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Children's Environments Research Group (CERG), the Graduate Center, City University of New York (CUNY), New York, NY, USA

ABSTRACT

This essay contributes to the comparative ethnography of play by reporting on children's descriptions of play in Bor, South Sudan. By situating play within the socio-political and economic structures that organize Bor Town society it describes children's everyday lives, critical imaginations, and experiences in a place where playfulness has been neglected by a focus on armed violence. By attending to the playful side of children's lives in Bor, this essay does not set out to minimize the insecurities that people all ages face there, but rather to counter ideas of Dinka society as particularly prone to violence – an idea that has often served to elide the role of governments, petroleum companies, and international NGOs and financial institutions in entrenching inequality and instability in South Sudan by attributing violence to local cultural forces.

Since the 1880s, the Bor region of Jonglei State in what is today South Sudan has intermittently made front-page headlines in international newspapers, first as an area of colonial interest, later because of Sudan's long-running wars. Most of the literature on the region concerns political violence, obscuring other aspects of people's lives. Observers who have paid attention to children in the region have tended to view their situation primarily through the lens of conflict and humanitarian crisis and intervention. Like other children in comparable circumstances elsewhere, South Sudanese children are commonly pictured as either blank-faced victims of war or smiling recipients of humanitarian aid (Dolinar & Sitar, 2013; Malkki, 1996; Vasavada, 2016). Widely reproduced photographs of children with miniature guns made from mud or reeds are often used to illustrate how deeply armed violence has shaped the lives and imaginations of children in South Sudan.[1] This article, in contrast, focuses on the ways in which children engage with their economic, social, and cultural surroundings through play. Understanding how children view and playfully engage with their surrounding in practical and imaginative ways is key to understanding their daily lives. By focusing on play and how it is culturally situated (Roopnarine, 2015) my aim is also to point to children's critical imaginations and to draw attention to experiences that have often been neglected by a focus on violence.

This essay is based on research carried out in 2009 and 2010 during a period of relative calm in Bor Town, the capital of Jonglei State, in what was then Southern Sudan (see Tuttle, 2014a, 2014b; Chrostowsky, 2013). It is based on ethnographic fieldwork with children and their families in Bor Town and the surrounding countryside. I conducted research with children in compound yards and paths in residential neighborhoods in Bor Town, talked to children I met in the town's open scrublands, and spent time with them in rural agricultural- and cattle-settlements. I also spoke to children and their parents and other adults about children's activities and growing up with insecure surroundings. Drawing on these observations and discussions, I examine how play is a part of the process by which children in Bor create and maintain ongoing relationships with other children and adults, and reflect critically on their surroundings and past experiences. I also draw more general conclusions about how children's play not only affords preparation for adult roles but also materials for making sense of them, and for reflecting on, subverting, and resisting adult demands. I use the term 'children' in this essay to approximate the Dinka term *mïth* (sg. *meth*), which is usually used to refer to children between the ages of 3 and 14 or so.

My first work in Bor was on collecting life histories. I first met Nhial completely by accident. He was staying in Bor Town to attend school and living with his mother's brother, who, having some business in the market, had left him in front of a shop to wait. About fourteen years old, his age-grade was *malɔu* (ma- 'masc.' + grey).[2] Nhial was telling me how his uncle was 'just making charcoal' for a little money so that he could send him for tutoring during the school holiday. Nhial's father was working in Juba as a butcher ('he is uneducated, a farmer') and his mother was in Kenya, where she had gone to seek treatment for a disease that was rife then. Nhial remarked on how he had recently been initiated, so I asked, what was that like? 'The whole story? Okay,' he said. 'The story is this. It starts like this – '

> there was a time when I was small there in that side of Aliap [across the White Nile, in Bahr al-Ghazal]. I had been there, I was small; I just adopted the culture of those people. And there were people who had been initiated there, while I was small. I liked that culture, and then I asked my father, so that he would initiate me, too. But he said that I was [too] small.

Nhial described how his father had then taken him to the Kakuma Refugee Camp in northern Kenya to enroll him in Standard 1, the first year of primary school. The school closed and Nhial returned to South Sudan, where he completed Standard 3 in Bor. In 2005, he returned to Kakuma, where he completed Standard 5 before returning, again, to Bor Town.

> I came to this area [Bor Town], for education again – because that education there [in Kakuma], stopped. When I came here, I stayed with my [maternal] uncle. And at that time, I wanted to be initiated, but then my uncle forced me, so I refused. Then that condition [changed]. I refused, but that education was going to stop; since those people of the ministry of education never paid the teachers – the teachers just closed the school for a while. Then I said [to my uncle], "Instead of missing my education, I will be initiated now, so that when the [school opens], I will not miss my education again." Because it was like a holiday. So then I went to initiation.[3]

Nhial's account of his initiation was not unusual, as I would subsequently learn by talking to more children. It was also very unlike much of the literature on children in South Sudan produced by NGOs (see Ryan, 2012 for a critique). Part of this literature concerns

questions about what constitutes an adult in connection to questions about the age of conscription of child soldiers. That the age of initiation has decreased during the past decades in many parts of South Sudan has been cited by human rights organizations as evidence that youngsters in South Sudan are 'regarded as adults … and thus old enough to serve in the military' (HRW, 1994, p. 13). While older residents of Bor frequently cited the loss of fine discriminations of age-grades as evidence of rapid change and social loss, none supported the contention that initiation conferred an 'adult' status, much less that it equipped a child to fight or marry (cf. Hutchinson, 1996, p. 298). When asked about initiation, recently initiated youngsters, like Nhial, more often described practical efforts to navigate others' demands and to accommodate school schedules and other movements to life stage rituals.

These differing perspectives provide a useful lesson about what can be missed if one assumes that there is a single trajectory from 'infancy' through 'childhood' to 'adulthood.' Nhial described two nonsynchronous trajectories: one through a series of standard forms in school, the other associated with cattle-keeping and negotiated with older male relatives. Rather than a single path toward adulthood through a series of coherent stages, Nhial described multiple, sometimes competing aspirations negotiated through different institutions (Johnson-Hanks, 2002).

