

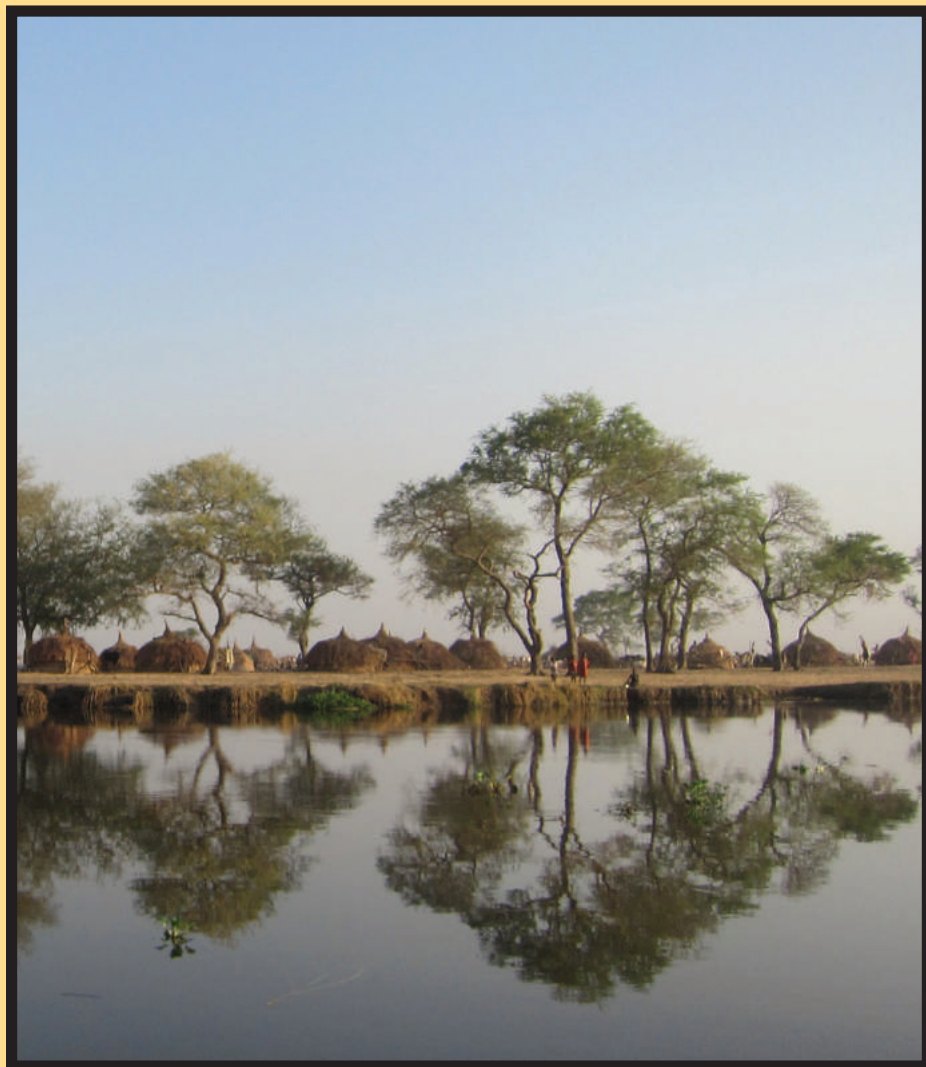


# Sudan Studies

for South Sudan and Sudan

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*Front cover photograph: Temporary settlement along the Pow river, Bahr-el-Zeraf (Credit: Gregor Schmidt).*

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# The Church's Commitment to Reconciliation in South Sudan

Father Gregor Schmidt\*

## *Abstract*

I was asked to write about my commitment as a religious in South Sudan in 2019 by a quarterly magazine in Germany. This article was adapted for publication in *Sudan Studies* in mid 2020 and published in Issue 63 (January 2021). It reflects my views on issues regarding the Christian faith and the causes for conflict in South Sudan based on personal experience. The first section provides an insight into how the Gospel has spread in South Sudan, especially among the Nuer. The second section describes the country's violent conflicts and some of their causes. In the third section, I reflect upon the work of reconciliation, which is an integral part of the mission of the Church.

