



South Sudan/Mercy Corps/M Roquette

THE CURRENCY OF CONNECTIONS

The impact of weddings and rituals on social connections in Bentiu, South Sudan

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Authors' affiliations:

Roxani Krystalli, Tufts University

Elizabeth Stites, Tufts University

Alex Humphrey, Mercy Corps

Vaidehi Krishnan: Mercy Corps

Introduction and Overview

Rationale for study

This briefing paper examines changes to wedding rituals and the nature of marriages in the Bentiu Protection of Civilians site (PoC) and adjacent areas of Rubkona and Bentiu towns in South Sudan. We draw from interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted between December 2018 and March 2019 with displaced residents to highlight how the shift from a cattle-based economy to one entailing greater use of cash has affected these life events. We also examine changes to bridewealth and corresponding shifts in the engagement of relatives, community members, and social networks in the rite and process of marriage.¹ Depending on their gender, age, and social positioning, respondents offered different views on the extent to which these changes were welcome or detrimental. We reflect this diversity of perspectives in the analysis that follows.

The question of changes to marriages is relevant for humanitarian practitioners, decision-makers, and researchers. First, consistent with research in South Sudan and other contexts, we show that weddings and marriages are not only privately important for those who directly participate in them, but also carry broader social and symbolic significance for the wider community.² Second, weddings and marriages provide a useful lens for examining the effects of cash on social connectedness, as well as the effects of livelihood loss—in the form of cattle, in particular—on new and existing relationships.³ Finally, an examination of weddings and marriages allows for a gender- and age-informed analysis of how social relationships are reconfigured during conflict and displacement.⁴ We pay particular attention to how norms around the regulation of gendered relationships have evolved during the course of conflict and displacement, and the ways in which livelihood changes affect those norms.

This briefing paper is part of an [OFDA-funded partnership between Mercy Corps and the Feinstein International Center](#) at Tufts University to examine changes to social connectedness for conflict-affected South Sudanese in South Sudan and Uganda, and how these connections are linked to their coping and recovery. Other outputs in this three-part Bentiu-focused series include briefing papers on (a) changes in the forms and sources of social connectedness in Bentiu, and (b) the significance of informal livelihood groups and associations as forms of social connectedness in the PoC and beyond. Collectively, these three papers expand on key themes that emerged from

¹ We recognize both that a gender analysis of social connectedness can reveal changes to relationships that go beyond marriage and that some of the impacts of the shift from cattle to cash that we describe also affect other life events, such as funerals, initiations, and justice settlements (e.g. for revenge killings). We plan to address these dimensions in future reports.

² Beswick, Stephanie. "We Are Bought Like Clothes": The War Over Polygyny and Levirate Marriage in South Sudan." *Northeast African Studies* 8, no. 2 (2001): 35-61. Luke, Nancy and Kaivan Munshi. "New Roles for Marriage in Urban Africa." *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 88, no. 2: 264-282 (2006). Ibreck, Rachel, and Naomi Pendle. "Community security and justice under United Nations governance: lessons from chiefs' courts in South Sudan's protection of civilians sites." *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* (2017). Pike, Isabel, Sanyu Majola and Caroline Kabiru. "Making Sense of Marriage: Gender and the Transition to Adulthood in Nairobi, Kenya." *Journal of Marriage and Family*: 1298-1313 (2018)

³ Catley, Andy. Livestock and Livelihoods in South Sudan. *Knowledge, Evidence and Learning for Development*, December 5, 2018. Hoogeveen, Johannes, Bas van der Klaauw and Gijsbert van Lomwel. "On the Timing of Marriage, Cattle and Shocks." *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 60, no. 1: 121-154 (2011). Idris, Iffat. Livestock and Conflict in South Sudan. *Knowledge, Evidence and Learning for Development*, October 29, 2018.

⁴ For a discussion of this issue in other contexts, including Kenya and Uganda, see: Pike, Isabel, Sanyu Majola and Caroline Kabiru. "Making Sense of Marriage: Gender and the Transition to Adulthood in Nairobi, Kenya." *Journal of Marriage and Family*: 1298-1313 (2018). Baines, Erin. "Forced marriage as a political project: Sexual rules and relations in the Lord's Resistance Army." *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 3 (2014): 405-417.

research on social connectedness in Panyijar County, South Sudan⁵ captured in [a paper released in January 2019](#), which highlighted the significance of social support networks for survival and coping during conflict and in its aftermath.⁶

