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Buffering State-making: Geopolitics in the Sudd Marshlands of South Sudan

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the history and ongoing transformation of the South Sudanese Sudd marshlands as a buffer zone in a variety of subsequent projects of domination and their subversion. Its argument will be that the contemporary geopolitics of the Sudd cannot be understood properly without unwinding the historical layers of contestation and conflict around these projects of control and their reversal, projects which have sought to shape and have been shaped crucially by the area's specific ecology. For more than a century, different external ventures – colonial, nationalist, secessionist – encountered in the southern Sudanese marshlands a formidable buffer to the realization of their various projects of control. Ambitions of making the Nile water flow, establishing effective state authority, or building lines of communication, get stuck in the Sudd's difficult terrain. Building on the political ecology and wider social theory on terrain, resistance and warfare, we conceptualize the Sudd as a lively political ecology – one characterized by constant struggles and accommodations between the centripetal logics of state-making and the centrifugal propensities of vernacular political culture.

Introduction

IF EVER THERE was a buffer zone, it is the Sudd: a swamp the size of a small country, where the boundaries between stable land and waterway become lost in endlessly receding and expanding tangles of floating aquatic plants. The Sudd is also home to an archetype of the anthropology of nomadic, acephalous, and state-resistant peoples: the Nuer. Unsurprisingly, the Sudd – Arabic for 'barrier' – has a long history as a buffer to geopolitical aspirations, hampering imperial efforts to discover the origins and flow of the Nile in the 19th century as much as providing a perfect ground for recurrent resistance against government power. The Sudd and its mobile people have since found themselves at the epicentre of projects of outside domination, marginalization, co-optation and claims for autonomy.

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This article explores how the environment and political cultures of the Sudd have interacted with state-making aspirations, from British colonial expansion to contemporary state practices, intended to make this environment legible.¹ Contrary to more static approaches to buffer zones, we focus on an active and relational process – *buffering* – that revolves around the interplay of external efforts to govern liminal zones and internal ones to manufacture distance from state-making processes by resorting to the features of rough terrain. Those buffering practices defy neat analytical and spatial dichotomies between stable centres of power and geographical margins. This understanding of buffering is rooted both in theories of resistance that pay attention to how questions of terrain mediate the reach and contestation of centralized states (Herbst 2000; Scott 2009; Shell 2015) as well in as Deleuze and Guattari's take on state formation as a dynamic process of continuous battles, interpenetrations and entanglements between the state apparatus and its exteriority – what they call a 'nomad' logic characterized by mobility, evasion, war and transformation (2010). Unwinding the historical layers of contestation and conflict in the Sudd allows us to show that buffer zones are lively political ecologies, made and remade over time in shifting projects of control and their subversion.

This paper is structured as follows. The following section presents a brief theoretical discussion of our take on buffer zones, comprising three lines of inquiry: first, we consider buffer zones as relational spatialities co-produced between outside projects of control and innate rationales of subversion; between attempts to code and enclose space and constant mobility and distribution in space. We point, second, to the infrastructural character of attempts to domesticate rough terrain and finally, to the intricate temporalities of buffer zones. Subsequently, we will discuss the Sudd as a place where state-making efforts get stuck in the mud, and show the different ways in which rough ecologies become constructed, deployed, appropriated, reinvented, and 'discovered' as buffers in competing and overlapping geopolitical aspirations. For more than a century, state formation logics – imperial, nationalist, and secessionist – encountered in the southern Sudanese marshlands a formidable barrier to the realization of their various projects of legibility and control.² Ambitions to control the flows of Nile water, to construct tenable lines of communication to extend and consolidate state authority not only unrelentingly got stuck in the clay soils of the Sudd. Those attempts were additionally met with strategies by the agro-pastoralist communities of the Sudd to ward off centralized authority by eluding or subverting outside control. By exploring how those projects have sought to shape and have been shaped crucially by both the specific ecology as well as the political cultures that evolve together with that landscape, we hope to contribute to a political ecology of buffer zones (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Aerial photo of the Sudd near Old Fangak (picture by Peer Schouten, January 2020)