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

In the book of Isaiah there is a reference to the peoples of Sudan:

At that time gifts will be brought to the LORD of hosts from a people tall and smooth, from a people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide, to Mount Zion, the place of the name of the LORD of hosts (Is 18:7).

The “rivers” are the Nile with its numerous tributaries that cut through the territory. Isaiah foresaw the time when these peoples would bring gifts to the Lord in Zion. It did not happen in his lifetime, but rather in New Testament times. The African in Acts (Chapter 8), who was baptised by Deacon Philip, was the first Sudanese Christian from the Meroe Empire of Queen Kandake. The man himself, whose conversion happened even before the Gospel reached Europe, left no historical traces. From the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, contacts were documented between Egyptian monks and Christians of Sudan (Nubians). From the sixth century onward, all royal dynasties were Christian. There was a long period in which Christianity flourished in Sudan until the 15<sup>th</sup> century. However, the memory of the Christian faith disappeared completely under the influence of Islam and was only made known – for the second time – by Saint Daniel Comboni almost 400 years later. It took until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century before the Nuer, the Nilotic people with whom I live, became Christians in large numbers. In colonial times, there were only sporadic conversions.

The Nuer were displaced during the Sudanese Civil War in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Expelled from their homeland, some became Christians as refugees when they met with Catholic and Protestant missionaries in Khartoum and Ethiopia. During the liberation struggle against the Islamic

government they discovered the God of the Bible as the Holy One who hears the weeping of his suffering people, just as he heard the enslaved Israelites in Egypt. The Gospel spread among the Nuer like wildfire during the 1980s and 1990s when returning converts shared their new faith with their families in the villages. The vision of Isaiah that the “people tall and smooth” of the Nile would worship God has also come true for them. Today, there are hundreds of thousands of Nuer Christians: mainly Presbyterians, Catholics and Episcopalians (Anglicans). A Catholic catechist Joseph Pal Mut reported that he baptised more than 20,000 converts during his time on duty between 1987 and 1996.<sup>1</sup> This shows that the local church in its beginnings has been essentially a lay movement without clergy.

The Comboni Missionaries were invited by the Bishop of the Diocese of Malakal in 1998 to accompany Catholics who live scattered in the villages of the Fangak region in the Sudd, the wetlands and marshes of the Nile. Our young Christian community, whose first generation of believers are still alive, is extremely hospitable and generous. In order to keep the parish together, we missionaries visit people regularly in their villages. We walk on foot because there are no roads and accordingly no vehicles. The most distant chapels are up to four days away from the parish centre. The parish’s territory is about five times the size of the administrative region of Greater London. Paths that are not used disappear within a few weeks in the constantly growing vegetation. During half the year, the waters of the Nile and the rains flood the region, which is as flat as a disk (see the photo on the front cover of this issue). There are no hills except termite hills. On our hikes, we cross waters that reach up to our necks. Tropical diseases are part of everyday life and safe drinking water is rare.

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

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Wheeler author and editor of the ‘Faith in Sudan’ series writes that Pal Mut died in a road accident in Nairobi on 29<sup>th</sup> March 1996. See his chapter (15) about Catholic catechists in Upper Nile in, Wheeler, A. C. (ed.) 1996. *Announcing the Light. Sudanese witnesses to the Gospel. Faith in Sudan* No. 6. Paulines Press Africa.



*Fr Gregor (second from the right) and Fr Alfred (fourth from the right) with three catechists on a journey through the swamps of the Nile  
(Credit for all photographs: Gregor Schmidt).*



*Sunday Mass in Old Fangak.*



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

*A violent society*

South Sudan is in the news only because there is a civil war and the tacit assumption is that there will be peace in the country when this conflict ends.



*Baptism in Pakan.*



*Comboni primary school in Leerpiny.*

However, I would argue that this is unlikely to be the case. The main elements of Nuer (and other pastoralist cultures) are very old and I was struck by the similarities between Nuer culture and those described in the Bible. A comparison with murder and manslaughter among the Israelites, who were themselves shepherds, is a good introduction for Western readers (e.g. 1 Chr 7:21; Gen 34). The polygamous patriarchal family and value system is very similar: among other things, revenge killings. These are based on an equilibrium recognized by all, which demands that a human life must be taken in order to atone for the death of a victim. Unlike the Old Testament (Gen 9:6), however, it is not important to find the murderer. It is enough to assassinate a close male relative as ‘compensation’, because the individual person represents the clan.