Nhial also described the fun that he had had. Initiation begins with a rite of separation, in which boys (*dhuɔ̈k*) undergoing initiation are separated from their old identities as ungendered children by leaving their households and staying together in a cattle byre, where they are fed by the age-set's sponsor, and ends with their reintegration into the social order as *malɔu*, young men. During the liminal stage, which lasts about a month, the initiands (called *aparak* or *alɔkniim*)[4] exist outside the order of ordinary social life. Nhial described how during his initiation period he and his companions jokingly mocked, threatened, and caned the generation that just weeks before had disciplined them – their elder-sisters, mothers, and aunts, mainly. Aparak walk around naked in little groups visiting relatives and carrying long sorghum stalks for threating passersby and mock battles with other groups of initiands. *Loc* refers to a game where aparak surround a young woman and demand that she pick one of them for her husband. If she refuses, the aparak cane her 'until she cries.' 'It's playing,' Nhial said in English; '*puɔl*,' when I asked him for a gloss. I remember being quite struck by this; while I knew a certain amount about the practice, with its ritual cycle and inversions of life and death, male and female, I was totally ignorant of what the experience of being an aparak was like or that it might be great fun. So I began to collect children's life histories.

I should probably emphasize here that *loc* is an example of a ritual dramatizing conflict between figures of authority (in this case female caregivers) and those beneath them (young boys). Joking partners are people who are expected to tease and abuse each other, their relations are marked by playful aggression. It wasn't all fun for aparak, though; joking relations cut both ways. Several young men mentioned to me how they had been woken up during their initiation period by people pouring cold water on them. I once asked a married woman about whether malou (the age-grade immediately following initiation) were able to marry. She said: 'Not even maguar ['zebra striped', the next age-grade after malou] are old enough to marry. If you went to engage [as a maguar] the woman would tell you to sit, then [she'd] go find a stick and come back and beat you.'[5]

When people (of all ages) told me their life histories, they tended like Nhial to organize their personal narratives around a sequence of places, rather than a series of life stages. This is not surprising; changes of location often correspond (for people everywhere) to changes in social positions, roles, statuses, and identities and to learning how to live in them. This is not a process that is limited to childhood: people are continually socialized, trained, and cared for by others. This process is formalized in Bor, where changes in residence correspond to movement through one *ideal* life course marked by a series of age-grades named after cattle colors (see fn. 2 and Deng, 1972, p. 47). But what initially drew me to Nhial and other children in Bor was that they had carefully studied what I myself had come to Bor to study. They had made themselves experts on the town's social and economic geography, the daily rhythms of the market, the fishing port, the towns schools, boreholes, and other gathering places. They knew the places where one could catch fish and the best trees for *thou* (desert dates) and tamarind. Their knowledge of these aspects of daily life in Bor were based not just on careful observation and critical reflection but on their active participation in the social life of Bor.

'Play' is, of course, a debated term (Leichter-Saxby, 2015). According to Sutton-Smith, play '[s]hould not be defined only in terms of the restricted modern Western values that say it is nonproductive, rational, voluntary, and fun. These are not concepts that can prevail as universals, given the larger historical and anthropologic evidence to the contrary' (1997, pp. 218–219). When I was making vocabulary lists in Bor, bilingual speakers generally offered *puɔl* and *tuk* as translations for play. Many defined play as an activity that is undertaken with no purpose beyond the pleasure of the action itself. Certain activities were focal, and people often provided examples of particular games, wrestling, running about, jumping, and imaginative play with clay cattle. Several people illustrated with *puɔl riai* 'vehicle for playing' (a push toy, or a small car) and – a phrase said by caregivers to shoo children outside – *ba la tuk lɔ* 'go (out) to play.' Children's descriptions ranged from climbing trees for tamarind and catching birds and fish, making small toys, to practicing karate and riddling and joking with other children, to hanging around mechanics' workspaces and making friendships with shopkeepers in the central market, whom they helped as translators. Rather than a set activity, children described play as something threading through many different activities. These were generally tied to certain key sites – compound yards, the market, the riverside, and the bush – where they were subject to the least supervision and where involvement across differences of generational hierarchy, status, and social space were most pronounced. Few activities were solitary, many were productive. Accordingly, the discussion that follows sees play as defined by my young interlocutors, at least in part, by a fairly broad understanding of self-direction, the freedom to choose what sort of relationships to create and to take part in.

Children's statements about their activities provided a useful lesson about conceptualizing play and my own inability at times to determine by observation whether a child was playing or learning or working. Having grown up in a place where habitual patterns of movement were constrained by play places (like playgrounds and playrooms) and playtimes (recess, after-school) had predisposed me to see pre-existing boundaries as a precondition for play – rather than as a field of action marked off by players themselves. Brian Sutton-Smith has drawn on what Stephen Jay Gould called the 'full house' of variation that may exist at any one time to write about how play is less of a stage in a human developmental sequence than something that is complexly woven through endless

configurations of relations with other activities and contexts (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 221). When I asked children about play, they did not generally define it through a contrast with 'work' nor distinguish between particular activities (such as between games and washing a motorcycle with friends) so much as stress a sense of agency, of creating objects and narratives for themselves and, in some cases, for those around them.

This essay looks at how play is embedded in the social, political, and economic structures of Bor Town and its changing history and constructions of 'childhood.' I begin by sketching out the ethnographic setting. In the next section, I discuss the ways in which children engage with social structures and events in imaginative play before turning to their playful involvement in collective tasks undertaken by people of all ages. I turn then to the ways in conceptualizations of play and adult evaluations of children's participation in livelihood activities are related to the town's geography and political domains. Finally, I discuss the production of playthings by children and their involvement in networks of exchange and, then, how children wrestle with their experiences of school through imaginative play.