Buffering State-making: Rough Ecologies, Political Engineering, and Time

Our first premise is that buffer zones find their geopolitical significance at the intersection of the material affordances of rough terrain and geopolitical agendas of control and resistance. Buffer zones are, in other words, not self-sufficient but quintessentially *relational* entities – peripheries designated as such by centres – yet nonetheless have ‘something’ intrinsic – rough terrain – which makes this designation possible. Classical geopolitics as well as contemporary engagements with buffer zones are bound by the common-sensical observation that inhospitable terrain has historically afforded an effective obstruction to the projection of external military power (Chay and Ross 1983; Mackinder 1904; Scott 2009). Particularly James Scott has pointed out how the designation of buffer zones as unruly, opaque, and ungoverned typically also extends to their inhabitants; these predicates are tagged exactly on those people whose ways of living are shifting, flexible, mobile – lifestyles perfectly adapted to the vagaries of terrain and thence fundamentally unyielding to control by centres of power (2009; cf. Engebrigtsen 2017; Peluso and Vandergeest 2011). Yet, a buffer zone need not only be approached as an external designation; buffering can also be approached from within by focusing on the active work through which the features of terrain are consciously deployed in strategies to manufacture distance to or actively thwart an outside project of control (Clastres 1987, 199–208; Gonzalez-Ruibal 2014). As Gordillo summarizes it, ‘terrain can be turned by rebellious populations into a powerful weapon against the state’ (2018, 54). Discussing the political possibilities opened up by the ‘friction of terrain’, James Scott argued that in Southeast Asia, hilly terrain provided an exit-option for mobile populations and “runaways from state-making processes in the lowlands” (2009, 24). But

mountainous landscapes are not the only type of terrain that present propitious ecological buffers against state-making projects.³ As we will explore, the history of South Sudan suggests that states can't wade in the mud very well, either.

The second premise finds its extension in the first. A range of perspectives has theorized the intersections of space, power, and the physical properties of landscape, drawing attention to the ways in which projects of empire or nation-state making, historical and contemporary, attain form through the domestication of rough terrain, and these projects are often distinctively infrastructural in nature (i.e., Ahram 2015; Mukerji 2010). Geopolitical control from a centre is projected into rough hinterlands through what we have elsewhere called *political engineering*, or the reconfiguration of the natural environment to make it amenable to the projection of military and administrative control (Bachmann and Schouten 2018). Governing and policing typically hinge on legibility, standardization, simplification, predictability and channelling; abstract qualities that are often enforced through the built environment – in other words, by literally landscaping unruly ecologies. Thus, part of the politics of buffer zones often play out in the seemingly technical realm of infrastructure development, an area of study that others have called 'technopolitics' (Mitchell 2002).

As implicit in the term buffering, we – thirdly – wish to approach the buffer zone as much as a spatial phenomenon as a temporal condition, one that may advance and recede, shift in and out of existence at the interface of climatic variability, projects of control and their contestation. We thereby depart from the linear modernist story, in which ever-expanding infrastructure grids would ultimately abolish the existence of buffer zones the world across. Even James Scott holds that what he called shatter zones are definitely a thing of the past, because

Since 1945, ... the power of the state to deploy distance-demolishing technologies—railroads, all-weather roads, telephone, telegraph, airpower, helicopters, and now information technology—so changed the strategic balance of power between self-governing peoples and nation-states, so diminished the friction of terrain, that my analysis largely ceases to be useful. ... the sovereign nation-state is now busy projecting its power to its outermost territorial borders and mopping up zones of weak or no sovereignty. (2009, xii)

However, it only takes a casual glance at recent studies of African frontier zones to understand that the friction of terrain is very much alive and well (i.e., Brachet and Scheele 2019; Lombard 2016; Roitman 2003). Others have noted how the spatial penetration of African states mostly remained imperfect, meaning that the coded space of all-weather infrastructures in many places at best form modest archipelagos in seas of logistically ungoverned terrain (Herbst 2000). Additionally and more importantly, whereas Scott's perspective

implicitly assumes a mutual exclusiveness between subversive groups and the state, the distinction between the two was never as clear-cut. Our understanding of this relation is instead rooted in Deleuze and Guattari's (2010) conception of history as continuous battles and accommodations between what they call the state-logic (classification, stasis, taxation, legibility) and the 'war machine' or nomad-logic (mobility, variability, evasion, war, metamorphosis).⁴ Even though the nomad logic arises from the urge to repel state intrusion, the two are dynamically related to each other. While the former's unruly impulses constitute a fundamental threat to the latter, the state strives to appropriate this very modality "to harness its power and potential" for its own interests (Hoffman 2011, 14; Deleuze and Guattari 2010, 43–53). For instance, in areas where it proved impossible to impose the state logic through what Michael Mann has called "infrastructural power" (1984), African states often work through intermediaries of varied plumage, including forms of 'raiding sovereignty' associated to nomadic antinomies to the state logic (Lombard 2012). As a result, the space between central states and mobile populations in their margins has always been one of interaction and interchange as much as avoidance (cf. Jedrej 2004).