Context

In December 2013, conflict broke out in South Sudan between forces loyal to President Salva Kiir Mayardit and Vice President Riek Machar. Soon, the fighting, which began in Juba's army barracks, had spread to much of Greater Upper Nile region. Within days of the outbreak of the conflict, thousands of civilians had poured into UNMISS (United Nations Mission in South Sudan) bases in Juba and other major towns seeking safety and protection within their confines. The informal encampments that subsequently grew inside the fenced enclosures were termed Protection of Civilian (PoC) sites. The UN initially



viewed the PoCs as short-term responses to the dire need for civilian protection upon the eruption of a conflict that observers hoped would be short-lived. However, in the six years since the outbreak of this crisis in South Sudan, the PoCs have become semi-permanent communities, home to tens of thousands of civilians and vast, complex and unique economies. While assessments conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) suggest that civilians have begun to leave the PoCs, the Bentiu site remains home to approximately 100,000 residents, making it by far the largest of South Sudan's six PoCs.⁷

The Bentiu PoC is populated by numerous Nuer clans and sub-clans, often living in direct proximity to one another for the first time. Ongoing violence, and the effects of displacement to PoCs, have both disrupted and reconfigured bases of social organization and connectedness. People have developed new livelihood strategies and systems of economic exchange. Novel forms of governance and authority have emerged, in which traditional 'customary' forms of authority and UNMISS and UNMISS-appointed governance structures both co-operate and clash.

Methods

The findings in this report are based on qualitative research conducted by three South Sudanese researchers and four expatriate researchers from Mercy Corps and FIC.⁸ Researchers spoke with a total of 133 people in 33 semi-

⁵ Panyijar County, in southern Unity State, is a rural, opposition-controlled region. The county has remained relatively stable throughout South Sudan's civil war, in large part because of its geographic isolation and the natural barrier provided by the Sudd, a vast swamp that encompasses the area.

⁶ Humphrey, Alex, Vaidehi Krishnan, and Roxani Krystalli. (2019). *The Currency of Connections: Why local support systems are integral to helping people recover in South Sudan*. Washington, DC: Mercy Corps.

⁷ "PoC Update" United Nations Missions in South Sudan (UNMISS), August 30, 2019, https://unmiss.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/poc_update_30_august_-_05_september_2019.pdf

⁸ Tufts University received permission to collaborate on this research with Mercy Corps through the Tufts University Institutional Review Board. Research participants were recruited based on snowball sampling. While the researchers attempted to ensure that diverse participants were included within the sample, including men and women of diverse ages and socioeconomic standing, the finding in this

structured in-depth interviews (IDIs) and 14 focus group discussions (FGDs). Research was conducted both inside the Bentiu PoC and in Bentiu Town and Rubkona Town. Research participants included men and women of diverse ages and livelihoods in an effort to document varying perspectives and experiences of life in the Bentiu PoC. Interviews were both led in Nuer by South Sudanese researchers, and in English by expatriates with translation by South Sudanese researchers. With participants' consent, most interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed and analyzed in English.⁹ Transcripts were analyzed using Dedoose through an iterative process of inductive coding, paying attention to patterns that emerge from the research, rather than assigning pre-determined analytic categories. In all cases in the write-up, the names of research participants have been changed in order to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

It should be noted that this research was conducted in communities that are predominantly ethnically Nuer, and many of the narratives presented in this series are deeply rooted in this unique context. While the implications of the findings in this report are relevant to audiences interested in diverse contexts in South Sudan and beyond, it is important to note that the specific narratives presented in this report may manifest differently in different contexts.



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write-up are not necessarily representative of the entire population within the POC. Researchers were careful to assure participants that their responses would be kept confidential and would have no bearing on the receipt of assistance from Mercy Corps or any other humanitarian agencies.

⁹ When participants preferred not to have a recording, researchers took notes by hand.

Key findings and analysis

Understanding weddings and marriages before displacement

Prior to people’s displacement to the PoC, the process of marriage involved extensive consultations and interactions among multiple stakeholders (Figure 1).¹⁰ This included information that the families collected about each other, consultations among a broad network of relatives (extending beyond the father and mother to include brothers, uncles, and other clan members), and negotiations around the bridewealth that the man’s family would pay in cattle.¹¹ The young man’s relatives and friends contributed to a pool of resources (cows) to pay the agreed price. While these cattle were sometimes exchanged all at once, more commonly they were exchanged slowly over an extended period, which served to build upon and layer the social connections between the families and clans.^{12 13} Once the payments reached a given level, there would be a celebration that involved an extended clan and family network as well as many other more casual social