The ethnographic setting – Bor Town

Bor Town is the capital of Jonglei State, South Sudan. In 2009, the town was a settlement of roughly forty thousand people. In 1991, Southern military unity collapsed when the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) divided into warring factions. During what came to be known as the *ruɔn capoth* 'season of the lone survivor', almost the entire population fled the town when the region was laid to waste by SPLA-Nasir soldiers and irregulars. The Government of Sudan captured Bor Town in 1992. Living nearby was risky. A few children stayed behind with elderly relatives in a district called Hai Salaam (حي سلام 'peace quarter') at the edge of town, and earned a little money selling cigarettes to the soldiers stationed there. It was only after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 that people began to settle there in substantial numbers. After 2005, the town's proximity to river and air transportation led it to be chosen by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as a repatriation way-station where returning people gathered before moving on to rural areas. Many remained in Bor Town for protection from rural insecurity and the greater access to schools and medical care that was available there. When I arrived, then, in August of 2009 it was a place where almost the entire population had recently arrived – and an ideal place in which to examine the processes by which people were reconstructing their lives and trying to get by in difficult circumstances, making choices about where to settle, fashioning binding agreements with one another, and looking for humor in their predicaments. Children were involved in all these processes.

The town's plat was divided up into a grid by wide avenues. In 2009, these roads passed mostly through scrub and forestland. The town itself clung to a few major roads, leaving a large open scrubland within the gridded part of town where people collected firewood, made charcoal, and children played. Bor Town's houses were mostly of wattle and daub, with thatched roofs and a single room. Here and there were square built houses with zinc roofs. Residential neighborhoods were dotted with little shops where vendors sold a uniform array of household goods: soap, candles, matches, packaged biscuits, soda, laundry detergent, cigarettes, soda bottles full of cooking oil, and little piles of

charcoal. Children attended a range of primary schools in town. Many parents struggled to send their children to one of the private primary schools opened there by Kenyan and Ugandan teachers, where the quality of education was widely felt to be superior to that offered by Government schools.

The most densely settled southwestern quarters were a maze of fenced compounds of three or four houses, where most of Bor Town's Somali, Kenyan, Uganda, and Northern and Western Sudanese residents lived. The southeastern extent of Bor Town's surveyed grid of cleared roads was marked by a cluster of fortified NGO compounds and, adjacent to the airstrip, a high-walled UN barracks with razor-wire, a moat, and machine gun turrets. A blocky cement prison marked the more sparsely settled northeastern extent of the grid.

Houses and homesteads

Dinka-speaking inhabitants of South Sudan are sometimes held out to exemplify what anthropologists have called 'state-less' or 'acephalous' society, organized around patrilineal descent groups, age-sets, lineages and clans. In Bor, people usually spoke of those whom they counted as their relatives most generally by saying that they were 'people of one dwelling-place' (kɔc pan tok), and referred to themselves comprehensively as 'Bor people' (kɔc Bor), describing different sorts of people geographically, as 'those of such-and-such a place,' called 'so-and-so.' Everyone also distinguished between Bor Town's center – popularly called 'Jonglei State' or suk (سوق 'market') – and panjieng (lit., 'people's land'), a term referring to rural places where people could create a sense of belonging that was more enduring and more secure than what 'the state' or 'the market' offered.

Bor Dinka descent groups are structured around cattle villages (wuɔt, singular: wut). Cattle villages – old abandoned ones or active ones – are everywhere on the Bor countryside; they are one of the main ways that history and social relations are inscribed on the landscape. Each wut has a name and a history, usually beginning with an account of the origins of its founding ancestors (koc wut celic 'people at the center of the wut'), how they left their birth-place and came to the territory which their descendants now inhabit, and so on.[6] These cattle villages were regarded as being more permanent and of greater antiquity than agricultural villages (Burton, 1987; Mawson, 1989, p. 60). The young people I knew best in Bor Town spent time in rural settlements, often moving between different relatives' households. As a result, rural settlements were seen – particularly from the perspective of town, where land rights and livelihoods were precarious – as stable gathering places, and often described as fixed centers of greater permanence than neighborhoods in town. And it was the arrangement of wuɔt, and overlapping patterns of cattle ownership there, particularly, that provided the physical framework for talking about relations between families in Bor country.

This structure is reproduced in miniature in rural homesteads. Or, more exactly, whenever people spoke to me somewhat abstractly about 'traditional houses' they described an idealized homestead consisting of two or three circular houses (ɣöt) with thatched roofs with an equal number of women's cooking hearths (mac thok) and a large cattle byre (luak) containing a cattle hearth (dhien) neatly arranged in a large clearing and surrounded by gardens (cf. Lienhardt, 1961, pp. 2–4). The fact

that few families in town actually lived in homesteads arranged in this way did not detract from the ideal.

This pattern was prominent in children's games. Children often made miniature mud cows and constructed little homesteads and animal kraals. Some were very abstract – these were mostly humps and horns, looking like little mud boomerangs – while others were made with great attention to detail (see Figures 1 and 2). Each cow had a name (implying a color-pattern and a sex). This abstract modeling of cattle (their fatness, humps, and horns) was learned by younger children from older ones, constituting both an independent 'cultural of childhood' (Opie & Opie, 1959) and an important part of children's aesthetic education (Coote, 1992, p. 261). Children used various found objects for props: nails or little sticks for cattle pegs, bits of fabric or string for tethers. With these props they would play out a range of activities associated with domestic life and cattle-keeping. The games afforded children an opportunity not only to play out in miniature the tasks which they more usually participated in as spectators or assistants, but also to imagine and reconstruct these relationships, to hold them out at a distance, and to reflect on them.

The cattle pictured in Figure 1 are arranged after the fashion of an idealized household, with a large central cow, three smaller cows (wives), and calves (their children), which are smaller still. The cattle in Figure 1 are being used in a kind of game of 'house' (or 'homestead'). Imaginative play with clay figurines sometimes spanned several days. Children told me about how they protected their cattle from the rain, 'burn[ing] them like charcoal, so the rain won't destroy them,' and burying them in them ground for safe-keeping. They played out elaborate scenarios, moving cattle from kraal to kraal, building little cattle sheds of grass, and protecting their cattle from rain and imagined cattle rustlers. 'You

Figure 1. Cattle figurines with posts and tethers.

