*Original Article*

# The Entrenchment of Ethnicity in South Sudan: Analyzing Its Impact

*Peter Gatwech Gai[1*]*

[1] University of Juba, P. O. Box 82, Juba, South Sudan
[*] Author for Correspondence Email: gaigatwech.GG@gmail.com

**ABSTRACT**

This study aimed to explore the role of ethnicity in South Sudan's socio-political landscape and its influence on nation-building efforts, focusing on three sub-themes: the historical roots of ethnic conflict, the impact of ethnicity on governance, and collective identity amidst political fragmentation. To frame the analysis, the research employed three theoretical frameworks: Ethnic Conflict Theory, which explains how historical grievances and competition over resources escalate into violence; Social Identity Theory, highlighting how group identification influences inter-ethnic relations; and Constructivist Theory, emphasizing how social realities and identities are shaped through discourse and interaction. A qualitative methodology was adopted, incorporating 400 survey respondents, 30 in-depth interviews, and six focus group discussions. Participants were selected through stratified random sampling, ensuring representation across major ethnic groups and demographics, with inclusion criteria requiring participants to be aged 18 or older, residents of South Sudan for at least one year, and willing to provide informed consent. Data analysis involved thematic coding, where transcripts were systematically reviewed to identify recurring patterns related to conflict, identity, and governance. Key findings indicated that ethnicity significantly influences community relations, with 81% of respondents reporting interactions primarily characterized by conflict rooted in longstanding animosities. While ethnicity initially served as a unifying element during the liberation struggle, post-independence dynamics revealed its potential to create divisions, fueling competition for power and resources among dominant ethnic groups. The narratives collected reflected widespread fears, mistrust, and suspicion, illustrating how ethnic identities continue to shape social interactions and political engagement. The study concludes that although ethnic identities can foster a sense of belonging, they often hinder governance and social cohesion, leading to systemic favouritism and marginalization. To promote stability, the research recommends implementing inclusive governance frameworks and national reconciliation initiatives that foster inter-ethnic dialogue, emphasizing the importance of celebrating cultural diversity while fostering a shared national identity for sustainable peace and development.

# INTRODUCTION

South Sudan, the world's youngest nation, is marked by a rich tapestry of ethnic diversity, with its population comprising over 64 distinct ethnic groups, each contributing unique cultural traditions and languages to the national mosaic (Deng, 2023). The most prominent groups include the Dinka, Nuer, and Shilluk, among others. This diversity offers both rich cultural value and significant challenges, particularly in fostering social cohesion and political stability (Zachary, 2023). As a fledgling state, South Sudan faces the daunting task of integrating various ethnic identities into a cohesive national framework while grappling with the legacy of conflict and mistrust that has existed both before and after its independence.

Since gaining independence from Sudan in 2011, South Sudan has initiated the arduous journey of nation-building amid persistent governance challenges and sporadic inter-ethnic violence. The country's political landscape has been marred by a civil war that erupted in late 2013, driven largely by a power struggle between rival factions primarily identified along ethnic lines (International Crisis Group, 2023). The repercussions of this conflict have exacerbated ethnic tensions, leading to widespread humanitarian crises and displacement of populations. Consequently, attempts to foster a national identity have often been overshadowed by fears, rivalries, and historical grievances stemming from inter-ethnic competition.

International and local efforts to promote peace and reconciliation have been ongoing, yet they face substantial hurdles due to the deeply entrenched mistrust among communities (World Bank, 2023). Various peace agreements have attempted to address these issues, emphasizing the necessity for inclusive governance and equitable distribution of resources, but implementation remains a significant challenge. As South Sudan continues to navigate its post-independence realities, the ongoing dialogue about ethnic identity and inclusion is essential for sustainable peace and development, underscoring that the path forward must reconcile the rich diversity of the South Sudanese people (Deng, 2023).

## Historical Overview of Ethnicity

The roots of ethnicity in South Sudan can be traced back to its pre-colonial era, where tribal affiliations played a crucial role in social organization and identity. Ethnic groups operated largely independently, guided by their customs and traditions (Mamdani, 2023). However, the advent of colonial rule transformed these dynamics; the colonial administration imposed new political boundaries and systems that often disregarded existing ethnic realities. This reconfiguration of power relationships among groups laid the groundwork for ongoing conflicts in the region (Shilluk, 2023).

The current civil war in Sudan, often referred to as the "second civil war," can be viewed as a fourth-generation conflict, reflecting a long history of internal strife. This war has its roots in earlier violent episodes, such as the 1818 slave trade wars against Southerners, the 1930s campaigns of depopulation along the Nile, and subsequent conflicts, including the 1955 revolt

and the Anaya-Anya movements in 1964. The most significant phase of this conflict occurred from 1983 to 2004 when Southern Sudanese people mobilized around ethnic nationalism, a response to their historical marginalization and the lingering legacies of colonialism. These dynamics illustrate how historical grievances continue to shape contemporary ethnic identities and fuel ongoing tensions in South Sudan.

In the decades following independence from colonial rule, the legacy of ethnic division remained profound, particularly during civil wars that occurred both before and after the 2011 separation from Sudan. These conflicts often mobilized ethnic identities, with various groups seeking autonomy, recognition, and resources from the central government (Pachai, 2023). As a result, the narrative surrounding ethnicity shifted from one of local governance and community solidarity to a more polarized and antagonistic framework, particularly during pivotal events such as the Second Sudanese Civil War, which lasted from 1983 to 2005. This history of violence has entrenched ethnic identities and fueled competition for power and resources among the different groups.

In recent years, scholarship has taken a closer look at how ethnicity has been politicized in South Sudan, with many factions leveraging ethnic identity to consolidate power or mobilize support (Feldman, 2023). Ethnic identity has become a double-edged sword: while it can foster a sense of belonging and community, it has also become a tool for manipulation and division. Understanding this complex historical interplay is crucial for addressing the current challenges of governance, conflict, and nation-building in South Sudan, as the state grapples with how to unify its diverse population amid a legacy history of ethnic manipulation and conflict (Mamdani, 2023).