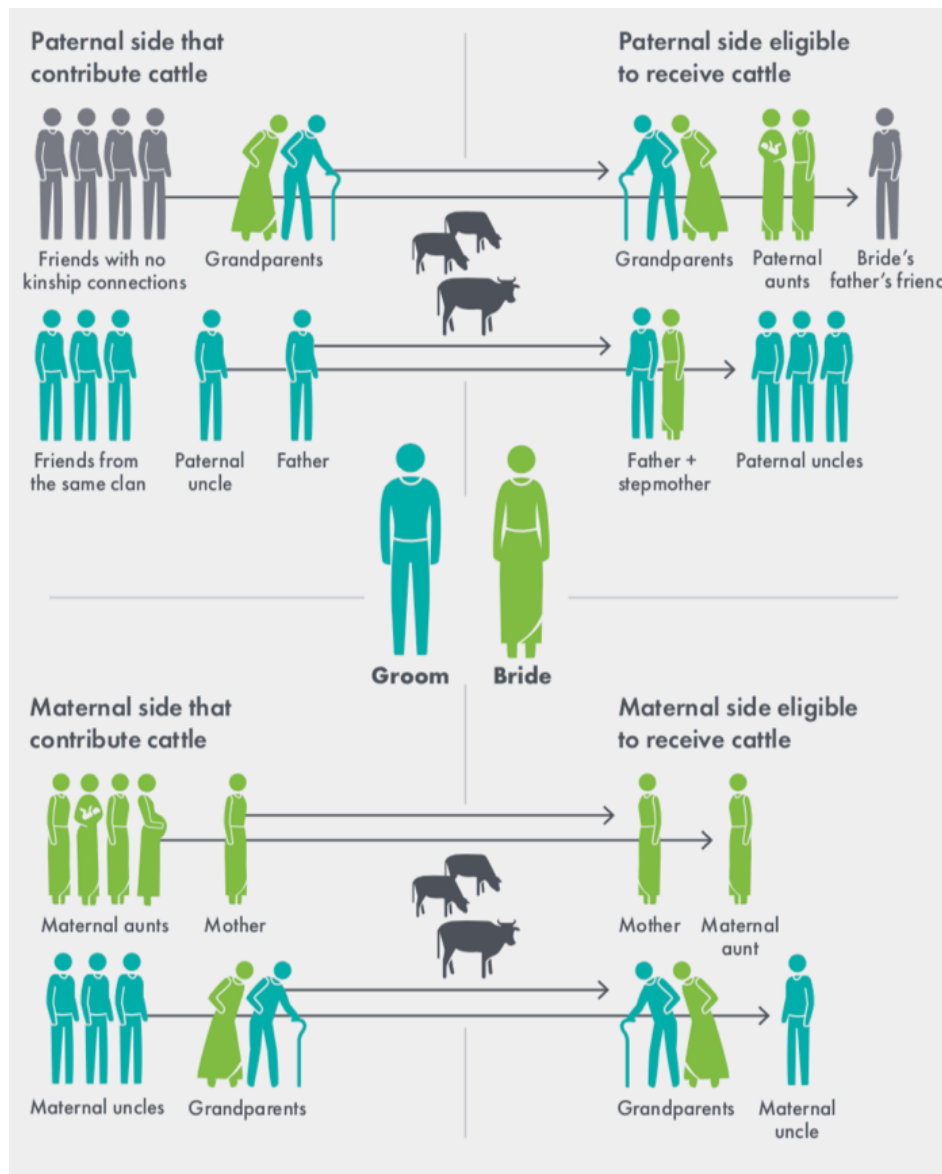


Figure 1: Bridewealth Cattle Exchange

¹⁰ Dominique Meekers examines marriage as both a process and institution. She explains that marriage as a process goes through multiple stages involving the couple as well as their extended families. Given these multiple stages, it can be difficult to pinpoint when the exact start of the marriage process begins. Meekers, Dominique. 1992. The Process of Marriage in African Societies: A Multiple Indicator Approach. *Population and Development Review* 18 (1):61-78.

¹¹ In-depth interview with female research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

¹² Anthropologist Sharon Hutchinson explains that this relationship of debt and exchange over bridewealth could go on for generations. Hutchinson, Sharon. 1996. *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War, and the State*. University of California Press, p. 62.

¹³ Anthropologist E.E. Evans-Prichard described Nuer clans as “segmented...exogamous system[s] of lineages which trace their descent to a common ancestor.” Marriage is thus the key source of inter-clan connectedness within Nuer communities. Evans-Prichard, E.E. 1940. *The Nuer of the Southern Sudan*. African Political Systems, p. 74.

connections. As one woman in the PoC said, “before people came to the PoC, marriage was very important. People in the family whose daughter is being married could prepare food and gather in the home of the girl’s father to receive the parents of the bridegroom to initiate the marriage with joy and happiness.”¹⁴