In the following, we will illustrate this take on buffer zones by tracing the turbulent history and ongoing transformation of the Sudd in four historical sedimentations of 'buffering': the Sudd as an insurmountable barrier against Anglo-Egyptian imperial schemes; the Sudd as a British-devised buffer against Egyptian and Arabic influences; the Sudd as a space of resistance for southern rebels against Khartoum administration; and in a final reversal, the rebel-turned-government of the South Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) adopts a combination of infrastructure and war machine tactics to control the Sudd and its people.

Buffering Empire-building

Communities living in the approximate geographical space of the Sudd have over the centuries adapted to the vagaries of the seasonally waxing and waning of its floodplains by combining transhumant pastoralism (during the dry season) with swidden agriculture (during the rainy season). Anthropologists generally agree that nearly every aspect of the culture and politics of local communities had to be fine-tuned for survival in this radically idiosyncratic ecosystem. Indeed, as Douglas Johnson suggested, "the way in which Nilotic societies have responded to environmental change and to one another constitute the main part of their history. . . . Their exploitation of the environment the role they play in their own ecology require them to be both fluid and flexible" (1986, 132).

The Sudd as a buffer to outside control gained geopolitical significance with the acceleration of imperial aspirations at the end of the 19th century. The

exceeding logistical powers made available to colonial forces through the Industrial Revolution locked them in an infrastructural arms race to claim effective control over the interior of Africa. In this geopolitical competition, the quest to discover (and claim) the origins of the River Nile assumed almost mythical proportions (Tvedt 2004). In the colonial logics of control prevailing at the time, cartography obviously played a central role, for putting things on a map made them amenable to contemplation and decision-making from a far, and it should come as no surprise that armies of explorers and surveyors were just as important as soldiers in the British expansion upstream.

For aspiring empire-makers, however, the Sudd is probably among the landscapes most formidably challenging to the establishment of sound logistical control: whereas further upstream, its waters take shape in natural channels that are recognizable as ‘river’, in the vast floodplain of the Sudd, a meshwork of dozens of regional rivers and their tributaries dissolve into stagnant pools and marshes. As an early British explorer put it after being deceived by the treacherous properties of the place, ‘no dependence can ever be placed on this accursed river. The fabulous Styx must be a sweet rippling brook compared to this horrible creation’ (cited in Howell, Lock, and Cobb 1988, 27). The British set forth vigorously to domesticate the Sudd – surveyors and hydrologists were to force it into the shape of a river – navigable, linear – that could be “a potentially benevolent servant to the irrigation economies in the north and, at the same time, as a potential political weapon in the hands of London” (Tvedt 2004, 73). From 1899, team after team was sent out to disaggregate this vast, elusive and incomprehensible swamp into a number of discrete and minor ‘Sudd blocks’. These so-called Sudd-cutting missions literally comprised hacking away the endless accumulations of vegetation with machetes (Collins 1990, 79–83). If ever there was a hubristic colonial venture, it was this. As M.F. Gage, member of a 1899/1900 Sudd-cutting mission, narrates: “We arrived without difficulty at Shambe and at this point the troubles of the expedition began. The Nile had apparently ceased to exist. A magnificent river so far, now it had suddenly been arrested by this extraordinary barrier of the Sudd” (Gage 1950, 10). No matter how much tangles of reeds and weeds the Sudd cutters would remove, the endless Sudd continued to extend in every direction. Based on his own harrowing experiences, British hydrologist William Garstin proposed to bypass the swamps altogether and cut a whole new canal through the adjacent savannah (Garstin 1904, 177; cf. Howell, Lock, and Cobb 1988) (Figure 2).