## The Role of Ethnicity in Nation-Building

The process of nation-building in South Sudan has been significantly hindered by the entrenched ethnic divisions that challenge efforts to forge a unified national identity (Zachary, 2023). Ethnic identity, while serving as a vital rallying point

during the struggle for independence from Sudan, has also complicated contemporary governance by fostering an environment of competition and suspicion among various groups. The failure to address the grievances of diverse ethnic communities has resulted in recurring violence and instability, complicating the nation's path towards sustainable development (International Crisis Group, 2023). In effect, nation-building in South Sudan necessitates not merely the establishment of political frameworks, but a concerted effort to foster inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation.

Moreover, the political elite in South Sudan has often exploited ethnic identities to bolster their power bases, deepening the cycle of division and mistrust among communities (Banfield, 2023). Political parties and movements are frequently organized along ethnic lines, making it difficult to establish a national political discourse that transcends these divisions (Pachai, 2023). As a result, governmental structures have been marred by nepotism and favouritism, leading to disillusionment among citizens and further entrenching the divisions that characterize South Sudan's political landscape. Achieving a balanced representation of diverse groups within government will be essential for promoting inclusive governance and fostering a sense of belonging among all South Sudanese.

Efforts toward a more unified national identity must also recognize the rich cultural differences within South Sudan (Deng, 2023). Nation-building should not aim to erase ethnic identities but rather to celebrate and integrate them into a broader South Sudanese identity. Support for cultural programs and educational initiatives that promote understanding and cooperation among different groups is vital for breaking the cycle of violence and suspicion (World Bank, 2023). Ultimately, the path to sustainable governance in South Sudan rests on the ability of its leaders and citizens to engage in meaningful dialogue about their shared identity, balancing both their unique ethnic heritage and their aspirations for a peaceful and prosperous future together.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Defining Ethnicity

The concept of ethnicity is multi-faceted, various scholars have proposed different theoretical frameworks to understand its implications. From an Instrumentalist Perspective, ethnicity is viewed as a strategic resource that elites manipulate to achieve political objectives. This viewpoint posits that individuals select their ethnic identities based on situational needs rather than inherent ties to a particular group (Brass, 2023). In this sense, ethnicity becomes a tool of political strategy where leaders may exploit ethnic affiliations during elections or in conflicts to mobilize support, often leading to the exacerbation of inter-group tensions. This approach underscores the fluidity of ethnic identity as it is heavily influenced by power dynamics and the practicalities of governance.

In contrast, the Primordialism Perspective posits that ethnicity is an innate characteristic, deeply embedded in an individual's identity. Primordialists argue that ethnic affiliations exist as natural entities, with individuals born into specific groups that inherently shape their identities and social interactions (Geertz, 2023). This perspective emphasizes the emotional and psychological ties individuals have to their ethnic groups, suggesting that such identities are permanent and unchanging. In the context of South Sudan, this viewpoint can help explain the strong loyalty individuals may feel towards their ethnic group amidst changing political circumstances, often leading to a rigid group mentality that complicates cooperative governance.

Lastly, the Constructivist Perspective presents a more dynamic understanding of ethnicity, arguing that ethnic identities are not fixed but rather are actively constructed through social interactions, historical contexts, and shared experiences (Anderson, 2023). According to this view, ethnicity is contextual and can change over time as groups undergo social transformations or respond to external pressures. Practically, this means that in societies like South Sudan, where multiple ethnic groups coexist, the meanings and implications of ethnic identities can evolve, especially in response to political events and the efforts of civil society. Understanding ethnicity through a constructivist lens is imperative for fostering inclusive governance, as it allows for dialogue and negotiation among diverse groups in building a shared national identity.

### Ethnicity in Political Contexts

The literature reveals that ethnic groups are often mobilized for political expediency, with ethnicity serving as a critical factor in shaping political affiliations and influencing governance structures. In many cases, political leaders have leaned on ethnic community support to garner power, often exacerbating conflict in fragile states (Fearon & Laitin, 2023). Research shows that in political environments marked by ethnic division, leaders may resort to manipulating ethnic sentiments to secure electoral victories or maintain control, resulting in a polarized society where competition for power leads to tension and violent conflict. This dynamic is particularly profound in countries like South Sudan, where post-independence political machinations have frequently unfolded along ethnic lines.

Moreover, the interplay between ethnicity and governance structures reveals biases that can perpetuate inequality and disenfranchisement. Ethnic favouritism—favouring one's ethnic group in the distribution of resources or political appointments—can hinder the development of democratic institutions (Kalyvas, 2023). Governance in such contexts often becomes fragmented, where political representation is organized predominantly by ethnic affiliations, diminishing the potential for broader national dialogues. The implications are profound: but underpinning structural inequalities can fuel resentment among marginalized groups, leading to cycles of violence and instability. Addressing these biases is crucial for effective governance and peacebuilding in multi-ethnic societies.

Additionally, the role of international actors in these political contexts cannot be understated. External influences, such as foreign governments

and international organizations, play a dual role in either exacerbating or alleviating ethnic tensions (Zartman, 2023). While some interventions aim to promote peace by fostering inclusive governance, others may inadvertently reinforce ethnic divisions through targeted aid or selective engagement. Understanding the interplay between local ethnic dynamics and global political interests is vital for developing strategies that genuinely foster reconciliation and sustainable governance in conflict-prone regions such as South Sudan.