Shift in bridewealth payment from cattle to cash

A key change in the PoC is that bridewealth is now paid primarily in cash, rather than cattle.¹⁵ This is both because people are not allowed to keep cattle inside the PoC and because many respondents lost their cattle in militarized cattle raids or displacement during the conflict.¹⁶ The shift to cash has affected perceptions regarding *who* can afford to get married (i.e. who has access to this resource), with one respondent noting that “the people that mostly marry with money these days are the ones working in the NGOs.”¹⁷ In addition, this shift changes the nature, duration, and sharing of the bridewealth among relatives and clan members, with impacts upon the nature of social connections across this broader network.¹⁸

Despite these changes, cattle are sometimes still part of the negotiations surrounding marriage. Some families prefer to settle part of the bridewealth in cash prior to the wedding celebration, leaving a portion to be paid in cattle after they leave the PoC and livelihoods recover. As one respondent noted, the family “asks for half the bridewealth to be settled in cash and the rest of the cattle is agreed to be paid when there is a peace agreement and people move out and stay free of any attacks. Then the balance would be paid to the in-laws in the form of cattle.”¹⁹ These arrangements show that transactions—and pending credits—surrounding marriage do still create



“The people that mostly marry with money these days are the ones working in the NGOs.”

— Female FGD participant, Bentiu PoC

lasting socioeconomic relationships between the families. Importantly, respondents appear to agree that the lack of cattle does not mean there should be no price attached to marriages. “There is no girl given for free,” an FGD participant said. “If a man does not have cows or money, and he cannot get them from anywhere, he will not marry until he gets the bridewealth.”²⁰

Perspectives on the shift to cash for the payment of bridewealth

Perspectives varied among respondents regarding the effects of this shift to cash. Some lamented that cash evaporates quickly compared to the long-term impacts of having access to cattle. These effects extend both to people’s livelihoods and to the nature of the social bonds, not only for the couple getting married but also for the

¹⁴ In-depth interview with female research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

¹⁵ Cash in lieu of cattle as part of bridewealth existed in Nuer society prior to outbreak of violence in the early 1980s, but it was relatively rare, normally consisted of only a small part of the total transfer, and the bride’s family frequently quickly converted the cash into cattle. In the violence and massive displacement that followed, many families did shift to cash for at least part of bridewealth, although ideally half of the payment was meant to remain in the form of cattle. Hutchinson, pp. 87-88, 100-102. In this briefing paper, we are examining a widespread shift from cattle to cash for families living within the Bentiu PoC.

¹⁶ In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

¹⁷ Focus group discussion with women conducting small-scale informal livelihoods within the Bentiu PoC, such as collection of firewood, reed, or elephant grass, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

¹⁸ The shift from cattle to cash as bridewealth in the PoC tracks with changing conceptions of wealth in the PoC. Respondents referred to a shift from “traditional” to more “modern” definitions of household wealth. While the traditional conceptualization focused on cattle, productive land, and number of daughters, more modern conceptualizations focus on cash and income.

¹⁹ In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018. Hutchinson found a similar pattern of displaced Nuer living around Khartoum promising payment in cattle “when the world becomes good again” (p 102).

²⁰ Focus group discussion with women conducting small-scale informal livelihoods within the Bentiu PoC, such as collection of firewood, reed, or elephant grass, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

extended family and clan. As one mother narrated, she could no longer afford to work less after her girls married because cash runs out faster than the dividends from cattle. “If my daughter is married today in the PoC, I won’t stop looking for firewood because the cash will disappear. In a short period of time, I will be back at square one.”²¹ An FGD participant echoed: “Marriage by cows stabilizes a relationship. Money just gets finished.”²²



***“Marriage by cows
stabilizes a relationship.
Cash just gets finished.”***

— Research participant,
Bentiu PoC

This stability extended to the respect the community accords marriages. As a respondent commented, “before, when you got married to a girl, the wedding was traditional. People danced around. But now marriage is conducted using cash. People do not do the ceremony and the respect is not there. Before, if a man paid a lot of cows for bridewealth, people would highly respect that person.”²³ A different respondent echoed: “When you get married using cash, we don’t see it as the valuable kind of marriage.”²⁴

Respondents also commented on the effects of the (in)visibility of cash as a currency for bridewealth payment. On the one hand, the knowledge that cash is circulating—and that it is linked to wedding rituals—can make some people targets for theft and vulnerable to experiencing ongoing violence within the PoC. “Cash caused many conflicts,” one respondent said. “Let me give you an example: When you are given bridewealth in the form of cash in this PoC, you have got to be vigilant throughout because more criminals are attracted to you to rob you of the cash.”²⁵ On the other hand, respondents consider cash to be a *less* visible asset than cattle ownership, meaning that others can hide it better or refuse to loan money to those in need. As one respondent noted, “those with no cash don’t want anything to do with those who have cash because when you ask for help from them, they will say that they have no cash. [...] Cash is something that can’t be seen from the pocket.”²⁶ This creates trust issues that can weaken social connections among people who would have previously relied on support from each other. This support was also easier to provide when the exchange was in cattle, as you could give someone in need some milk and hence maintain these social ties. Gifts of cattle continue to build social connectedness over time, as people can share animal products, gift calves, allow bulls to sire other people’s cows, and lend animals (sometimes for years, decades or a lifetime) to a social contact.