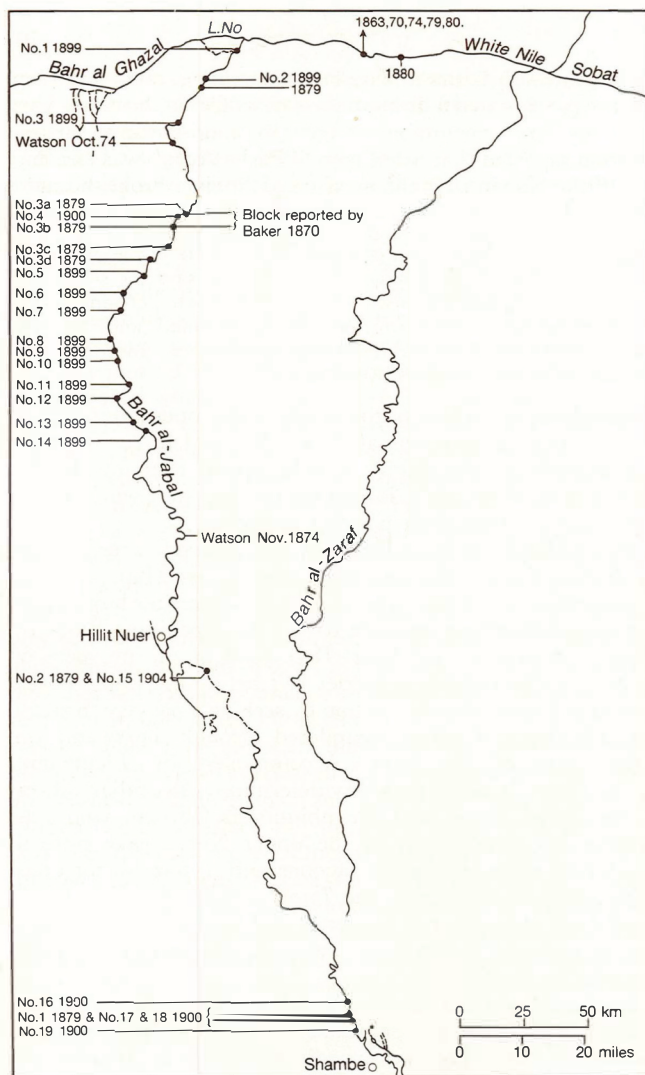
However, the “most awkward problem of all” (Morrice 1949, 146) that British logistical aspirations ran up against was the clay-heavy turf called ‘black cotton soil’. This type of soil turned the key ambition of the British – extending authority through the construction of durable roads – into a “slippery quagmire” (Assher 1928, 229). As a consequence, British authority across Upper Nile remained both restricted to elevated stations and towns and

a phenomenon of the dry season. Despite decades of Quixotesque efforts at road-building pursued by all governors, one local administrator could observe as late as 1955 that “the term roads in Upper Nile province is a complete misnomer [...] without doubt the roads in Upper Nile are the worst in the Sudan” (Suliman 1955). As Naomi Pendle summarizes it eloquently, “while the government claimed sovereignty over the areas, the materiality of the landscape asserted an enduring autonomy that defined government imaginations about to remake the landscape for ease of access and a material display of the physical presence of government” (2017b, 99).

If British colonial administrators thus found the Sudd a hellish space inimical to material civilization – literally a barrier – as Evans-Pritchard observed, “the Nuer”, by contrast, “think that they live in the finest country on earth” (1969, 51). Their adaptive qualities – mobility, fluidity and flexibility – must have been part of why they have formed a key case out of which the anthropological ideal-type of nomadic, egalitarian, stateless societies have been forged (Evans-Pritchard 1969; cf. Engebriksen 2017). They came to epitomize all the defiant properties of the ‘nomad’ to the 20th century high-modernist state order: it was not that they were *actually* permanently mobile, but rather that their imminent, potential mobility defied the colonial conditions of possibility for control.

Vice versa, southern Sudanese came to think in very similar terms of colonial administration as *hakuma*, made up of *turuk* (foreigners, government): vague, distant, largely extractive and alien, against which communities which shared little among them have sought to strengthen their local autonomy in spaces outside of its reach (Leonardi 2007). Encroaching colonial stations, settlement schemes and military campaigns aimed at bringing the people around the Sudd into the fold of the imperial state (Johnson 2016a). However, the colonial spatial order of clearly bounded territorial-administrative units with home to ethnically distinct communities, went against the grain of vernacular conceptions of spatiality and mobility, which were premised on overlapping and constantly negotiated claims to land as well as shifting seasonal mobility patterns primed to deal with herd and climate variability (cf. Cormack 2016; Hutchinson 1996).

Yet faced with limited resources, colonial administration in practice adopted many of the features the British attributed to local authority, mainly through coercive expeditions to ‘pacify tribes’. The ‘Nuer patrols’ of the first quarter of the 20th century, meant to overcome Lou Nuer resistance to colonial rule (cf. Kindersley and Rolandsen 2019, 388), can serve to illustrate. As the British allied with competing tribes and clans to submit them through a policy that the colonial director of intelligence called “administration by raids” – burning camps and pillaging livestock – the Nuer utilized the swampy “geographical sanctuaries” to evade the colonial state, only to later raid British allies in much the same fashion after the British had left (Warburg 1968, 322;



MAP 2. Bahr al-Jabal and Bahr al-Zaraf, showing sudd blocks
Source: Lyons (1906)

Figure 2. Map of Sudd blocks 1906. Reproduced with permission of Oxford Publishing Limited (licence number 45114) from R. O. Collins 1990. *The waters of the Nile. Hydropolitics and the Jonglei Canal 1900-1988*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 82.