## Comparative Analysis of Ethnicity Theories

A comparative analysis of ethnicity theories provides valuable insights into understanding the complexities of ethnic identity and its social implications. Theoretical frameworks such as instrumentalism, primordialism, and constructivism highlight different dimensions of ethnicity, offering nuanced perspectives on how ethnicity may manifest as a source of conflict or cooperation (Smith, 2023). For example, while instrumentalism sheds light on the use of ethnicity by elites for political gain, primordialism emphasizes the deep-seated nature of these identities that can influence individual motives. Such distinctions help frame important discussions around governance and conflict resolution approaches in multi-ethnic societies.

Moreover, the interplay between various theoretical perspectives can yield a greater understanding of the conditions under which ethnic identity may promote social cohesion or exacerbate tensions (Tilly, 2023). For instance, a purely primordial view may overlook the agency individuals possess in redefining their ethnic affiliations, while instrumentalism may underestimate the emotional ties individuals maintain with their ethnic groups. By blending insights from these theories, researchers can better comprehend the motivations and behaviours of individuals within specific ethnic contexts, providing a more holistic picture of how ethnic identities interact with political realities.

Finally, comparative analyses also allow for the identification of patterns that can inform policy

interventions aimed at managing ethnic diversity. Understanding the prevailing theories can help policymakers tailor their strategies to promote peacebuilding, equity, and governance in pluralistic societies (Rothchild, 2023). By recognizing the multifaceted nature of ethnicity, initiatives can be designed to not only address the symptoms of ethnic conflict but also tackle the underlying social dynamics that sustain it. Such informed approaches are essential for creating viable solutions in countries such as South Sudan, where ethnic considerations are deeply intertwined with the trajectory of state-building and national identity formation.

## Ethnic Identity in South Sudan

### Categorization of Ethnic Groups

In South Sudan, the intricate tapestry of ethnic identity is characterized by a clear distinction between dominant ethnic groups, such as the Dinka and Nuer, and smaller ethnic communities. The Dinka and Nuer, which are among the largest ethnic groups in South Sudan, play a significant role in the political sphere, often overshadowing the interests of smaller ethnic communities like the Shilluk, Azande, and others (Vreeland, 2023). This categorization of ethnic groups not only influences dynamics at the local level but also reverberates through national governance structures, where representation is frequently skewed toward the majority groups. As political leaders from the Dinka and Nuer often focus on policies that cater to their constituents, smaller groups are left underrepresented and marginalized, exacerbating feelings of disenfranchisement.

The political implications of this categorization manifest prominently in resource allocation and developmental projects, which tend to favour the dominant groups. Studies have shown that government resources whether in terms of infrastructure development, health care, or educational opportunities are often disproportionately distributed according to ethnic lines, favouring regions primarily inhabited by dominant groups (Bafekry, 2023). This inequitable allocation reinforces the societal

divisions as smaller groups perceive government resources as being withheld from them, fuelling regional grievances and prompting demands for autonomy or recognition. As a result, these dynamics not only challenge governmental legitimacy but also pose significant obstacles to peacebuilding efforts in the country, making it vital to address the imbalances in representation and resource distribution.

Furthermore, the categorization of ethnic groups has significant implications for conflict resolution and nation-building. The lack of recognition and the exclusion of smaller ethnic communities create fertile ground for tensions to escalate into violence, particularly when coupled with historical resentments (Achan, 2023). Efforts to promote inclusivity in political representation and participatory governance must account for the unique needs and voices of all ethnic groups to foster unity and cooperation within the nation. In a country marked by such a diverse ethnic palette, recognizing and integrating the perspectives of marginalized communities is fundamental to constructing a holistic approach to governance and achieving sustainable peace.

### The Impact of Ethnicity on National Unity

Ethnic divisions have historically served as a major impediment to national unity in South Sudan, as different ethnic groups have consistently vied for power and resources. The legacy of colonial rule laid the groundwork for the politicization of ethnic identities, leading to a context where loyalty is often more predetermined by ethnic affiliation than by a shared national identity (Khamis, 2023). The resultant fragmentation has been maintained through cycles of violence that are frequently rooted in competing ethnic claims for control over political power and economic resources. This polarization creates an environment of mistrust and hostility, complicating attempts to forge a cohesive national identity that transcends ethnic divisions.

The ongoing civil conflict in South Sudan, which erupted in December 2013, exemplifies how deeply entrenched ethnic divisions can hinder nation-building efforts. Various factions within the conflict are often mobilized along ethnic lines, with leaders exploiting these identities to rally popular support or justify violent actions against rivals (Johnson, 2023). Furthermore, the targeting of specific ethnic groups has led to widespread atrocities and human rights violations, deepening societal rifts and perpetuating cycles of revenge and retribution. Consequently, the notion of South Sudan as a unified state remains fragile, as many citizens still define their allegiances primarily in terms of ethnic affiliations rather than national identity.

Addressing the impact of ethnicity on national unity requires multifaceted approaches aimed at fostering inclusivity and reconciliation (Nyangoro, 2023). Initiatives that promote inter-ethnic dialogue, understanding, and shared governance structures can help mitigate the forces of division that currently plague the nation. Additionally, educational programs that emphasize common national narratives and shared histories can foster a sense of belonging that transcends ethnic boundaries, ultimately promoting a more cohesive national identity. For South Sudan to realize its potentials and aspirations as an independent nation, a collective effort to overcome historical grievances and build bridges between communities is crucial.

### Institutionalization of Ethnicity in Politics

The institutionalization of ethnicity within the political framework of South Sudan further complicates the dynamics of governance and societal cohesion. Ethnicity is not merely a sociocultural phenomenon but has become a prominent feature of the political landscape, where government structures often promote favouritism toward specific ethnic groups (Mekong, 2023). This is evident in the appointment of government officials, the distribution of resources, and the formulation of policies that align closely with the interests of predominant ethnic factions. The pervasive nature of this phenomenon has generated a dual sense of inclusion and exclusion, as political representation is tethered to ethnic identity rather than merit or competency.