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²¹ In-depth interview with female research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

²² Focus group with key informants from humanitarian NGO, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

²³ In-depth interview with male businessperson, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

²⁴ Focus group discussion with male cattle keepers, Bentiu Town, March 2019.

²⁵ In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

²⁶ In-depth interview with female research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

A key effect of the shift to cash was a reconfiguration of the stakeholders involved in decision-making surrounding marriage. Respondents generally agreed that fewer family members were involved in marriage decisions now, and that the exchanges occurred primarily between immediate families. This included both exchanges related to the bridewealth and the nature of the wedding celebrations themselves. “The marriage is now one-on-one between the household,” one respondent said.²⁷ Traditionally, fathers and other male authority figures have played instrumental roles in the negotiation, payment, and distribution of cattle-based bridewealth. However, in the PoC, where bridewealth in the form of cash is paid directly to only a few members of the bride’s immediately family, respondents stated that in some cases youth did not even consult their own parents before marrying. “Before, a father could advise his son on who to marry. If a young man wanted to marry a certain girl, the father would investigate the family and he could say ‘no, pick another girl.’ But these days, young men don’t even consult their fathers,” one respondent said.²⁸ In this sense, cash bridewealth (as opposed to cattle) may either be contributing to or may be a sign of an erosion of generational authority in the PoC. Men and women of various ages lamented these developments because they represent a weakening of social connectedness, an erosion of rituals linked to weddings, changes in inter-generational relations, and a possible decrease of support for the couple. A different respondent added that, while previously relatives were involved in procuring cows for the marriage, there is now less clarity about how much cash the man’s family paid and whether it was enough, and this can create conflict among family members down the line.²⁹



“Before, a father could advise his son on who to marry. If a young man wanted to marry a certain girl, the father would investigate the family and he could say ‘no, pick another girl.’ But these days, young men don’t even consult their father.”

— Male key informant (South Sudanese NGO staff member), Bentiu PoC



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Others suggested that in the PoC, people are included in marriage-related preparations who would not have previously been meaningfully consulted. This may be attributable to the payment of bridewealth in the form of cash. For example, one FGD participant remarked that people now turn to their friends or neighbors to gather cash (or, in few cases, cattle) for the bridewealth, whereas before those activities would have been mostly limited to the family. “We always had friends,” this respondent said, “but the investment in marriage that formed bonds were only between families. Now they are also between people who are just friends.”³⁰ Similarly, respondents welcomed that women in the PoC can now more readily contribute cash to these processes, as opposed to the cattle-based exchanges being predominantly controlled by male family members.³¹ Youth who are members of savings groups said that they can mobilize

²⁷ In-depth interview with male businessperson, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

²⁸ Focus group discussion with key informants from humanitarian NGO, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

²⁹ In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

³⁰ Focus group discussion with key informants from humanitarian NGOs, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

³¹ Focus group discussion with key informants from humanitarian NGOs, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

those resources to help other members get married: “We collect money on a weekly basis and give the money to the father of the girl if the marriage is agreed to be conducted with money,” one member of such a group said.³² As a result, while there has certainly been a shift in who is consulted and how regarding weddings and marriages, the shift does not necessarily represent a shrinking of social relations in every domain.

In fact, some welcome the move to cash for bridewealth payments, particularly given the escalation of violent cattle raids in South Sudan over the course of the current crisis.³³ As one respondent said, “nowadays parents in the PoC prefer payment of bridewealth in the form of cash by the bridegroom. [...] If the bridegroom has cattle, he is requested to sell cows and pay in the form of cash.”³⁴ When asked about that preference, the same respondent clarified that “no one would like to take care of the cattle when they become targets for raiders.”³⁵ This suggests that, while some feel that cash enhances people’s vulnerability to theft or other acts of violence, cattle ownership comes with its own set of vulnerabilities, leading some to prefer cash bridewealth.³⁶

Others expressed a preference for cash because it has made the process of getting married easier due to the involvement of fewer stakeholders, including parents and extended family, which puts the decision-making about marriage more squarely in the hands of the couple. “The important thing I have seen in



“Girls in school are not bothered so much about this marriage issue because there are some households who have resorted to keeping their daughters in school. They offer them pieces of advice not to be impregnated by the gangs within the PoC.”