Johnson 2016b, 28). In a report on a British Western Nuer patrol in 1927–1928, the then district commissioner of Rumbek, testifies to the Nuers' guerilla attacks: "The Nuer were credited with the most advanced tactics, such as lying up in long grass, firing the grass as we pass through, and night attacking behind a screen of cattle or even women and children ..." (Kingdon 1945, 173). The Sudd affords a permanently changing distribution of people, a dynamic that defies effective military calculation. Often, those sanctuaries were just metres away from British stations and main communication lines. The tall grasses growing along channels in the Sudd completely obliterated the view of colonial patrols on boats, meaning people could hide from punitive expeditions within earshot (Assher 1928, 67). British administrators had to admit that what they considered the most advanced armoury proved inadequate to realize its purpose. When the British air raided Nuer cattle camps in 1927–30 as part of Upper Nile Province Governor C.A. Willis' attempt to convert fluid Nuer landscapes into neatly confined settlements, Kingdon notes that "it was thought that the loss of cattle would bring the Nuer running in, but the results were not up to expectation, as they soon learned the value of dispersal, and dispersal in a swamp meant little damage" (Kingdon 1945, 178). Local British administrators eventually quietly adapted their ambitions to these realities and began to report districts as formally 'settled' when a native commissioner had been provided with a fixed house (Assher 1928, 76). Up until the very end of colonial rule, then, the Sudd was still as a 'shatter zone', an ecology propitious to efforts by local populations to elude the reach of the British through the friction of terrain.

A Reversal of Direction: Buffering the North

As Egypt gained independence from Great Britain in 1922, an additional layer of buffering is grafted on top of the first one. Egypt and Britain still formed a condominium governing Sudan, but Egypt developed a more assertive policy of claiming Nile water. For Cairo, the Sudd needed to be subdued because it refused to release its greatest treasure: its water. Its shallowness means that more than 50% of the water flowing into the Sudd is evaporated before the 'Nile' reaches the northern end of the swamps. The annual loss of millions of cubic metres of potential water was framed as a matter of survival for the Egyptian economy and society, and Cairo began surveying the Sudd in light of possible large-scale engineering schemes, of which the Jonglei Canal proved to be the most persistent idea (for an overview see Collins 1990). Yet the British administration became weary of Egyptian influence in Sudan. In the course of trying to make the South Sudanese 'fit' inside a colonial apparatus, the British had deployed anthropologists and came to recognize the distinctiveness of the people of the Sudd as opposed to the Arabized Sudanese of Khartoum. A paternalistic character, Governor Willis suddenly insisted the needs of the

people of the Sudd to be taken into consideration in all irrigation schemes: "... it would seem only reasonable that out of the progressive benefits arising from the scheme in Egypt provision should be made for the moral and material growth of the natives whose life is now to be disturbed" (Willis, quoted Johnson 1995, 380). He caused a major stir when he then prohibited any staff of the Egyptian Irrigation Department to enter the area, going as far as threatening to mobilize the Aliab Dinka against the Egyptian engineers. If the engineers would return to the Sudd, the Dinka, he professed, "would have someone to put their spears into and fatter ones at that" (Willis, quoted in Collins 1983, 338).

Whereas initially the 'savage' element of the war-like nomad was subversive and something to be overcome, now it became strategized in a way that could be mobilized to keep at bay competing efforts to establish engineered, state-space. Yet ultimately, this was but one hiccup in the broader British development of a distinct 'Southern policy' aimed at preserving "self-contained racial or tribal units" of the lands beyond the Sudd and their protection from "Middle Eastern and Arab lines of progress".⁵ From a British perspective, the Sudd lent itself well to act as a 'natural' buffer against excessive northern influence in the south, but the Khartoum-issued governor of the area the time prefigured what kind of stumbling block the ecological-infrastructureal conundrum of the Sudd would present for the future, independent country:

Hitherto, this province has acted as the insuperable barrier between the North and the South and I believe [...] that it will always founder on the bogs and marshes of Upper Nile, unless we do something radical to improve our roads. It is of no use for us to argue that the idea of North and South is a mere figment of the imagination so long as we do not remove the barriers, which divide the country. (Yassein 1955).

Luddites in the Swamps?