Figure 2. Cattle figurines.

move the cattle from a place to another place,' one child told me. 'Some people will come and attack. Some people will take [the cattle]. Like that and like that. And even the women cook, and everything like that – we bring some ladies in, so we're married to them. We built some houses. Then you give your house away and go to another village, and build your own house … .'[7]

An emphasis on acquiring skills and preparation for later life can obscure children's cooperative and critical reflections on 'models' of activity that they themselves have created (Chick 2010, pp. 133–136). These games were full of talk. Children evaluated daily routines, conflicts and cattle raids, and the formation of new settlements. The process of shaping miniature cattle, moving them from place to place, and playing out complicated scenarios, involved continual evaluations and judgements about the rights and wrongs of actions, debates, justifications, and narrative descriptions of activity. Chick's (2010) emphasis on the ways that toys more often serve as 'models', rather than 'miniatures,' usefully underlines children's reflexive self-awareness in play. The relationship between children and their environments is not merely one of acquiring skills and social categories for adulthood; it is, in part, a relationship of discovering social possibilities and perspectives, trying them out, and evaluating them (Figures 3 and 4).

The models that children make of homesteads and their relations are not simply copies transcribed from an idealized template that has been transmitted from generation to generation, independent of the construction process. Children are active co-participants in the production of households within an environment that includes individuals of all ages, examples of other houses of various shape and design, and ideas about what an ideal household should look like and how contributions to its production should be recognized and valued. For adults and children alike, building a house is a matter of coordinating actions, which are simultaneously playful and 'workful' (Katz, 2004, p. 60).

Figure 3. Digging up a termite mound for plaster.

People in Bor convene gatherings for clearing fields, planning, harvesting, and other large tasks such as plastering a house with mud or erecting or thatching a cattle-byre (*luak*). These were tasks that were best done all at once. Kin and neighbors – over time these tended to blend into one another – would help each other in rotation. The recipient of the labor provided food and drink and sometimes a slaughtered chicken or goat for the workers for the day. The food and drink were not considered to be a payment or wage, but an obligatory gesture of recognition and hospitality from the host, who remained indebted to the workers afterwards. The groups were sometimes gendered or aged, or structured by kin-relations or mixed, depending on the task. Clearing fields, for example, was generally performed by groups of men, who expected a meal of soup and beer. Groups of children generally plastered houses, and received porridge and soda.

Houses in Bor were typically built in stages. First, a man would clear a patch of ground and, after marking out a four-sided or circular plan, dig out post-holes with a narrow hoe or iron bar. After these preliminaries, he would travel into the bush, or the market, to find appropriate timber for wall posts (*cop*) and rafters (*thɛl*), Borassus palm (*akan*) for poles, and lath (or wattle), and twine. After the main supporting posts were in place, the roof-frame could be assembled nearby (generally by two or three men working together) and lifted into place. After the roof was thatched and secured, the builder would wait for a rainy day, leaving the walls open to provide a shady place to rest or play.

Figure 4. Heavy ball of mud for plaster.

One day in October 2009 at about 7 AM everybody is gathered at Madut's house for plastering. Madut's young nephew, Ayuen, is finding a rhythm with two other young men, rolling the sticky termite mud that the younger children had dug up, and dropping it between the lathing. Young men and boys are smearing the mud, packing and slapping the wall to evacuate any pockets of air that, as the clay dried and cracked, would cause chunks to slough off. The youngest boys are digging up a termite mound with hoes and piling up the soil and soaking it with water collected there from the rain (and supplemented by women carrying it from a nearby borehole). After the soil was turned to mud, they hauled to the house in halved jerrycans (a repurposed pull toy). Ayuen was pouring water from another container to thicken the mud. Then he'd scoop it up and ball it in his hands and throw it on the wall and slap it.

Another group of children have formed a second plastering team. Several are inside the house, slapping mud against the wall and laughing and pressing it smooth. They are supplied there by several children who are carrying heavy balls of termite mud. Several smaller children are looking on, helping to carry mud, or wandering in and out of the two plastering groups, picking up handfuls of mud and rolling it into balls and pinching it to make shapes and figurines.

Several women are attending to pots boiling nearby. Madut's attention is divided between monitoring the progress of the plastering groups and a game of chess being played by two older men who have substituted bottle caps and a mud cow for missing pieces. One of the men, Open-grave, has been laid up for several weeks by a leg badly injured by several gunshot wounds. Madit is laughing and telling me that this is the third or fourth time Open-grave has been badly wounded; thus, his nickname: 'because you have to wait to put the soil on him, because he probably isn't dead!'

Plastering and play wound together until late-afternoon and then raveled off into other games after the children had received their porridge and soda. They removed the labels from the soda bottles for flag-making (Figure 5) and ran off.

The beer and soup provided by a host to those who help erect a fence or clear a field acknowledges a debt. Suggesting that it was in any way like a wage or equivalent to the value of a helper's contribution would be an insult, because it would suggest an attempt to break off further relations of mutual aid. Likewise, the act of giving soda to children constructed them as 'helpers' (rather than 'players'), to whom the owner of the house owed a debt. It acknowledged the flow of benefits upward across generations and provided

Figure 5. Flags.

a token of commitment to an ongoing relationship without exactly quantifying the children's contribution. Of course, one can draw on time allocations or other measures to quantify children's contributions to domestic economies in settings like this one. However, the distinction between children's work and play can lead a researcher to overlook the degree to which categories of 'work' and 'play' can occupy the same space. Indeed, multiple constructions of helping and playing may be available to participants within the space of a *single* activity, like plastering a house.

