly on the use of force is recognized and desired because the state usually proves to be reliable. In South Sudan, however, the state has never functioned nor brought visible benefits, not under the colonial rule of the British, nor the Arabs, nor the current government under President Salva Kiir. The state has never acted as a reliable service provider and is rather perceived an intruder, for example in the case of new legislation. In most cases, therefore, clans prefer to regulate their interests at the local level according to customary law (tradition). Although they are granted some autonomy in the transitional constitution, they do that also where it is explicitly forbidden in the written law of modern South Sudan, e.g. girl marriage.

Additionally, the people in rural regions have hardly diversified activities, apart from the separation of the two sexes. A Nuer (and Dinka) man is at the same time a shepherd, fisherman, farmer, architect, trader, soldier and blood avenger. Every pastoralist has one or two semi-automatic rifles (AK-47). The local culture cannot distinguish between civilians and fighters, at least not among men. Furthermore, it knows childhood only until the beginning of puberty. From then on, a boy learns to hunt, shoot and kill. The modern political definition of adulthood from the age of 18 is incomprehensible in traditional culture – quite apart from the fact that many do not even know their birth year – and therefore, the problem of child soldiers, which is causing so much attention in the West, is difficult to communicate.

We Comboni Missionaries serve a parish in Unity State, whose center is in Leer, the birth town of Nuer opposition leader Riek Machar. Right at the beginning of the civil war, the town was captured by militias fighting for the Dinka government. In 2015, the militias locked more than 60 men and boys inside an overseas shipping container on our church plot who then suffocated there miserably to death. From the point of view of outsiders, this amounts to a war crime committed by militias against Nuer civilians with children. From the point of view of the murderers, it was a preventive measure, because the victims were potential fighters and avengers who, at that time, had merely no weapon at hand. (The incident is documented by Amnesty International. The report is found here: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr65/3598/2016/en/>)

There are many exiled South Sudanese who have enjoyed a good education in Anglo-Saxon Countries and have also come to know the benefits of a functioning state. After independence, however, the returning exiles were accused of cowardly running away. The power in the new state was distributed among – often uneducated – guerrilla fighters who know nothing but war and are deeply rooted in the traditional pastoralist culture as described above. Since there is no South Sudanese national identity apart from hatred of the Arab government in Khartoum and pride at having won the liberation struggle, every politician and civil servant is tempted to act in the interest of his clan and ethnic group. In concrete terms, this means that state revenues at all levels go into private pockets if they are not used for the war against the opposition. What is commonly referred to as corruption and nepotism is the basic pattern of how ethnic groups ensure that their members are doing well. This used to make sense in the past in order to ensure the survival of the clan in a hostile local context, but for a modern state this means death because every group in power tries to exclude the others. The "cultural DNA" makes the mechanism of this conflict tragically predictable.

In addition, the government takes advantage of the “Helper Syndrome” of the international community and the United Nations (UN). While spending millions of US-Dollars on weapons, it has handed over, to a large extent, important sectors such as agriculture ("livelihoods"), education and medical care to the responsibility of the UN, other aid agencies and the churches. Although the use of aid money is controlled to some extent, the Central Bank retains almost 50% of the value of every US-Dollar that is exchanged in local currency by any aid organization. Skimming humanitarian aid money has become a business model. And no one is monitoring the flow of oil revenues and the horrendous fees (“work permits”) foreign aid workers have to pay to be allowed to build up the country. The capital, Juba, has a high density of SUV and luxury car dealers because politicians and generals help themselves, taking money out of the state treasury unscathed.

## **The Reconciliation Work of the Church**

The South Sudanese Catholic Bishops' Conference (SSCBC) has had difficulty gaining influence on the warring parties because many bishoprics have been vacant. In addition, ethnic belonging is still a strong aspect of the identity of Catholics and of Christians in general, as is among church leaders. In this difficult tension between cultural and faith identity, the ecumenical South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC), of which the Catholic Church is a founding member, helped preparing a path towards national reconciliation.

At the local level of the parish, we find ourselves in the unlikely situation that the national war has reached only the fringes of Fangak County. With exception of the county capital New Fangak, other areas have not been directly affected by battles or displacement. This is due to the isolation of the area

that is created by the Nile swamps and thus lack of road connections. In our diocese, in whose territory much of the fighting and destruction has taken place, our parish is the only one that has not had to be closed in all these years. In all other parishes of Malakal Diocese, the work was stopped for several years. Still, every Nuer family of our parish has lost relatives in the war. Because the "enemy" breathes down their necks, but is still reassuringly far away, our work of reconciliation looks different from a parish with mixed hostile groups.

I am working on the side of the "losers". Although the Nuer of my region wish to get rid of the current government, it is a blessing from the point of view of the Gospel to belong to the marginalized (cf. Lk 1,51-53). In order not to be misunderstood, I add that those South Sudanese controlling the government are not worse people than others, but simply, they have more opportunities because they possess better weapons and can count on Uganda's military aid. Apart from the first year of fighting, when the opposition had some victories and committed terrible crimes among the Dinka, the war has mainly taken place on territory where people who support the opposition parties traditionally live and is reaching the Dinka homelands only peripherally. In addition to genocide of minorities and ethnic cleansing in the Greater Equatoria Region, there is also expulsion and confiscation of land by the government, which settles its own loyal people there. Even though this has not (yet) taken place in our parish area, it is an enormous challenge to preach love of enemies in such a context.