These contradictory aspirations would come to heads just before Sudan's independence in 1956. When from 1953 the plans for Sudan's independence were being forged between Khartoum, London and Cairo, southern Sudanese were worried that administrative unification under a single, national, administration would entail their further marginalization. What would quickly turn into the first Anyanya rebellion could be considered the third layer in the historical interpenetration of 'buffering' playing out around the Sudd. In it, the spatial schism within southern Sudan that was already apparent under British rule hardened even further. It concerns the division between the oppressive and thinly spread geography of state authority, confined to the metric space along major trade routes and administrative centres on the one hand, and the subversive geographies of the bush, where people could roam with more freedom, and the rebels amongst them. While this overall geography remained

largely unchanged, what did change was the intensity of the animosity between the two spheres and the fact that it was now the Khartoum-based government which occupied the administrative posts in southern Sudan ceded to them by the British. The tactics of pacification changed little: the government continued to displace people into garrison towns to submit them to government control rule and depopulate the bush, thus bringing anyone roaming there under closer scrutiny (Kindersley and Rolandsen 2019, 390–391). By extension, more than ever, the bush in southern Sudan became a space associated with marginalization and its contestation.

The first civil war ended in the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement, which granted southern Sudan more regional autonomy in exchange for an end to the uprising. However, multiple factors conspired to upend the peace agreement in 1983. In the 1970s, oil was discovered in the border area between northern and southern Sudan, raising the stakes of territorial control in the upper ranges of the Sudd; the Sudanese government turned more radical, promising to extend Sharia law to the whole of Sudan; and Khartoum announced that together with Egypt, it would build the Jonglei Canal – realizing an imperial dream first introduced by British engineers 70 years before. This announcement was met across the towns of southern Sudan with significant discontent. After 18 years of fighting, many perceived the hard-won autonomy of the South to be sold out to the Egyptians again. Riots erupted on 14–16 October 1974 in Juba and later in Malakal, where students shouted, “Down with Alier, down with the Jonglei Canal, No Egyptians after today!”⁶ Alier, the head of the Southern regional administration and Vice President of Sudan, responded with a violent crackdown in the South, declaring that the outdated and archaic lifestyles that persisted in the Sudd were to be wiped out by the engineering wonders of the Canal:

We are not to remain a sort of a human zoo for anthropologists, tourists, environmentalists and adventurers from developed countries of Europe to study us, our origins, our plights, the size of our skulls and the shape and length of customary scars on our forehead ... If we have to drive our people to paradise with sticks we will do so for their own good and the good of those who will come after us. (Alier 1974)

In the following years, a five-story tall bucketwheel would relentlessly cut open the savannah, taking out 280,000 cubic metres of clay soil each week. However, the excavator turned soon into a beacon for resentment building up not only against the deficit of development dividends for local communities, but also against the increasing political marginalization of southern Sudanese (Collins 1990). Discontent in the Sudd turned out to be fertile soil for the emergence of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA). What started out in 1983 in Bor as a mutiny of 500 southern Sudanese military and police personnel quickly turned into a 6,000 strong rebel force of disillusioned with the gap between development expectations that came with the

canal and oil on the one hand, and the absence of any improvement in their condition on the ground.

In the ensuing civil war, the logics of state and its anarchic ‘other’ interacted dynamically. Initially, the division between major hubs and routes first under colonial then Sudanese control – spaces “counted in order to be occupied” in Deleuze and Guattari’s idiom (2010, 18) and the marshlands of the rebels – spaces “occupied without being counted” – remained intact. The SPLA strategized the features of the Sudd to remain elusive to the Sudanese Army. Playing the seasons, the rebels remained fragmented and hidden during the dry seasons but used the cover of the additional friction of terrain of the rainy seasons to conduct their attacks. Later however, the counterinsurgency of the Sudanese Army, mounted on violently clearing the countryside and the engineering of famines to drive people out of the bush into camps and garrison towns (Duffield et al. 2000), heralded an appropriation of the tactics of the war machine by state forces.

If Sudan’s policy after the discovery of substantial oil reserves in southern Sudan had been to expand transport infrastructures southward to ‘open up’ the region for economic development, the rebels’ first target was this infrastructure of occupation. Amongst the first moves of the SPLA was to occupy and sabotage oil installations that were meant to leach all the wealth out from under their soil. The SPLA then kidnapped nine workers of CCI, the French construction company working on the nearly finished Jonglei Canal. As the SPLA wrote in a letter to Chevron, Total and CCI, the major players in resource extraction and infrastructure construction, respectively, in December 1983,

... agricultural projects, hospitals, towns and model villages that were to be carried out in the canal zone will only remain in the text of the agreement never to be executed after you will have completed your works on the canal. You can therefore see our determination to see to it that the work on the canal stops (quoted in Collins 1990, 398).