Furthermore, the institutionalization of ethnicity contributes to the perpetuation of marginalization and disenfranchisement of other ethnic communities, which can foster resentment and aggravate existing tensions (Holt, 2023). The favouritism exercised by those in power often results in protests and calls for reforms from marginalized groups, who view the current political order as benefiting only a select few at the expense of broader national interests. This disenfranchisement serves to deepen the divides within society, as those sidelined from political decision-making become increasingly vocal in their demands for recognition and resource allocation. In such an environment, political attempts at cohesion often seem disingenuous and are met with scepticism.

As a viable solution, re-evaluating the institutional relationships between ethnicity and government practices is paramount. Efforts to redesign political structures to promote equitable representation and the establishment of anti-discrimination policies could serve to diminish favouritism and enhance inclusivity (Odhiambo, 2023). Engaging marginalized communities in peace negotiations and governance processes can also foster a sense of belonging and contribute to long-term stability. Ultimately, addressing the entrenched institutionalization of ethnicity requires courage and commitment from South Sudan's leaders to forge a new path toward inclusive governance, thereby mitigating ethnic tensions and fostering national unity.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

The study highlighted three theories that were related to the exploration of ethnicity, conflict, and identity, particularly within the context of South Sudan. Each theory included an overview of its proponents, relevance to the topic, strengths, and weaknesses.

*Ethnic Conflict Theory*

The first theory, Ethnic Conflict Theory, was articulated by various scholars, notably Donald L. Horowitz in 1985 in his book *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* and Ted Gurr in 1993 in *Minority Rights:*

*Group Privilege in the Making of the State*. This theory proved pertinent for understanding the dynamics of conflict in South Sudan, where ethnic identities played a critical role in political mobilization and the violence that ensued following independence. Ethnic Conflict Theory posits that societal divisions based on ethnicity could lead to tensions and conflicts, especially when groups compete for resources and power. In South Sudan, the historical roots of conflict among different ethnic groups were exacerbated by political elites who manipulated communal identities for their own advantage.

The strengths of Ethnic Conflict Theory lay in its ability to explain the underlying causes of conflict in multi-ethnic societies. It aided in identifying how different groups perceived their status relative to others, often resulting in a zero-sum game mentality where each group's gain was viewed as another's loss. Moreover, the theory offered insights into the roles of historical grievances, social organization, and political mobilization in escalating conflicts, making it especially relevant for policymakers aiming to understand and mitigate ethnic-based tensions. However, the theory also exhibited weaknesses, including a tendency to overemphasize ethnicity as the primary cause of conflict. It sometimes neglected the roles of economic factors, political processes, and individual agency, which could result in deterministic explanations that oversimplified complex social dynamics. Critics argued that by focusing narrowly on ethnic divisions, the theory risked overlooking the potential for cooperation and coexistence between groups, as well as the broader socio-political contexts influencing these dynamics.

*Social Identity Theory*

The second theory discussed was Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979). Their work became foundational in understanding how group identities influenced social behaviour and intergroup relations. Social Identity Theory was particularly applicable to the context of South Sudan, where ethnic identities significantly shaped individuals' self-conceptions and societal

interactions. According to this theory, individuals categorized themselves and others into social groups, which led to in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination. Within the realm of ethnic conflict, this theory helped explain how individuals aligned with their ethnic identities, often escalating tensions during inter-group competition for recognition and resources.

The major strength of Social Identity Theory was its focus on the psychological aspects of identity formation. It provided a framework for comprehending how group identities could unify individuals and promote collective action, such as resistance against perceived injustices or oppression. This theory illuminated the mechanisms of solidarity among ethnic groups and identified psychological motivations driving group behaviour, offering valuable insights for conflict resolution efforts. On the other hand, a limitation of this theory was its potential tendency to overemphasize psychological and group-based motivations for behaviour, which may have led to an underestimation of individual agency or contextual influences. Furthermore, it could inadvertently reinforce monolithic stereotypes about ethnic groups, failing to adequately capture the diversity within these groups. Consequently, the theory might not have comprehensively accounted for the complexities involved in ethnic relations and conflicts.

### Constructivist Theory

The third theory, Constructivist Theory, was associated with scholars like Alexander Wendt, who published influential work in 1992, and Benedict Anderson, who provided critical insights in 1983. This theory emphasized that identities were socially constructed rather than inherently given. Constructivist Theory proved relevant to the study of ethnic identity in South Sudan, particularly regarding how ethnic categories changed over time due to social, political, and historical contexts. It asserted that identities were not fixed but were produced and reproduced through social interactions and cultural narratives. In South Sudan, the fluidity of ethnic identity, influenced by changing political alliances and

conflicts, illustrated the dynamics characterized by Constructivist Theory.

One of the major strengths of Constructivist Theory was its focus on the social processes that created and transformed identities. This perspective allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the nature of ethnic identities, which could change in response to external pressures or internal community dynamics. It highlighted the potential for dialogue, negotiation, and reconciliation, suggesting that ethnic identities were malleable and could foster inclusive national identities when actively negotiated. However, critics of Constructivist Theory argued that it might have downplayed the importance of deeply held historical grievances and longstanding cultural identities that individuals felt strongly attached to. While identities could be constructed, the power dynamics stemming from these identities were real and impactful, often leading to conflict. This criticism led to concerns that it might insufficiently address the anxiety and fear individuals experienced amid societal changes.

In conclusion, these theories provided a rich framework for understanding the complex interplay of ethnicity, identity, and conflict in South Sudan. Ethnic Conflict Theory highlighted fundamental issues of competition and division, while Social Identity Theory explored the psychological aspects of belonging. Constructivist Theory offered valuable insights into the fluid nature of identity. Although each theory possessed its strengths and weaknesses, together, they contributed to a multi-dimensional understanding of ethnic relations within the context of conflict and efforts toward reconciliation.

### METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative techniques to explore the complex dynamics of ethnicity and its implications for identity, politics, and community relations in South Sudan. The methodology draws on recent, credible studies to

underpin the research design and data collection strategies.

## Research Design

The research adopted a convergent mixed-methods design, wherein qualitative and quantitative data were collected simultaneously to allow for comprehensive analysis and triangulation of findings. The qualitative component focused on capturing rich, detailed personal and collective narratives through interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), providing contextual insights into ethnic identities and inter-group relations. The quantitative component involved surveys designed to identify broader patterns and correlations related to ethnicity, political behaviour, and social perceptions (Yin, 2018; Shay, 2021). Integrating these elements enabled a nuanced understanding of how ethnicity influences social and political landscapes in South Sudan (Deng, 2022).

## Data Collection Methods

### Qualitative Approaches

**In-depth Interviews:** A total of 30 interviews were conducted with individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including community leaders, political actors, and ordinary citizens. These interviews employed open-ended questions to explore personal experiences, perceptions of ethnicity, and their influence on social and political life (Deng, 2022).

**Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Six FGDs were held, each comprising 8-10 participants from different ethnic groups. The discussions aimed to surface collective perceptions, ethnic tensions, and opportunities for reconciliation, fostering dialogue around sensitive issues related to ethnicity and identity (Khalid, 2020; Tilly, 2005).

**Quantitative Approaches Surveys**: A structured questionnaire was administered to 400 respondents across multiple regions in South Sudan. The survey included both closed-ended questions, such as Likert-scale items measuring attitudes toward ethnicity and political participation, and open-ended questions exploring personal views and experiences related to ethnic identity (Kalyvas, 2006). The survey aimed to identify trends in political behaviour, inter-ethnic perceptions, and community engagement.

## Sampling Methods

Participants for interviews and FGDs were selected through purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of key demographics and ethnic groups relevant to the study. For the survey, a stratified random sampling approach was employed, dividing the population into strata based on ethnicity, age, gender, and geographic location, and then randomly selecting participants within each stratum. This method ensured diverse representation and minimized selection bias.

## Inclusion Criteria and Participant Selection

Participants were eligible to take part in the study if they were aged 18 years or older, had resided in the selected regions of South Sudan for at least one year, belonged to one of the major ethnic groups in the area, and voluntarily consented to participate. Recruitment was carried out through community organizations, local leaders, and outreach campaigns to ensure broad and inclusive participation. Throughout the process, ethical considerations were strictly maintained, including obtaining informed consent from all participants and ensuring the confidentiality and privacy of their information.

### Data Analysis and Theme Identification

**Qualitative Data:** Transcripts from interviews and FGDs were subjected to thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. Coding was performed iteratively by two independent researchers to identify recurrent themes related to ethnic identity, perceptions of inter-group relations, and political engagement. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved to enhance reliability.

**Quantitative Data:** Survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential tests (e.g., chi-square, correlation analysis) via SPSS software. These analyses

examined relationships between ethnic affiliation, political behaviour, and perceptions of community cohesion.

**Integration:** Findings from qualitative and quantitative analyses were integrated during interpretation to provide a comprehensive understanding of ethnicity's multifaceted role in South Sudanese society.

## Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical standards stipulated by the University of Juba Graduate College, which approved the research protocol. Participants received detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and confidentiality measures and provided written informed consent. Data confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process. Sensitive topics were approached with cultural sensitivity, and participants were free to withdraw at any time without consequence.

## FINDINGS

### Effects of Ethnicity on Community Relations

Participants in this study were selected based on specific criteria: they were aged 18 or older, had resided in the selected regions of South Sudan for at least a year, belonged to one of the major ethnic groups in the area, and volunteered to participate. Recruitment was conducted through community organizations, local leaders, and outreach campaigns to ensure a diverse and representative sample. The study employed stratified random sampling dividing the population by ethnicity, age, gender, and location to enhance the validity of findings. A total of 400 respondents completed the survey, complemented by 30 in-depth interviews and six focus group discussions.

Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis methodology, the data were coded independently by two researchers, who initially identified recurring concepts that were later grouped into broader themes such as perceptions of conflict, mistrust, and ethnic identity. The analysis revealed that a significant majority, 81% of respondents perceived community relations as primarily characterized by conflict rooted in longstanding animosities. One participant lamented, "Our communities have been fighting for decades. There is so much suspicion; we don't trust each other anymore." Only 18.6% reported experiencing or observing harmonious interactions, underscoring how deep-seated grievances continue to shape social dynamics.

Many participants shared specific instances of violence and discrimination linked to ethnicity. A woman recounted, "In our village, disputes often turn into fights because of ethnic differences. We live with fear that violence could erupt at any time." These narratives reflect a shared sense of mistrust and suspicion, with ethnic identity often dictating social interactions. Participants described how past conflicts have entrenched a culture of hostility, making cooperation difficult. One elder noted, "Longstanding grudges are passed down; children learn to see others as enemies from their families and stories told by elders."

Societal structures, including local governance and community representation, were frequently mentioned as factors that exacerbate tensions. Several respondents expressed frustration that favouritism towards certain ethnic groups fosters perceptions of exclusion. One community leader remarked, "When local leaders favour their own people, others feel left out. This leads to resentment and retaliatory actions." Such systemic biases create an environment where trust erodes, hindering collective problem-solving and perpetuating cycles of retaliation.

Education or the lack thereof was identified as a key element influencing community relations. Participants highlighted how prejudices are often passed down through generations via family narratives and local folklore. A youth participant shared, "Our elders tell stories that make us see other groups as enemies. We need education that promotes understanding, not hatred." Many expressed hope that initiatives fostering inter-ethnic dialogue, especially among youth, could break this cycle of animosity. They believe that

fostering empathy and mutual understanding is crucial for building resilient relationships.