In South Sudan, deadly conflicts are taking place on three levels at the same time: for six years until recently between the government and the opposition (with the risk of returning to the battle field); at the same time violent clashes between various ethnic groups and among sub-tribes (in particular Dinka); and revenge murders between clans at the local level. The Red Cross reported on the radio, in the middle of 2019 that, while the number of people injured in the civil war has fallen since the last peace agreement was signed, the total number of patients with gunshot wounds is not much smaller. Regarding this

issue, I point out the tragic interrelation between humanitarian food aid and local clan conflicts. Men organize themselves to fight when they are well nourished and strong. They are less inclined to engage in conflict when they are weak because of hunger. The food distribution of the UN World Food Program (WFP), which is supposed to prevent starvation, becomes the occasion to carry out deadly clan conflicts. Instead, the national conflict is determined by the change of dry and rainy season because the road network consists of paths of cotton or loamy soil. Vehicles that carry heavy armoury get stuck when the soil turns into mud.

While men killed each other with spears until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, South Sudanese pastoralists have increasingly armed themselves with Kalashnikovs (AK-47) and other firearms since 1955 and the beginning of their struggle for independence against the Arab rulers. They also started using these arms in cattle raids against other ethnic groups and in revenge killings against other clans. In the years following the 2005 peace treaty (CPA) and before the outbreak of civil war in 2013, there were thousands of murders and revenge killings committed each year in inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic conflicts in South Sudan.<sup>2</sup> In the period between April 2011 and April 2012, conflict between the Nuer and Murle alone resulted in the deaths of 5,000 people in Jonglei State, where my parish is located. The Murle are distinguished from other ethnic groups in that they raid not only cattle but also young children in order to increase the number of tribal members. This causes enormous hatred among the neighbouring peoples. Although the conflict was included in statistics reported by UN observers, it was only worth a footnote in the international press and was not interpreted as a 'war'. Admittedly, the current civil war has increased killing tenfold, but in my experience there have rarely been peaceful periods in many parts of South Sudan. The rate of violence goes up and down. The country is like a patient who has constant fever, sometime more and sometime less. Therefore, a ceasefire, such as the one that is now in place, must not be interpreted as reconciliation.

### *The cultural causes of conflict*

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

The first aspect is that people have survived for centuries in a hostile environment, where they have been threatened by other groups; by nature (drought, floods, diseases etc.); and by wildlife (snakes, crocodiles, scorpions, etc.). The individual can only survive in the collective, which provides security

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<sup>2</sup> These were documented by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and other UN and international organisations.



*School building destroyed in New Fangak in December 2014.*

and distributive justice. There is an African proverb: 'I am because we are'. These are the immediate relationships that carry you. In the West, relationships and friendships are optional. Contact can be cut off even with parents and siblings because it is possible to take care of oneself in the modern state. A Nuer or Dinka, on the other hand, cannot rely on anything, except that his brothers and sons will risk their lives in his defence and in old age, only the extended family will provide for him. Therefore, there is 100% loyalty to a close relative, whether he is right or wrong. Furthermore, one's own clan is uncompromisingly defended against others; for these reasons I would argue that the civil war is ethnic. The clan and tribal collective almost completely overshadows the identity of the individual and because the identity of a person is embedded in his or her collective, the 'other' is almost always perceived only as a representative of his collective.

The second aspect concerns the marriage system and bride-price. While some people in Europe are debating the need to stop begetting children as a contribution to ease the effects of climate change, in traditional Africa it is the fundamental human destiny to continue the lifeline of one's family through one's own offspring. Marriage is the legitimate place to beget and raise children. In a patriarchal society such as South Sudan, it is necessary for the father

of the children to pay the bride-price in full, otherwise the children do not belong to him, but to his wife's clan. Biological fatherhood has no relevance, only legal paternity counts, which is legitimized by the bride-price. Among the Nuer, the bride-price for a woman is about 50 healthy cattle, among the Dinka, it can reach over 200 livestock. This creates pressure and desire but because one does not want conflict with neighbouring clans, cattle are usually raided from farther away, from other tribes. The shepherds are killed in an attack so that they cannot sound the alarm, and the herd can be led calmly away. This practice is common, for example, in the border region of Warrap, Unity and Lakes State, and between Lou Nuer and Murle in Jonglei.