The SPLA successfully turned the ditch and the bucketwheel into powerful symbols of marginalization and exploitation, and the SPLA’s emergence and success can at least in part be seen as a reaction against political engineering; by interrupting the digging of the canal, they intervened directly in a technopolitics that had ignored them.

“Taking the Town to the People”

Unsurprisingly, the SPLA’s apparent war against machines was never meant as a complete repudiation of the state as a conduit of infrastructural modernity, but rather a rejection to their exclusion from its fruits. To wit, before silencing the excavator, the SPLA’s leader John Garang had written a PhD thesis on the

development of the Jonglei area in which he showed himself an enthusiast of grand modernization schemes for southern Sudan.

The relevance of the Jonglei canal to the Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk, Anuak and the Murle people of the Jonglei Project Area is therefore not that the canal interferes with their traditional ways of life but rather that it (1) opens up hitherto dormant opportunities for socio-economic development ... and (2) provides real opportunities for regional and national integration of the area (Garang de Mabior 1981, 229–30).

As any earnest (state) engineer, Garang realizes the pivotal role of public works for realizing state territory (Deleuze and Guattari 2010, 98). He considered the construction of modern drainage systems and irrigation works, the concerted use of mechanical technology for agriculture, the introduction of a modern land tenure system and resettlement schemes that would result in 'more compact villages' the most useful mechanisms to emancipate a 'New' Sudan (Garang de Mabior 1981, 227–28). In the 1990s, powerful external forces started to align behind the SPLA's emancipatory agenda.⁷ External observers chose to gloss over the ecological and social diversity in southern Sudan, instead framing its people as (potentially) 'Christian' people unified in their brutal oppression by the Arabs in Khartoum (McAlister 2014). Donors put their weight behind an SPLA-driven agenda to build, literally, a new state out of the flow of oil, one that would upend the structural marginalization of all southern Sudanese. As the President of South Sudan, Salva Kiir, put it in a speech just weeks after independence:

While we may continue to encounter difficulties on routine basis, we will take the advantage of beginning from scratch. The Republic of South Sudan is like a white paper. *Tabula rasa*. We think, plan and implement. (Salva Kiir, Speech at Martyr's Day, 30th July 2011)

In other words, the SPLA overtly adopted the language and logic of the state apparatus, interested in extending its presence via the production of striated spaces through, mainly, infrastructure. When the SPLA was in the bush, the centrifugal forces of the Sudd were as much a challenge to collective action as an asset inhibiting state control; now that it occupied the seat of power, this fragmented ecology, inhabited by just as intractable socio-political groups, also became a potential site of challenge to its rule. Donors stood side by side with the former guerillas to provide cash, consultations, feasibility studies, and strategy papers targeting the construction of a new, modern, inclusive, state out of the oil proceeds. Until the civil war erupted in December 2013, external statebuilders assumed that the centre was benevolent and thence that eliminating impediments to its reach and extending its logistical capacities into the interior would yield progress. While donors considered the thousands of kilometres of opened up roads as 'peace dividends' that eliminated the barriers that had divided South Sudanese (Bennett et al. 2010, 49), the SPLA elite also used it to extend its domination without having resolved issues of

participation and inclusion. As Vaughan et al put it, “the former margin – the South – started to create and construct its own centers and peripheries” (Vaughan, Schomerus, and de Vries 2013, 3).

In response, many communities moved away from the contact areas; the bush once more affording a buffer from external imposition (Thomas 2015, 135; cf. Pendle 2017a). Indeed, many were the (unrecorded) instances in which local community militias purposefully destroyed bridges and roads, as the expanding infrastructure of the ‘inclusive’ South Sudan now became vehicles along which government violence could come. For the myriad defecting and opposition factions and local community defence forces, the Sudd continues to provide cover for refuge against expanding centres of power (cf. Craze and Tubiana 2016). At the same time, the SPLA elite mobilizes its anti-state heritage as well. Euphemistically veiled under the slogan ‘taking the town to the people’, the SPLA distributed both political alliances and violence across the rural areas. Since the civil war, both Khartoum and the SPLA had increasingly resorted to relying on militias, in a form of proxy warfare, whereby full- or partially nomad herders were encouraged to raid and depopulate whole areas – to achieve political objectives (see Craze 2018 for discussion). As after independence the SPLA was increasingly officially confined to the straitjacket of expectations that come with statehood, power figures in reality have continually sought to reinforce their own, parallel, raiding power by establishing ties to herder youths they could potentially mobilize, and embedding ‘deep-rooted resistance to centralized control’ *into* the state apparatus (Twijnstra and Titeca 2016, 284). Indeed, government and opposition have managed to subvert donor efforts to create a professional security sector, instead distributing cash and opportunities to decentralized bands and militias through a dynamic political economy of patronage, predation and promises (Craze 2020, cf. Wild, Jok, and Patel 2018). The “resulting centralization and fragmentation”, as Joshua Craze puts it, “are thus not opposed processes, but are rather complementary and dialectically related” (2020, 7).