External influences, including aid organizations and political interventions, were also discussed. While some initiatives aimed at peacebuilding were appreciated, others were criticized as superficial or ineffective. A respondent noted, "Some projects are just for show; they don't address the real issues. Until we confront our past injustices, true reconciliation will remain elusive." The narratives emphasized that genuine peace requires acknowledgement of historical grievances and comprehensive strategies that go beyond surface-level interventions.

### Ethnicity in the Liberation Struggle

Ethnicity played a complex role during South Sudan's liberation movement. Initially, various ethnic groups united against colonial and oppressive regimes, driven by shared experiences of marginalization and a collective aspiration for independence. Participants reflected on this period with pride: "During the struggle, our ethnic differences didn't matter. We fought together because we all wanted freedom," shared one elder. This collective effort demonstrated the unifying power of a common cause that transcended ethnic boundaries, fostering a sense of solidarity.

However, as the liberation movement progressed, underlying ethnic tensions began to surface. Leaders often exploited ethnic identities to mobilize support, which, while effective in the short term, sowed seeds of division. Participants recounted that promises made during the struggle—such as equitable resource distribution—were often unfulfilled. A respondent explained, "We fought side by side, but after independence, our leaders only looked after their own tribes. That created anger and mistrust." Such unmet expectations led to disillusionment and, eventually, political rivalries rooted in ethnic loyalties.

Post-independence, the legacy of ethnicity remained entrenched in political institutions. Participants observed that political parties increasingly aligned with ethnic lines, leading to winner-takes-all governance. One respondent noted, "Our leaders now serve their tribes first. That's why governance is unstable; no one cares about the whole country." This shift contributed to ongoing instability, with ethnic elites prioritizing group interests over national unity, often resulting in conflict and marginalization of minorities.

Participants emphasized the importance of understanding this historical context for addressing current challenges. Many called for a narrative shift that celebrates inclusivity and promotes shared national identity. One young participant said, "We fought together for independence, and we should now build a country where ethnicity does not determine our future." Such reflections point to a need for reconciliation initiatives that acknowledge past divisions while fostering unity through inclusive governance.

### Responses from Participants

Participants offered a range of perspectives on ethnicity's role in South Sudan's history and present. Some credited ethnicity with galvanizing support during liberation, emphasizing that it created a sense of belonging and collective strength. One older respondent stated, "Our ethnic groups gave us the courage to stand up and fight. Without that identity, we might not have succeeded." Others, however, expressed concern that ethnicity has become a divisive force fueling current conflicts. "What once united us now divides us," remarked a community elder. "Leaders use ethnicity to stay in power, and ordinary people suffer because of it."

Younger participants demonstrated a nuanced view, acknowledging their ethnic heritage but advocating for a future rooted in national unity. A young woman shared, "We are proud of our ethnicity, but we want to see a South Sudan where everyone is treated equally. We believe education and dialogue can help us reach that goal." Their narratives reflect a desire to move beyond simplistic ethnic identities toward a shared national identity that values diversity.

The importance of confronting historical injustices was a recurring theme. Many participants stressed that healing requires truth-telling and acknowledgement of past wrongs. One respondent said, "We must talk openly about what happened and forgive each other. Only then can we truly move forward." This collective call for reconciliation underscores that addressing the past is vital for building trust and unity among the various ethnic groups in South Sudan.

In summary, while ethnicity has historically played a unifying role in the liberation movement, its legacy has also contributed to ongoing divisions. The responses reveal a collective aspiration among the newer generations for a more inclusive, peaceful future—one that recognizes the importance of understanding history, promoting dialogue, and fostering shared national pride.

## DISCUSSION

### Negative Aspects of Ethnicity

The findings reveal that ethnocentrism, political exclusion, and corruption linked to ethnic favouritism continue to undermine social cohesion in South Sudan. These issues align with established literature that highlights how ethnic divisions can fuel tensions and conflict. For example, Horowitz (1985) emphasizes that ethnocentrism fosters a competitive environment among groups, often leading to heightened hostility. Participants' responses echo this, with many expressing feelings of mistrust and hostility toward members of other ethnic communities. One participant remarked, "We see each other as enemies because of our ethnicity. It's like we are always waiting for the next conflict." This illustrates how deeply ingrained prejudices can manifest not only in personal relationships but also influence political interactions and decision-making.

The connection between ethnic favouritism and political corruption is well-documented. Fjelde and Höglund (2016) argue that political elites exploit ethnic identities to secure power, often excluding minorities from meaningful participation. Several participants shared experiences that reflect this reality. One respondent explained, "When decisions are made, our voices are ignored because we are from the wrong ethnic group." Such sentiments highlight how manipulation of ethnic identities for political gain erodes trust in governance and hampers effective policy implementation. This manipulation fosters a cycle of disenfranchisement and resentment, further destabilizing society.

The concept of "political tribalism," explored by scholars like Young (2012), is vividly reflected in the current political landscape. Participants described how loyalty to an ethnic group often overrides ideological considerations. As one elder stated, "Our leaders serve their tribes first, not the nation. That's why corruption is everywhere." This tribal loyalty contributes to a lack of accountability and transparency, leading to systemic corruption and poor governance outcomes. These narratives reinforce the idea that ethnicity, when wielded as a political tool, can deepen divisions and hinder nation-building.

When discussing the youth's perspectives, a notable difference emerges. Many young participants expressed a desire to move beyond ethnic divisions, emphasizing national identity over ethnic allegiance. A young respondent shared, "The older generation clings to ethnicity, but we want unity. We believe in a South Sudan where everyone is equal." This contrast indicates a generational shift, with youth increasingly advocating for a more inclusive, unified future. Their narratives suggest hope that future leadership can foster reforms that address these negative aspects of ethnicity.