Work and play were tightly bound together. Playing in small groups, children often built little houses. Figure 6, shows a little house within which the builder has 'imprisoned' his grandmother. Madol and his friend collected materials (small posts, green palm for

Figure 6. Small house.

twine, and grass for thatching) and build a little house. Play like this afforded an opportunity to carry out collective tasks in which children did not ordinarily play an organizing role. Younger children were not excluded from the activities of older children, youth, and adults, though young children often took part mainly as spectators. Their play frequently involved activities performed by their caregivers and, as the repurposed pull toy used to cart mud (above) illustrates, as they grew older and stronger their play often overlapped more and more with helping. However, as the soda (above) indicated, this 'help' may or may not be explicitly recognized by others as 'help.' For example, girls' contributions to childcare and other household tasks (discussed below) were rarely marked by the explicit recognition of gifts.

Domains of play and constructions of childhood

Children's contributions to their households came in many forms. Children collected wild fruits, caught birds (which they occasionally sold in the market), collected sticks for toothbrushes (which were also sold), and fished. Fruit trees were busy with activity. Children climbed while others played in small groups below. Boys and girls played together. When tamarind was ripe, bigger children would climb to pick fruit to eat themselves, and collect some for the smaller children playing below and to take home to flavor their families' polenta. Children also collected *manthou* (the fruit of the *Balanites aegyptiaca*, known elsewhere as lallob or by the Arabic name *heglig*). They would nibble off the flesh around the husk, scattering them around where they would be collected and broken open for the small seed inside, which were used as a snack and a condiment by adults. (The term for the oily, bitter seed, *kuarjuaac*, freely translates as 'gather (*kuar*) + frying oil (*juaac*).' The image that the name evokes is of gathering up the scattered fruit after children have nibbled off the pulp and discarded the fibrous husks.) During lean times these fruits were crucial to people's survival.

Boys and girls looked after animals and gardens, fetched water, gathered firewood, and ran errands, sometimes getting sidetracked from an errand or chore by friends. Girls looked after younger children and helped to sift and grind cereals. Children made real contributions to family incomes, and combined their activities with play. Boys worked in Bor's taxi parks as barkers and conductors. Other boys spent time in the central market, with some collecting bottles to re-sell to traders and others seeking out friendships with Arabophone shopkeepers and providing help with translation and minding shops. While collecting bottles for re-sale was emblematic of 'work' for children and adults alike, making friendships with merchants (and helping in their stalls) was often described by children as 'just for enjoyment.' Boys often formed friendships with merchants in town and helped out with translation and dealing with customers. These friendships also provided merchants (who were often from Darfur or northern Sudan) with information about the market, news, and a measure of security. Girls occasionally helped out their mothers or other female relatives at coffee stands and the vegetable market, which lay to the north of Bor Town's central market. Still others found work in the informal economy that centered around motorcycles and established riverside washing stations, where self-organized teams of 8 or 9 little boys with buckets and dish soap would wash and rinse a motorcycle for 3 pounds. Between washing motorcycles they would splash about in the water and play (*bok*).

Very young children's unsupervised play was mostly in the 'bush' near their homes. As I have already mentioned, Bor Town was divided up into a grid by wide avenues cut through scrub and forestland. Walking from the edge of town to the central market, I often passed people making charcoal. This was archetypical 'town work'–difficult, heavy labor which is often performed alone and takes several days to complete. One must collect and cut heavy logs, stacking them up in piles more than a meter high, and then cover the pile with layers of foliage and soil to limit the flow of air during carbonization. Finally, the charcoal is collected and placed in sacks, which needed to be carried from the bush, and sold in town. It was work that was most often done to make ends meet. That the town's roads had been cleared but few plots assigned left large spaces of open bush, where children could roam about. I often met children playing there in little groups away from their homesteads, making charcoal (Figure 7) or little houses.

Figure 7. A fish.

Children in Bor, like many children in East Africa and elsewhere, grow up in the company of other children, and their frequent movement between homes is an important part of the flow of care, gifts, and sociability that creates and maintains bonds of kinship. Children were not expected to observe formal greetings, and wandered freely in and out of the compounds and houses of relatives, friends, and neighbors carrying small items and messages and looking for playmates. Much like what Schildkrout (1978, p. 124, 129) observed of Hausa children in urban Kano, in Nigeria, adulthood was marked in Bor by increased restrictions on young people's spatial mobility as they were expected to observe greater formality when moving between households and gendered spaces (see Tuttle, 2014a, p. 273).

Early in the morning, girls carried embers between households to light cooking hearths. Throughout the day, boys and girls ran errands, fetching bottled drinks from shops and borrowing chairs from neighbors when guests arrived. They carried news between households. In this way children contribute not only to household incomes but also build and sustain the networks of mutual support, communication, and hospitality that neighborhood life in Bor Town is based on (Figures 8–13).

The strongest ties between households were established by childcare. Adult caregivers entrusted toddlers and infants to the care of elder children – and these were almost always girls – who carried around younger children, kept them out of trouble with animals and hot cooking hearths, and included them in their games. Foreign visitors were sometimes disturbed by the freedom that very young children were given by their caregivers to explore their surroundings and test their limits through play. Very young children generally toddled around the clean-swept compound yard, picking up sticks and sharp cooking utensils for playthings while older girls kept an eye on them, played dodge games, helped to pound sorghum and maize (or played at grinding maize), picked chaff, and rested and chatted. This freedom was based on a perfectly sensible appreciation of the real hazards present in most homesteads. Most of the dangers that children faced in Bor in 2009–2010 – where political and economic forces structure children's risks for pneumonia, waterborne diarrheal diseases, and malaria, which accounted for roughly 71% of post-neonatal children's deaths (WHO, 2015) – had causes that were remote from caregivers' control. The health system was limited to a few private clinics and an understaffed Government hospital in the center of town.[8] Serious injuries around homesteads were very rare; on one occasion, during the year before my arrival, a child had died from burns after tipping over a cooking pot filled with hot oil, but this was very unusual. Cooking pots were continually monitored, and almost always within arm's reach. I heard accounts of older children who had drowned in the river while playing there, but this also was a very rare occurrence.