Violence among men causes a surplus of women. This surplus makes polygamy (more precisely, polygyny) necessary and stabilizes it, because a woman is only considered 'grown up' and recognised in the community when she is married and has become a mother many times over. While we in the West understand women's rights as having equal human and civil rights with men, including the right not to want children, pastoralists in South Sudan know only one women's right: to become a wife and a mother; because there are not enough men, it is obvious to all women to accept entering a polygamous relationship. These relationships also reduce the burden of housework (cooking, cleaning) for the individual woman as it is shared among several women. Polygyny is also the reason why men crave more cattle in order to marry more women which leads to further cattle raids and killings; this is a vicious cycle. However, it must be noted that the reality of cattle raiding is a complicated issue and exists for different reasons. Besides greed (for women), young men often engage in daring competitions to prove their manhood or even consider raiding as a form of initiation. Revenge attacks, which target only people when they start, can escalate into cattle raids so as to inflict greater harm to the other side.

The third aspect concerns the perception of state laws and, in conflicts, the lack of understanding of the distinction between civilians and armed parties. Societies in developed countries have specialised in more and more professions and occupations. Even killing has been, in a sense, professionalised. Generally, only soldiers and others authorized security personnel (police, etc.) are permitted to kill under certain legal rules. The state's monopoly on the use of force is recognised and desired because the state usually proves to be reliable. In South Sudan, however, the state has never functioned nor brought visible benefits, not under the colonial rule of the British, nor the Arabs, nor the current government under President Salva Kiir. The state has never acted as a reliable service provider and is rather perceived an intruder, for example in the case of new legislation. In most cases, therefore, clans prefer to regulate their



*Caterina Nyadul in stormy Kuerdap.*



*Women carrying water from a borehole.*

interests at the local level according to custom and tradition. Although they are granted some autonomy in the transitional constitution, they also follow customary law where it is explicitly forbidden in the written law of modern South Sudan e.g. girl marriage.

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



*Mundari pastoralists with their cow.*

We Comboni Missionaries serve a parish in Unity State, whose centre is in Leer, the birth town of Nuer opposition leader Riek Machar. Right at the beginning of the civil war, the town was captured by militias fighting for the Dinka government. In 2015, the militias locked more than 60 men and boys inside an overseas shipping container on our church plot who then suffocated to death. From the point of view of outsiders, this amounts to a war crime committed by militias against Nuer civilians including children. From the point of view of the murderers, it was a preventive measure, because the

victims were potential fighters and avengers. Amnesty International published a detailed report on the incidents in Leer.<sup>3</sup>

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

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

### *The Reconciliation Work of the Church*

The South Sudanese Catholic Bishops’ Conference (SSCBC) has had difficulty gaining influence on the warring parties because many bishoprics have been vacant. In addition, ethnic belonging is still a strong aspect of the identity of Catholics and of Christians in general, as it is among church leaders. In

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<sup>3</sup> Amnesty International, 2016. *South Sudan: ‘We are still running’: War crimes in Leer, South Sudan*. 28<sup>th</sup> July. Index number AFR 65/4486/2016.



this difficult tension between cultural and faith identity, the ecumenical South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC), of which the Catholic Church is a founding member, has helped prepare a path towards national reconciliation.

At the local level of the parish, we find ourselves in the unlikely situation that the national war has reached only the fringes of Fangak County. With the exception of the county capital New Fangak, other areas have not been directly affected by battles or displacement. This is due to the isolation of the area that is created by the Nile swamps and thus the lack of road connections. In our diocese, in whose territory much of the fighting and destruction has taken place, our parish is the only one that has not had to be closed in all these years. In all the other parishes of Malakal Diocese, the work was stopped for several years. Still, every Nuer family in our parish has lost relatives in the war. Because the ‘enemy’ breathes down their necks, but is still reassuringly far away, our reconciliation work looks different from that of a parish in which there are mixed hostile groups.