— Female research participant, Bentiu PoC

cash is that it’s easy for people who get cash to get married,” one respondent said.³⁷ Moreover, the challenges that some families face in gathering enough cash for a marriage can correlate with positive outcomes for girls’ education. “Girls in school are not bothered so much about this marriage issue,” one respondent said, “because there are some households who have resorted to keeping their daughters in school. They offer them pieces of advice not to be impregnated by the gangs within the PoC.”³⁸ This may help delay the age of marriage for girls.

Potential conflicts surrounding marriages and settlement strategies

Cash is not only relevant to the payment of an agreed bridewealth, but also to the resolution of disputes that arise from various approaches to marriage. As FGD participants explained, there are three different ways in which people approach marriages and the potential conflicts that arise from them. The first is the process of permission-seeking from families, agreement on bridewealth amount, the commencement of payments, and celebration discussed earlier. The second, elopement, refers in this context to a couple deciding to marry without following the full process of working with the families in advance. In such cases, the male’s immediate family may be

³² In-depth interview with male youth, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

³³ For a detailed discussion of the escalation and “militarization” of cattle raiding during South Sudan’s crisis, see: Wild, Hannah, Jok Madut Jok, and Ronak Patel. “The militarization of cattle raiding in South Sudan: how a traditional practice became a tool for political violence.” *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* 3, no. 1 (2018): 2.

³⁴ In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

³⁵ In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

³⁶ For a discussion of how assets can become liabilities during times of conflict, see: Lautze, Sue and Angela Raven-Roberts. “Violence and complex humanitarian emergencies: implications for livelihoods models.” *Disasters*, 2006, 30(4): 383-401.

³⁷ In-depth interview with male research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

³⁸ In-depth interview with female research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

required to pay a cash settlement to the bride’s family. The third approach to getting married refers to weddings arranged in the aftermath of a girl or woman getting pregnant.



“Right now when a guy wants to marry a girl without her parents’ permission, he will be taken to the Community High Committee leader who deals with marriage cases. Then the guy will be told to pay 30,000 SSP. The cash is not the actual bridewealth; it is the payment for taking the girl without permission from her parents.”

— Male research participant, Bentiu PoC

Governance bodies within the PoC, such as the Community High Committee (CHC), civil court, and UNMISS are important stakeholders in settling potential disputes arising from each of these approaches to marriage. The CHC and civil court are formal structures to which male and female members are elected based on their counties of origin. These unique institutions have emerged with the support of UNMISS as community-driven solutions to camp management and security challenges in the PoC. The dispute resolution mandates of the CHC and civil court primarily relate to the resolution of social conflicts, including ones related to impregnation

and elopement. For example, the CHC and civil court can intervene to help girls’ families accept a cash payment in cases of elopement or pregnancy. A key informant explained: “Right now when a guy wants to marry a girl without her parents’ permission, he will be taken to the [CHC] leader who deals with marriage cases. Then the guy will be told to pay 30,000 SSP [approximately 133 USD at the time of publication]. The cash is not the actual bridewealth; it is the payment for taking the girl without permission from her parents. The parents of the girl will only take the cash if they accept the guy to marry their daughter. If they don’t like him, they will take half the money because he took her without permission.”³⁹ ⁴⁰

Some respondents commented that the existence of these governance structures within the PoC has also had an effect on preventing early marriage. “We don’t give young girls to a man in order to get money or cattle,” one FGD participant said. “It is not acceptable here because the UN, Community High Committee, and the civil court do not allow such a thing to happen.”⁴¹ Others disagreed with this point, suggesting that early marriages are more of an issue in the PoC than they were outside, regardless of the presence of these governance bodies. “Before the crisis,⁴² the people who got married were mature enough. But now, here in the PoC young girls are being impregnated and drop out of school, thus making different communities clash,” one FGD participant said.⁴³ Yet others suggested that non-parental family members can influence when girls get married: “As the father, you may make the decision to give out your daughter. But the moment you inform your brother about it—some of these brothers are educated—they will tell you, ‘ok, now, see, your daughter is under age’. [...] Sometimes the brother says, ‘the girl is too young to go for marriage. Let her grow first and later we shall get more cows.’”⁴⁴ ⁴⁵ It is

³⁹ In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

⁴⁰ Note that respondents also suggested there is a cattle equivalent: “When you elope a girl, the girl’s family take fifty cows. If you don’t have the cows that they demand, they will divorce their girl and they will take two cows for their girl’s dignity.” This narrative suggests that the woman will no longer be married after the exchange. Focus group discussion with male fisherfolk, Bentiu Town, March 2019.

⁴¹ Focus group participant with PoC community leaders of all genders, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

⁴² When referring to “before the crisis,” research participants most often consider this to be before their displacement to the PoC.