This respect for children's autonomy (within certain limits) was also related to the attitude that children learn best through their own self-direction. In a comparative study of 'risky play,' Lancy (2016) identified three 'themes' that are often present across a range of societies where young children play with sharp-edged tools. The first is reluctance on the part of caregivers to impose their wills on children 'because of a general bias against hierarchization and assertion of rank,' Lancy says (2016, p. 655). Though self-assertion and independence are key values, Bor Dinka society is not so much egalitarian as heterarchical, with many shallow hierarchies. Parents, at any rate, were never reluctant to command children; and, in my conversations with children, being bossed around by adults was one of the most frequently cited definitions of childhood. Instead, and in

Figure 8. Making charcoal.

line with Lancy's second and third themes, children's freedom to engage with risky tools was related to the view that children best acquire skills from their own initiative, and their own mistakes, in the company of others (Lancy, 2016; and cf. Ng'asike, 2015, p. 105; Hutchinson, 1996, pp. 167–168). This attitude in Bor was proverbial: *raan aci jiony ka lɔ, raan aye jiony ka bo* 'a person won't be advised when he goes, a person only takes advice when returning [from a misadventure]'. There is no sense scolding someone for a mistake that they have not yet made.

Both the gendering of children's work in Bor and its conceptual separation (by adults) from play were most pronounced in the town's central market, Merol Market, and the main taxi park. 'You've heard the children [in the taxi park, working as barkers, for the taxis that ran between Bor and Pariak on the road to Juba]? 'Pariak! Pariak! Pariak!',' asked my friend Mabior, who was explaining to me why the young boys in Bor who worked in the market were called *meth ka agoro* (children of Agoro). Agoro is a town

Figure 9. Caregivers.

near the border of South Sudan in Northern Uganda, where there was a displacement camp and a market for guns and stolen property: 'guns and bullets, cows, clothes, everything. *suk mujaramin*' [سوق المجرمين, 'market of criminals']. 'There's no government there,' he was saying, 'the person carrying even the pen could be killed.' (In other words, anyone who appeared to be collecting information there was suspected of working for the government and liable to be killed.)

> So those are the children who have parents – but maybe one [parent] is a drunkard, or a father who is a soldier and was taken far away: so there is no food. So, 'I am in the market to feed myself' [the child says to himself]. And they may get a pound – they are even sleeping in the bus park and eating left-over food. But what about the relatives? I blame the relatives. Those children have a right [to work or to be fed and cared for by a relative], because they are small. Maybe when there is separation [independence from Sudan], the Government can collect the children and talk to UNICEF and Save the Children and put them in school.[9]

While the 'work' and 'play' of children's contributions to households were not generally distinguished by adults when activities were undertaken in the home sphere (*bai*), children's participation in settings that were associated with cash and the wage labor economy were felt by many in Bor to be inappropriate 'work.' Parents' negative judgments mapped children's participation in economic activities onto the distinction between the spheres of 'hakuma' (towns, military/government, markets) and bai ('home') (Leonardi, 2007). Thus adult's distinctions between work and play and labor, and between childhood and adulthood, emerged from evaluations situated by spheres of activity, institutions, and their aspirations for their children's futures.

Figure 10. work-yard.

For many parents I spoke to in Bor in 2009–2010, prior to South Sudan's independence, the work and play of children in the marketplace was making a strong impression as an expression of growing inequalities of mobility and wealth. For ordinary people the most visible expression of inequalities of wealth and influence within South Sudanese society was the ability of 'big people' to relocate their families safely to Uganda and Kenya, where there were better schools and hospitals and fewer risks from rural insecurity, while their own children sought out opportunities in the taxi park. Few parents I spoke to saw anything unusual or problematic about children's participation in other livelihood activities (herding, childcare, fishing, collecting wild food, and planting) elsewhere in town, but most discouraged their children from going to Bor's central market alone (see Tuttle, 2014a, p. 264).

Playthings made by children

Children's play did not generally center around objects manufactured specifically for play. Their *kak ye puɔl* or *kaŋ puɔl*, 'playthings', were mainly ordinary domestic items (stirring

Figure 11. A dump truck.

sticks, pestles, pans, clothing) or objects that they had fashioned themselves out of clay, sticks, plant fibers, or discarded materials like bits of cloth and string, wire, oil tins, and nails. Most of the object made specifically for play were manufactured by children. The most common included clay cattle, push-and-pull toys (*puɔl riai*), hoops, kites (made from sticks and plastic bags), tops, marbles (made by melting plastic or rolling up clay), and tethers of woven palm.

Making objects for play was one of the activities that constituted the daily round for children, along with food-collecting, running errands, and socializing. Finished toys were often discarded or given to other children, as their play often revolved more around the process of searching out materials and shaping them than playing with finished toys.

Several children in town made more complex toys, which circulated widely among many children, who gave them away or swapped them for other things. Chol was one of these children. I had seen children pulling very detailed miniature cars and eventually traced one back to Chol, a boy of eight or nine. He had set up a small garage near his home

Figure 12. A push-toy.

in the shade of a tree along a path, where he made miniature cars and trucks out of oil tins and bits of wire and other materials that he had scavenged. He had a few tools: a hammer to flatten out the tins, several nails for making rivets, and a knife. With the help of his assistants, he made little cars and trucks with axles and wheels, hinged open-box beds, and detailed interiors: little seats and all the wheels and levers that he had seen in actual vehicles.

He had begun metalworking, he said, by making all-metal stoves out of scrap metal. (This was a common part of the repertoire of several NGO-run skills-training programs in the region. The all-metal stoves were designed to burn charcoal and, despite their relatively low efficiency and durability, lessen people's reliance on wood. This was meant to improve the lives of women and children who faced risks collecting firewood. Several children in town manufactured scrap metal stoves for sale in the market.) Chol had seen similar cars and trucks (and airplanes) made in Kakuma, a large refugee camp in Kenya

Figure 13. Marbles carried in a wheeled pull-toy.

where he had spent some time. He told me that he would like to work as a mechanic or a driver, perhaps fly in an airplane.