Sometimes I get asked by European Christians why South Sudanese Christians don't just follow the word of Jesus and forgive their enemies. That suggestion is easily expressed, but only because those persons do not have a real enemy who seeks to kill them or destroy their livelihoods. I myself am a foreigner in South Sudan and because my own life is not threatened by anybody, I do not superficially demand love of one's enemy from Christians of my parish, as this would be to ask something that I do not have to implement myself. Instead, I have made the suffering of the Nuer my own suffering and make no demands. We pray for the dead and bless the wounded who are taken to our hospital ward. On certain occasions, our Nuer Catholics pray at Mass in the language of the Dinka in order to set a sign for national reconciliation.

At the local level of the clan conflict, traditional reconciliation talks go hand in hand with Christian prayer (insofar as the clans are Christian). Our active parishioners are noticeably less violent than the average Nuer. The ecclesial life is like a shelter where a new, peaceful life-style is maintained. The Catholic Church is known and loved for the fact that differences of opinion are settled without violence. In contrast to traditional festivals and gatherings, weapons and alcohol are not allowed at church festivals and on church grounds. Anyone interested in this "alternative lifestyle" can join us. A traditional feast often runs the risk of ending in bloodshed because youth (men) injure or kill each other. Either a previous attack needs to be revenged or a new dispute is started under the influence of alcohol.

Furthermore, in our sermons and conversations, we shape the idea of inviolable human dignity because every person is an image of God. "Dignity" cannot be adequately translated into Nuer. As an illustration, we explain that everyone must respect other persons deeply, even if they are women or strangers of another tribe. The stories of Jesus in the gospels help to underline that message.

In South Sudan, there is no secular society. Therefore, international peace programs, which always appeal to reason and emphasize human rights, have little effect on the ground because they do not understand the dynamics of ethnic identity or negate it, and do not take people's religious identity seriously. As a missionary, I make the Gospel – which presents God as a merciful Father – known to my listeners. A disciple of Jesus is called to imitate the Father and love the neighbor, even the enemy (cf. Eph 5:1-2; Lk 6:27-36). It is about a change of mentality so that it is no longer the ethnicity or the clan which defines whom one can trust and whom one cannot trust. The Gospel and the Bible clearly show

what constitutes a just, honest person. This should be the benchmark for building a just and peaceful society.

A peaceful and conciliatory attitude must be exemplified in everyday life. This is the strength of the Church and the missionaries. We live with “our” people and suffer with them. Jesus Christ changed and converted people by loving concretely and making Himself the servant of all. We missionaries strive to learn language and culture, and walk their paths both literally and figuratively. People honor this, and they are ready to open themselves to the perspective of the Gospel because we have opened ourselves to their perspective. Patience is needed. Jesus explains that the Kingdom of God grows like a tree, slowly but steadily.

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*This essay was first published in August 2019 by a religious quarterly magazine in Germany. Meanwhile, some progress has been made in the peace process. But it remains a fragile cease-fire because none of the root causes of the conflict have been solved, nor properly addressed. Therefore, my description of the violence among ethnic groups remains valid, even if the transitional government, which includes many opposition groups, has begun its work while I share this English translation (September 2020).*

***For now, this PDF can only be shared as a private copy because it will be published officially in the journal SUDAN STUDIES (Issue 63, January 2021).***

**About the author:**

Comboni Father Gregor Schmidt (born 1973 in Berlin) is the child of a German father and a Korean mother. He first got to know his Order, the Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus, in Peru where he performed his community service (substitute for military service) through the German diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart. He studied theology in St. Augustin, Jerusalem and Innsbruck. Fr. Gregor has lived among the pastoralists of South Sudan for almost 12 years, the first three years with the Mundari and then nine years with the Nuer. He has witnessed all the phases of state-building and disintegration: the interim period, which began in 2005 with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), the first free election in 2010, the referendum on independence with 99% approval and independence in 2011, and the start of the civil war at the end of 2013.

**Background of South Sudan:**

South Sudan is a multi-ethnic society with more than 60 peoples/languages. About three-quarters of the population are semi-nomadic shepherds (pastoralists). The country is one of the least developed/urbanized regions in Africa and has been suffering the longest war in Africa. Since 1955, the population has been experiencing fighting, with only two longer periods of calm (1972-83 and 2005-13), which has traumatized four generations of people. The liberation struggle in former Sudan against the rulers in Khartoum had cost more than two million lives. The current civil war so far has taken approximately 400,000 lives. Since the signing of the last peace agreement in September 2018, the situation has stabilized somewhat. For most of the time during the civil war since 2014, the *Fund for Peace* has placed South Sudan in first place on its *Fragile States Index* ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fragile\\_States\\_Index](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fragile_States_Index)).