⁴³ Focus group discussion with women conducting small-scale informal livelihoods within the Bentiu PoC, such as collection of firewood, reeds, or elephant grass, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

⁴⁴ Focus group discussion with PoC community leaders of all genders, Bentiu PoC, March 2019.

⁴⁵ South Sudanese NGO staff key informants indicated that women who are 15 years old or younger are most likely to be considered “too young” for marriage, as described in this quote.

important to note that calculations around marriage age are not only about the girls' education or other opportunities, but also about the family's ability to potentially secure a larger bridewealth down the line.

Governance authorities in the PoC are not always successful in preventing or de-escalating conflicts surrounding marriages and payments. One respondent elaborated: "Now these youth can just admire each other. Then the guy takes the girl. If the parents of the girl go to report this to the authority, the guy will come with his gangs at night and attack the parents of the girl."⁴⁶

Some respondents linked the emergence of formalized structures like the CHC and civil courts to a decrease in the influence of male elders who held influential, informal customary roles related to marriage outside the PoC.⁴⁷ "Before, marriage initiatives were conducted by the elders. They could choose a potential wife for the sons based on the family background and the character of the girl. These days the elders are not given the chance to observe the youth relationship. The children no longer understand the elders. They do not make any consultation when they want to marry, especially the boys."⁴⁸



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⁴⁶ In-depth interview with female research participant, December 2018.

⁴⁷ Given that the role of elders in general is discussed in greater length in *The Currency of Connections: The Evolution of Pre-displacement Connections in Bentiu, South Sudan*, another paper in this series, we focus here specifically on the role of elders vis-à-vis weddings and marriages.

⁴⁸ In-depth interview with female research participant, December 2018.

Intermarriage

Respondents reported changing attitudes towards intermarriage, which refers, in this context, to marriages between people from different Nuer clans. Intermarriage is possible when there is trust between the different sides. This trust is built through the exchange of cash or cattle over the course of the marriage process, as well as through shared presence in livelihood groups (such as fishing groups). “We intermarry outside the community only if you trust the person that wants to marry your daughter, [if you trust] that he’s going to take care of your daughter. Some people are able to marry from different communities because they have cash and cattle. They are good to go,” one FGD participant said.⁴⁹ Respondents framed intermarriage as potentially enhancing social connectedness because it allows the couple to have social connections in different clans and to serve as potential peace-makers if there is conflict.⁵⁰ Some suggested that intermarriage may be more desirable, stating that they were “advised not to date girls from the same cattle camp because it may create conflict among us.”⁵¹ Notably, relations between members of different communities remain tense when “a girl from a community is impregnated by a man from a different community who cannot afford to pay the parents bridewealth.”⁵² We discuss the tensions surrounding pregnancies in the section that follows.



“We intermarry outside the community only if you trust the person that wants to marry your daughter, [if you trust] that he’s going to take care of your daughter.”

— Male research participant, Bentiu PoC

Pregnancies outside of marriage

The issue of adolescent girls getting pregnant outside marriage came up repeatedly in this research. Some respondents attributed the increase in these pregnancies to girls’ increased mobility during the day and to their freedom to spend their time in less supervised ways in the PoC compared to before their displacement. “The girls have the freedom to move to their boyfriends’ houses whenever their mothers go outside to collect firewood, sell vegetables or tea in the market, and leave the girls home alone,” one respondent said.⁵³ While these narratives may be valid, it is also essential to take into account men and boys’ roles, as well as the availability of information regarding contraception and the social acceptability of its use.



“Parents incite fighting because they feel that a lot of resources were spent on this girl to be brought up. How could someone without the capacity to pay bridewealth elope or impregnate the girl?”

— Female research participant, Bentiu PoC

Prior to displacement, the family of an impregnated girl would receive a payment in cattle from the boy’s family, whereas increasingly this form of settlement is also shifting to cash. One respondent explained: “When a girl is impregnated, the guy is asked to pay 180,000 SSP [equivalent to approximately USD 600 at time of publication], equivalent to three cattle that

⁴⁹ Focus group discussion with male fisherfolk, Bentiu Town, March 2019.

⁵⁰ Focus group discussion with male fisherfolk, Bentiu Town, March 2019.

⁵¹ In-depth interview with trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

⁵² In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

⁵³ In-depth interview with female research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

were always paid in the traditional way when a girl was impregnated.”⁵⁴ Pregnancies outside of marriage remain a potential source of conflict and reportedly regularly lead to physical violence. “The family of the girl is so angry, they would even want to kill the guy,” one FGD member said.⁵⁵ A different respondent echoed: “Parents incite fighting because they feel that a lot of resources were spent on this girl to be brought up. How could someone without the capacity to pay bridewealth elope or impregnate the girl?”⁵⁶ These narratives underscore the ways in which girls are seen as assets, sites of investment, and sources of pride in a family, as well as the ways in which those perceptions can lead to violence.