Chol mostly gave the cars away as gifts to other children. Such generous acts were generally spoken of as a manifestation of Dinka *cieŋ*[10] or 'culture' – that is, as the sort of ordinary give-and-take of Dinka life among neighbors who exchange companionship, labor and supplies, and talk. He anticipated that others would probably reciprocate. The trust and the relationships that he built and maintained in this way might bring a benefit to him, but he did not speak of this as a motivation. He and his friends, he told me, just made the vehicles for fun.

Many researchers turn to a theory of play as practice for adult activity to understand the role that work and larger social relations play in children's self-directed activities. But it would be a mistake to limit play to a stage of preparation for later work, or even to a process of creating a material link to a desire for a particular life-course, such as becoming

a mechanic or a driver. Certainly, children did learn a great deal about their social and natural environments by plastering houses, tending livestock, collecting fruit, hunting for birds, playing at making charcoal, minding shops, and so forth. This knowledge and skill would no doubt be useful in later life, but a focus on play as a stage of preparation risks missing the ways in which play is a part of the process of creating and maintaining ongoing relationships in the present, *and* constructing desirable futures and reflecting critically on past experiences.

School

Play bears the marks of specific social histories. It not only affords preparation for adult roles but also materials for making sense of them, and for reflecting on, subverting, and resisting adult demands. Children do not simply acquire adult skills and knowledge; children contribute to processes of social reproduction and change by making use of the cultural materials that are available to them, transforming and reinventing skills, knowledge, and practices in changing circumstances.

For example, one afternoon in September, 2009, I was sitting in Bor Town with my friend Madit, who was leafing through a book that I had brought called *Perspectives on Africa* (Grinker & Steiner, 1997). He stopped on an image of a European 'colonial officer in portage' shown wearing a cork helmet and seated in a palanquin carried by four Africans (Grinker & Steiner, 1997, p. 567).

'There's a song about this,' Madit said.

I asked him to sing it.

bɛny iye, bɛny yekɔcd̈ït	Master woe! Master of all the people
duɔn [duɔk] bä bɛnyd̈ït jal (cök) piny	Don't let the master touch the ground.
bɛny iye, bɛny yekɔcd̈ït	Master woe! Master of all the people
duɔn [duɔk] bä bɛnyd̈ït jal piny	Don't let the master touch the ground.[11]

'They carried him in a bed,' Madit said, laughing at the vulgarity of it. 'At that time, when the Europeans colonized the people here, if the leader wanted to go the next morning, he sent word to the village. He said, 'You go and collect the young men!' And then, the next morning, the European said, 'I want to go to Khartoum,' or 'I want to go to Malakal.' And so they collected the young men – collected a lot of young men! – and put the European in the bed. Then the young men carried him from Bor up to Malakal, and from Malakal to Khartoum!'

The song, *duɔn bä bɛnyd̈ït jal piny* 'don't let the leader touch the ground', was sung by schoolchildren and learned by younger children from older ones. The image of carrying a European *bɛny* 'master', in a bed was a vivid image of *yɔŋ*, a term which many people used as the verbal synonym of mustamr (مستعمر 'colonialist'). Nebel (1948) translated *yɔŋ* as 'compel, hurry,' illustrating it with *Yɔŋ kɔc bï luoi lac thok* 'Hurry them to finish the work quickly'. Bilingual speakers of Dinka and English commonly translated *yɔŋ* as 'oppress,' but in everyday speech the word was more often used to mean 'to humiliate' or 'to degrade.' The song drew on a vivid image of the pre-colonial and colonial past. But for the schoolchildren who sang it, the song had a much more immediate reference in daily life.

South Sudan's educational system developed under the Anglo-Egyptian colonial regime. The style of teaching in primary schools in Bor is entirely authoritarian, with a heavy emphasis on rote memorization and military-style order and discipline. Early in the morning, when school was in session, I used to pass neat rows of students standing at attention in the yard of Bor's Primary School B. After the students piled up the firewood that they'd collected to cook their mid-day meal, the head teacher took them through the morning drill, always starting with 'a ten hut' and ending with 'a ten easy.'

> The students stand in rows, forming a rectangle in the schoolyard. The headmaster clasps a long switch that trails behind his back as he paces between them.
>
> 'Attention!' he shouts, 'Right!' and the students march right. 'Aaa-ten easy', and the students step left.
>
> 'Good morning students,' the headmaster says.
>
> 'Good morning,' the students call out in unison.
>
> 'How are you?' the headmaster asks.
>
> 'We are fine,' the students reply together.
>
> 'No you are not "fine,"' he replies, 'where are the rest of you?'[12]

That strict discipline and corporal punishment were central to children's school experiences was not only my impression; it was borne out by games. Madit and I would sometimes sit in his uncle's compound in town. One afternoon, when school was out, Mabior's children asked me to 'play headmaster.' They fetched the little blue UNICEF notebooks that Madit had bought for them in the market, and Yar*thii* 'little Yar', Mabior's smallest daughter, leaned close to make sure I wrote 'NAME _____' and 'FORM _____', after the fashion of her teacher, at the top of each sheet of paper. Under Yarthii's direction, I wrote out a list of math problems and English language and 'mother tongue' translation questions, and passed around pens from my backpack. The children busied themselves outside with their exams. Pretty soon they were back. As I was checking their math, Mabior's smallest son, Col, ran outside and returned with a long switch (*anyicui*) that he had pulled from a neem tree nearby. The children stood in a neat row, wide-eyeing their outstretched palms and giggling with delight, waiting to be struck across their open palms for each incorrect answer.