I am working on the side of the losers. Although the Nuer of my region wish to get rid of the current government, it is a blessing from the point of view of the Gospel to belong to the marginalized (cf. Lk 1,51-53). In order not to be misunderstood, I add that those South Sudanese controlling the government are not worse people than others, but they simply have more opportunities through their control of better weapons and Uganda’s military aid. Apart from the first year of fighting, when the opposition had some victories and committed terrible crimes among the Dinka, the war has mainly taken place on territory where people who support the opposition parties traditionally live i.e. not in the Dinka homelands. In addition to ethnic cleansing of minority tribes in the Greater Equatoria Region, there has also been expulsion and confiscation of land by the government, which settles its own loyal people there.<sup>4</sup> Even though fighting has not (yet) taken place in our parish area, it is an enormous challenge to preach love of ones enemies in such a context.

Sometimes I get asked by European Christians why South Sudanese Christians don’t just follow the word of Jesus and forgive their enemies. That suggestion is easily expressed but only because those persons do not have a real enemy who seeks to kill them or destroy their livelihoods. I myself am a foreigner in South Sudan and because my own life is not threatened by anybody, I do not superficially demand love of one’s enemy from Christians of my parish as this would be to ask something that I do not have to implement myself.

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<sup>4</sup> Personal communication. A South Sudanese Comboni Missionary from Nimule confirmed this in regard to his home area. Also see reports and information by the United Nations Human Rights Council on [www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org).

Instead, I have made the suffering of the Nuer my own suffering and make no demands. We pray for the dead and bless the wounded who are taken to our hospital ward. On certain occasions, our Nuer Catholics pray at Mass in the language of the Dinka in order to set a sign for national reconciliation.

At the local level of clan conflict, traditional reconciliation talks go hand in hand with Christian prayer (insofar as the clans are Christian). Our active parishioners are noticeably less inclined to use violence than the average Nuer. The ecclesial life is like a shelter where a new, peaceful lifestyle is maintained. The Catholic Church is known and loved for the fact that differences of opinion are settled without violence. In contrast to traditional festivals and gatherings, weapons and alcohol are not allowed at church festivals and on church grounds. Anyone interested in this 'alternative lifestyle' can join us. A traditional feast often runs the risk of ending in bloodshed because youth (men) injure or kill each other; either a previous attack needs to be revenged or a new dispute is started under the influence of alcohol. Furthermore, in our sermons and conversations, we shape the idea of inviolable human dignity because every person is an image of God. 'Dignity' cannot be adequately translated into Nuer. As an illustration, we explain that everyone must respect other persons deeply, even if they are women or strangers of another tribe. The stories of Jesus in the gospels help to underline that message.

In South Sudan, there is no secular society. Therefore, international peace



*Parish youth walking from New Fangak to Lele. We went to visit the chapel for a few days to pray and give the sacrament of confirmation. It is custom that a big group of people walks with the missionary. They carry his bag and sometimes a flag or a drum to accompany singing. This demonstrates the unity of the faithful.*

programs, which always appeal to reason and emphasize human rights, have little effect on the ground because they do not understand the dynamics of ethnic identity or negate it, and do not take people's religious identity seriously. As a missionary, I make the Gospel that presents God as a merciful Father, known to the people. A disciple of Jesus is called to imitate the Father and love the neighbour, even the enemy (cf. Eph 5:1-2; Lk 6:27-36). This message is about a change of mentality so that it is no longer ethnicity or the clan that defines whom one can and cannot trust. The Gospel and the Bible clearly show what constitutes a just, honest person. This should be the benchmark for building a just and peaceful society.

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

\* Comboni Father Gregor Schmidt is the child of a German father and a Korean mother. He first got to know his Order, the Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus, in Peru where he performed his community service (substitute for military service) through the German diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart. He studied theology in St. Augustin, Jerusalem and Innsbruck. Fr Gregor has lived among the pastoralists of South Sudan for 12 years, the first three years with the Mundari and then nine years with the Nuer. (Contact: [gregor.bogdong@gmail.com](mailto:gregor.bogdong@gmail.com)).

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