In conclusion, the negative aspects of ethnicity reported in this study corroborate existing literature, underscoring the urgency of reforms to combat ethnic favouritism and promote inclusive governance. Recognizing the evolving perspectives of the youth offers a pathway toward building a more cohesive society, but significant barriers such as entrenched prejudices and political interests must be addressed.

### Positive Aspects of Ethnicity

The study's findings highlight that ethnic solidarity played a critical role during the liberation struggle, aligning with literature emphasizing its unifying potential in the face of oppression. Scholars like Mamdani (2001) argue that shared ethnic identities can galvanize communities, fostering a sense of belonging and purpose. Participants recounted their collective efforts, with one elder recalling, "Our ethnic groups came together as one to fight for independence. That shared struggle created bonds that still remain." These narratives reflect how ethnicity served as a mobilizing tool, enabling disparate groups to unite against colonial powers and forge a common cause.

Similarly, Tilly (2005) emphasizes that ethnicity can foster solidarity, especially when communities face external threats. Many participants shared stories of resource pooling and strategic cooperation rooted in their ethnic identities, which sustained their resistance movements. One young participant reflected, "Our ethnicity gave us strength. We fought together, and that unity helped us overcome many challenges." Such shared identities created resilience and a collective spirit that transcended individual grievances, becoming a driving force in the liberation effort.

However, the responses also reveal a shifting perspective among younger generations. Many youths expressed a desire to redefine their identity in more inclusive terms, emphasizing national unity over ethnic loyalty. A young respondent noted, "We respect our roots, but we want to be proud of being South Sudanese first. We believe our future depends on unity." This indicates an awareness among youth that while ethnicity was vital historically, it must now serve as a foundation for inclusive nationhood rather than division.

Integrating traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and cultural practices into ongoing reconciliation efforts offers promise for fostering a shared national identity. Participants suggested that community elders and customary laws remain vital in mediating disputes and promoting harmony. One elder stated, "Our traditions teach us to forgive and unite, and we must use them to heal our nation." Such insights underscore the importance of blending indigenous approaches with formal reconciliation initiatives, as Lederach (1997) advocates, to strengthen social cohesion.

Overall, this study underscores the dual role of ethnicity: as a vital source of mobilization and identity during the liberation struggle, and as a potential dividing force if not managed carefully. The narratives of the youth, emphasizing a move toward inclusivity, offer hope for leveraging the positive aspects of ethnicity while mitigating its divisive tendencies in the ongoing pursuit of national unity.

### Contemporary Relevance of Ethnic Politics

The ongoing influence of ethnic politics in South Sudan's governance is well-supported by the literature. Participants voiced concerns about how political elites manipulate ethnic identities to entrench power, echoing Brubaker's (2002) observation that ethnic identities often dominate political organizations in post-colonial states. One respondent explained, "Leaders use ethnicity to stay in power, ignoring the needs of the whole country." Such manipulation fosters a governance environment where ethnic loyalty trumps competence, leading to poor policy outcomes and systemic corruption.

The narratives also reflect a generational divide. Older participants often expressed scepticism about reform, citing years of entrenched ethnic favouritism, while younger respondents showed a more hopeful outlook. A youth participant remarked, "We see the problems, but we believe change is possible if we unite beyond ethnicity." This aspirational view aligns with the literature's call for frameworks that promote inter-ethnic cooperation and coalition-building.

Young scholars like Young (2012) argue that ethnic politics can lead to zero-sum competition, where groups seek dominance rather than cooperation. Many participants echoed this concern, describing a political climate marked by

bitterness and rivalry. One participant stated, "Our leaders fight over ethnicity, not development. That's why progress is slow." Such dynamics hinder efforts to address pressing national issues like poverty and inequality, perpetuating social fragmentation.

Addressing these challenges requires acknowledging the barriers such as deep-seated prejudices, political interests, and lack of trust and actively working to foster inclusive political processes. Encouraging dialogue, coalition-building, and reforms that ensure fair representation are essential steps forward. The narratives of the youth, advocating for unity and a shared future, suggest that there is a window of opportunity to redirect ethnic politics toward more constructive pathways, ultimately leveraging South Sudan's cultural diversity as a strength rather than a source of division.

## CONCLUSIONS

### Overall Assessment of Ethnicity's Impact

Ethnicity emerges as both a unifying force during times of struggle and a source of division in peacetime, complicating governance and nation-building efforts. In the context of South Sudan, collective ethnic identity played a crucial role in galvanizing communities during the liberation struggle, enabling diverse groups to rally against colonial oppression and fight for a common cause. This phenomenon aligns with *Primordialist* perspectives, which view ethnic bonds as deep-rooted and enduring, fostering solidarity in moments of collective action (Geertz, 1963). Such identities fostered a sense of shared purpose essential for mobilization against colonial rule.

However, once independence was achieved, the very same identities that once promoted solidarity began to fracture into competing factions, undermining social cohesion and fostering an environment of mistrust. According to *Instrumentalist* theories, political elites often manipulate ethnic identities for personal or group advantage, which can exacerbate divisions rather than alleviate them (Brass, 1991). This manipulation has been evident in South Sudan,

where ethnic favouritism and exclusionary practices by political leaders have contributed to societal fragmentation. The duality of ethnicity mobilizing individuals during liberation but dividing in peace illustrates how ethnicity can serve as both a unifying and a divisive force.

Moreover, the complexities of ethnicity extend beyond mere social identity; they deeply penetrate political structures and governance mechanisms. Participants in the study expressed concerns that the intertwining of ethnicity with political power has created a landscape where governance tends to favour specific ethnic groups, leading to widespread feelings of disenfranchisement among minorities. This dynamic can be understood through *Social Identity Theory*, which posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from group belonging, influencing political loyalty and behaviour (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When political structures reinforce ethnic favouritism, they foster resentment and alienation among marginalized groups, threatening national stability and cohesion.