Imaginary play like Yarthii and Col's addressed their experiences with adults, but it was not meant merely to replicate their experience of school, nor only to create a domain where they could master their own fears of being beaten by teachers. Mabior's children imagined a world with a logical relation to the real world, within which they could play with power, authority, age, violence, and humiliation. The school provided a kind of ready-made microcosm of the larger world, with its own distinctive practices, relations, and materials, where the emotional relationships that they grappled with could be mapped out, turned up-side-down, exaggerated and made more vivid. By enrolling me as a headmaster, Yarthii confronted my difference (adultness, foreignness, whiteness, scariness, and so on) directly. Yarthii and Col gave me instructions, teaching me how to behave as a teacher – and, by doing so perhaps, worked to master their fear. But it would be a mistake to reduce this play to any one of its elements: as playful reconstruction

of school roles, an inversion of child and adult roles, an effort to master their fear of school teachers generally, or of me, in particular, or as a critique of school practices, or a critical exploration of their experiences in school. Their play was all these things.

Conclusion

In their review of children's play in Africa and South America, Schwartzman and Barbera (1977) noted that all too often the kind of creativity and critical insight that animated Yarthii and Col's games has emerged in Africanist scholarship as a residual category: an 'unimportant or … 'miscellaneous' pastime' defined by what it is not, 'serious' or 'important' (1977, p. 23, pp. 28–29). This view assumes that play is like the icing on a cake, which needs to be scraped off to reveal something more important, such as preparation for adult life, underneath. Children's participation in the social life of Bor suggests, instead, that play is not like the icing on a cake so much as the eggs in a cake – something that, while it may be conceptually separated, is essential to the composition, (re)production, and shape of everyday life for children and adults.

By focusing on play and the ways in which it is situated by (and productive of) social, political, and economic relations among people of all ages, I have sought not only to draw attention to children's experiences that have often been neglected by a focus on violence in South Sudan but also the ways in which children contribute to social reproduction there. Doing so has also enabled me to discuss the ways in which children's play not only affords preparation for adult roles but also the materials for making sense of them and taking an active and self-reflective role in social life in the present.

> In this essay, I have drawn on Brian Sutton-Smith's (1997) attention to the variability of play to follow children's definitions of play in Bor as something threaded through many activities and contexts but always exceeding them and leading in unexpected directions. This is a process that, as Cindi Katz shows, requires rethinking familiar terms and coming up with new ones, like 'playful work' and 'workful' play (2004, p. 60). Play is, after all, simultaneously serious and non-serious (Finnegan, 2014). By juxtaposing seemingly incompatible perspectives and domains play can lead analysis down unexpected paths and to productive encounters.

Notes

1. In my years of living and working in South Sudan, I've never actually seen one of these. See, though, for examples: Nichols (2016), Patinkin (2016), East (2014), and the cover of Hutchinson (1996).
2. I have tried to avoid using technical terms in this essay, however two require a brief explanation. The term 'age-grade' refers to the more or less formalized age categories that a person passes through during their life course (infancy, childhood, adolescence, and so forth). A number of scholars have emphasized the indeterminacy of life courses, and the ways in which passages to adulthoods are plural, 'negotiable and contested, fraught with uncertainty, innovation and ambivalence' (Johnson-Hanks, 2002, p. 865). Among Bor Dinka, the ideal male life course from childhood (*dhuk*) to elderhood (*kec*) is generally composed of five age grades (Malou, Athar Ngook, Maguar, Ayuor, Kec), with initiation effecting the entrance of candidates (*aparak*) into the first age grade of youth-hood (Malou) as well as a particular age set (riic). In Bor, age grades are named for the color patterns of beaded necklaces and corsets, which were said to have been manufactured and worn in earlier times, before war

broke out in the region. The term 'age-set' refers to a formal cohort of individuals who are generally initiated together and, thus linked, move through a series of age-grades together. Age sets in the vicinity of Bor are generally organized at the level of the *dhien* (a group of people linked by lineage and overlapping herd ownership, who share a common hearth) and named for the color pattern of the bull provided to the aparak by the sponsor of their initiation. A useful discussion of the changing role of age-grading and initiation among Nuer speakers can be found in Hutchinson (1996).

3. Interview (in English) recorded in Bor Town, 18 September 2009.
4. *Alɔkniim* 'pasturegrassheads' refers to the undifferentiatedness of initiates who, like prairygrass, are all 'equal,' or the same 'height'. The initiation period normally starts just after the harvest, when the sorghum is cut. (In recent years in Bor Town, people have tried to synchronize initiation with school holidays.) The metaphoric alignment of human and agricultural cycles – that is to say, the naturalization of an ideal life course—is also evident in the sorghum stalks that the candidates carried. Their attacks were likened to threshing.
5. Interview, 6 April 2010, Bor Town. The crying described by Nhial (above) and the beating mentioned here are each conventional hyperbole of humorous narratives.
6. In this way, the numbers of *dhien* (lineage) attached to a *wut* are often invoked to mark time, as they seem to grow outward from the center (see Leonardi, 1961). For an excellent discussion of how this socio-political form has shaped 'the State' in South Sudan, see Cormack (2016).
7. Bor Town, September 2009.
8. The absence of a health system means that the data on causes of children's mortality are estimates based on very little information. The WHO gave 7% as the figure for mortality stemming from 'injuries,' which include others than just household injuries.
9. Interview, 14 July 2010, Bor Town.
10. As a noun the term *cieŋ* refers to the domain of everyday life and practices, 'habits and customs' (Nebel, 1979), 'surrounding land,' and, as a verb, means 'way of doing things' or simply 'to live.' Evans-Pritchard famously translated the Nuer cognate as 'home' (1940, pp. 135–136; but see Burton, 1987, pp. 27–28); in Dinka the term can also simply mean, 'to wear.'
11. Recorded 23 September 2009.
12. Bor Town, 18 March 2010

Notes on contributor

Brendan Tuttle, Ph.D., is an applied anthropologist working in South Sudan. His research interests include ordinary life in the midst of armed conflict, conflict transformation, forced migration, children in conflict, and complex emergencies.

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