These dynamics require the engagement of PoC authorities to prevent or de-escalate tensions. “If the issue is taken to the authority, the guy will bring two cows and one bull. The girl will be rejected by her parents to stay with the guy who impregnated her until she gives birth. That is when they [the girls’ family] demand for more cows.”⁵⁷ When the man’s family has access to neither cattle nor cash, the authorities come up with alternate arrangements:

“sometimes if someone impregnated someone’s daughter, they would pay nothing because we don’t have cattle here in the PoC and we don’t have cash to handle the issues. We stand very firm that we don’t allow the two families to fight. Because we don’t have cattle to handle the case, we ask the UN force to take the person to prison. In the long run, he can be taken to court outside [the PoC] and the families can come together and contribute to settle the case.”



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⁵⁴ In-depth interview with male trader, Bentiu PoC, December 2018. Further examination of where the men and their families come up with these large amounts of cash would likely also reveal important aspects of social connectedness.

⁵⁵ Focus group discussion with male fisherfolk, Bentiu Town, March 2019.

⁵⁶ In-depth interview with female research participant, Bentiu PoC, December 2018.

⁵⁷ Focus group discussion with male fisherfolk, Bentiu Town, March 2019.

Conclusions and Implications

In much of South Sudan, the economy is undergoing a gradual transformation from one rooted in cattle and kinship to one based on cash transactions; this is affecting many aspects of public and private life.⁵⁸

While some respondents lamented these changes as potential causes of tension or as factors contributing to the weakening of social bonds, others welcomed the potential freedom these changes can afford. With respect to weddings and marriages in the PoC, the shift to a cash-based economy has influenced (a) who is involved in decision-making; (b) who contributes resources for bridewealth payments; (c) the form in which resources are gathered; (d) the lasting symbolic and material effect of the bridewealth on both those getting married and their families; (e) the strategies for conflict prevention and dispute resolution.

Additionally, the fact that bridewealth is most often paid in cash as opposed to cattle in the PoC has significant implications for households' abilities to diversify their social networks and access support in times of need. Many young men cannot afford to marry using cash, and, unlike cattle that are shared across vast kinship networks, cash bridewealth is often shared with far fewer members of the bride's household. This does not allow for as much social network expansion as was inherent under the previous system. Further, in the current economic context, cash devalues and dissipates rapidly and households have few choices to safely store, grow or invest their cash. On the other hand, the transition to cash appears to have had some positive effects on girls' schooling. Some families are choosing education rather than early marriage for their daughters, as they prefer to wait for greater stability and a hoped-for return to the more valuable cattle-based bridewealth. Others preferred cash as it can be more easily concealed, protecting them against potential cattle raiders or criminal elements within the PoC.

Implications for aid actors and further research: Understanding the role of marriages in expanding crucial social connections may provide aid actors with nuanced and context-specific data on vulnerability, which could be used in developing targeting criteria for aid interventions. For example, by considering male household members' abilities to marry, aid actors may be able to identify potential exclusion from social networks and local support systems. During program inception and pre-intervention assessments interviewers could consider whether young men want to marry but are unable to do so due to lack of economic capacity and/or social connections to contribute towards their bridewealth. Similarly, exploring women's changing attitudes to marriage, and to the different exchanges surrounding this process, is essential for supporting their aspirations for the future. Additionally, when conceptualizing vulnerability, aid actors should be aware that young people who report having married using cash (as opposed to cattle) as bridewealth may have more limited social connections and a less diverse social support network.

This research also reveals opportunities for further investigation. These include tracking perceptions of marriages over time. It may also be beneficial to examine whether people return to a cattle-based system of bridewealth negotiation and payment after they leave the PoC, or whether the shift to cash has a lasting impact. Additionally, the nature of this impact on social connectedness and associated social safety nets will be important to consider. Finally, as this paper highlights, weddings, marriages, and pregnancies must be understood from the perspectives of not only the male community elders or the men who make payments, but also from the young women who are involved in these social processes and institutions.

⁵⁸ Thomas, Edward. 2019. *Cash, Commodification, and Conflict in South Sudan*. The Rift Valley Institute.

CONTACT

ALEX HUMPHREY
Research Manager | South Sudan
ahumphrey@mercycorps.org

JON KURTZ
Senior Director of Research and Learning
jkurtz@mercycorps.org

JANARDHAN RAO
Country Director | South Sudan
jrao@mercycorps.org

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45 SW Ankeny Street
Portland, Oregon 97204
888.842.0842
mercycorps.org