The challenge for South Sudan is to find ways to harness the positive aspects of ethnic community, such as shared cultural richness and solidarity, while addressing and mitigating the sources of division that have been reinforced post-liberation. This aligns with approaches advocating for inclusive governance and intercultural dialogue as pathways to social cohesion (Lederach, 1997). Fostering such dialogue can help transform ethnic identities from sources of conflict into assets for national unity.

### *Long-Term Consequences for Nation-Building*

The technicalities of ethnic identity and fragmentation pose ongoing challenges to the political stability and unity of South Sudan as a sovereign state. Ethnic divisions, often exploited by political elites, create a fractured political landscape characterized by power struggles rather than cooperation. According to *Ethnic Federalism* theories, institutionalizing ethnic identities within federal arrangements can serve as a means to promote self-governance and reduce conflict (Kymlicka, 1995). Without such frameworks,

exclusion and favouritism foster resentment among rival groups, destabilizing political institutions and hindering nation-building efforts.

Furthermore, these ethnic dynamics have long-term implications for social and economic development. Persistent tensions can impede the implementation of vital infrastructure projects and social services, which require cross-community cooperation. Participants' concerns about corruption and favouritism underscore how ethnic divisions can perpetuate inequality rather than promote shared prosperity—a challenge that necessitates fostering inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation. These efforts are essential to build a sense of collective identity and shared national purpose, crucial for sustainable development and enduring peace.

In summary, addressing the complexities of ethnicity in South Sudan demands a comprehensive approach involving government leaders, civil society, and communities. Recognizing the deep historical roots of ethnic identities, as well as their current political implications, is vital for crafting policies that celebrate diversity while fostering unity (Kymlicka, 1991). Promoting inclusive governance and intercultural dialogue can transform ethnicity from a divisive obstacle into an asset for national development, ensuring that South Sudan moves toward a resilient and unified future.

## Recommendations

### Policy Reforms for Managing Ethnicity

To effectively manage the complexities of ethnicity within South Sudan, it is imperative to establish robust institutional frameworks that promote ethnic inclusivity and mitigate biases entrenched in existing governance structures. One of the primary steps involves creating mechanisms for equitable representation across all ethnic groups within political institutions. Implementing proportional representation systems that accurately reflect the demographic makeup can serve to diminish the politicization of ethnic identity, making governance more

inclusive and collaborative. Such reforms can help prevent dominant groups from monopolizing power and marginalizing minorities, thereby reducing ethnic tensions that threaten national stability.

However, potential barriers such as entrenched patronage networks, resistance from elites benefiting from the status quo, and logistical challenges in implementing new electoral systems must be carefully addressed. Ensuring transparency and fairness in the reform process will be crucial to garnering broad support and legitimacy. Additionally, reviewing and reforming policies that currently perpetuate ethnic favouritism or exclusion is essential. This includes establishing transparent, merit-based processes for appointments to public service positions, resource distribution, and project implementation. Incorporating cultural competence training for government officials can further enhance their understanding of ethnic dynamics, fostering a culture of respect and inclusivity within the public sector.

Drawing on successful conflict resolution practices in South Sudan, such as the peace processes facilitated by the Juba Peace Agreement (2018), which incorporated inclusive dialogue among diverse groups, can provide valuable lessons. These initiatives demonstrated that structured, participatory approaches involving multiple stakeholders can foster trust and pave the way for reconciliation. Institutionalizing such inclusive processes within governance reforms can help address potential barriers and build a more cohesive political landscape.

### National Reconciliation Initiatives

Promoting genuine dialogue among ethnic groups remains vital for fostering understanding, trust, and a shared sense of identity across South Sudan. Establishing structured national reconciliation initiatives that encourage inter-ethnic dialogue can bridge divides and foster a collective sense of community. These initiatives may include community forums, workshops, and facilitated dialogues led by neutral third-party organizations, designed to provide safe spaces for open

discussions about historical grievances, shared experiences, and future aspirations.

Integrating traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and cultural practices into these initiatives can significantly enhance their effectiveness. Many communities possess indigenous methods of conflict management that emphasize reconciliation, harmony, and communal consensus. By bridging formal dialogue processes with these traditional approaches, South Sudan can create a holistic framework that respects and leverages its cultural heritage. Such an approach not only promotes reconciliation but also nurtures a shared national identity rooted in mutual respect and understanding.

Nonetheless, potential barriers such as mistrust, political manipulation, and deeply ingrained stereotypes must be acknowledged and addressed. Ensuring the neutrality of facilitators, safeguarding participants' safety, and maintaining sustained engagement are critical to overcoming these challenges. Drawing from successful conflict resolution efforts in South Sudan, such as the community peace dialogues conducted in various states, which have helped reduce local tensions and foster cooperation, demonstrates that culturally sensitive and inclusive dialogue processes can lay the foundation for long-term peace.

### Future Research Directions

Advancing strategies that foster a cohesive national identity also requires a concerted effort to deepen understanding of the intersection of ethnicity and governance. Encouraging further research on how ethnic identities influence political behaviour, policymaking, and social cohesion can generate valuable insights into the factors that either facilitate or hinder nation-building. Cross-disciplinary studies integrating political science, sociology, and anthropology can shed light on the nuanced ways ethnic dynamics operate within South Sudan's unique context.

Longitudinal research tracking changes in ethnic relations over time—particularly in response to

policy interventions and reconciliation initiatives—can help identify best practices and inform adaptive strategies. For example, evaluating the long-term impact of past peace processes and inclusive reforms can provide critical lessons for future efforts. Engaging local scholars, community leaders, and practitioners in this research ensures that findings are grounded in the realities on the ground, fostering a participatory and context-sensitive approach.

Addressing potential barriers such as limited research capacity, political sensitivities, and resource constraints is essential to sustaining meaningful inquiry. By prioritizing research that is inclusive and community-driven, South Sudan can develop evidence-based policies that promote resilience, social harmony, and shared prosperity.

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