Conclusion

If, as Douglas Johnson surmised (1989), the specific ecological features of the Sudd played a definitive role in shaping the autonomous and decentralized political culture of local communities, it must also find its place in accounts of South Sudan’s contemporary political fragmentation. In this article, we have tried to illustrate how the social construction of buffers – buffering, for lack of a better word – whether externally induced or internally grown, can be productively conceived as a political interaction mediated through the environment, a political ecology of imposition and resistance that unfolds in interplay with the specific affordances of rough terrain. The Sudd has *de facto* constituted a buffer to imperial aspirations of the Anglo-Egyptian, British,

Sudanese as well as state-building rationales in contemporary South Sudan. Whomever was the centre of power, time and again, the character of the Sudd as hostile to any logistical ambition, provided a mattress of protection for people to withdraw from the reach of centres of power and afforded a milieu to directly ward off intrusion. Of course, what holds *in extremis* for the Sudd also holds for many of the other peripheries of (South) Sudan and other countries with similar characteristics (cf. James 2007). By extension, the histories of individual buffer zones should be analysed in terms of the continuous interplay of state logics of calculation and the reversal they afford. Thus, conceived, buffer zones lose their ‘blank slate’ character, their politics at any time instead becomes scripted against the background of earlier entanglements of different geographies. Outside projects of control are of course grafted on local geographies, landscapes and communities—imagined or real—and these projects themselves become part of the local geopolitical landscape, whether in the form of locally appropriated administrative structures and infrastructures or the organization of public authority (Cormack 2016). The histories of buffer zones are lively and dynamic, and subsequent waves of conquering, repelling, short-lived empires, state formation and its undoing, all fold into the political present of the geopolitics and conflicts in buffer zones. As a consequence of these legacies of repeated interaction, as our discussion of the political contestation in the Sudd marshes has shown, it might eventually be difficult to analytically maintain the clean-cut division between outside projects of control and local, vernacular forms of resistance that James Scott takes as his analytical focus. Following Deleuze and Guattari, the Sudd is a buffer not only in a geographical sense but also in the sense of a field of force between the centripetal powers of the state and the centrifugal propensities of commitments to mobility and autonomy. It thus becomes both interesting and politically relevant to give texture to the supposedly ‘empty slate’ of buffer zones by tracing the historical projects and their contestations that shape the historical political geographies of such zones.

Notes

1. The material for this paper has been derived from archival work at the Sudan Archive Durham (June 2019), the South Sudan National Archives in Juba (September 2019) as well as four field research trips to South Sudan, including Juba (May 2018, September 2019), a visit to the Sudd (Old Fangak, January 2020) and regions bordering the Sudd (Lakes State, April 2019). The research is part of a research project on the politics of infrastructure in the DR Congo and South Sudan.
2. We here use ‘southern Sudan’ for the geographical area until independence, and ‘South Sudan’ to refer to the independent state.
3. Shell (2015) provides a useful overview of all the kinds of ecologies that have historically inhibited the extension of the road-based state and of the kind of ecosystems of locally adapted vernacular mobilities for each, mobilities which, of course, were deemed

‘subversive’ from the perspective of the state cores on whose fringes these thrived. In deserts, cameleers roam; in watery monsoon landscapes, people ride elephants; across permafrost, sled dogs; and on rocky terrain, Che Guevara rode mules.

4. Indeed, in the most literal sense, many sedentary states have been overrun by nomads in African history, nomads have established sedentary states, and sedentary states resorted to nomads to rule their hinterlands (cf. Azarya 1996; Buijtenhuijs 2001).
5. Civil Secretary’s Office, quoted in Beshir (1968). During the following decades, the Egyptian Irrigation Department would come with exceedingly ambitious Sudd diversion schemes, which in turn the British-ran Sudan administration would criticize for not taking into account the concerns of affected local populations, requesting more elaborate impact studies (Howell, Lock, and Cobb 1988, 21–35).
6. South Sudan National Archives, SG/HEC.36.G.1.
7. During the early 1990s, and with a change of the geopolitical configurations, the SPLA was mired in internal contestations leading to its split in 1991. The divide, spearheaded by today’s South Sudanese Vice President Riek Machar, has impressed itself onto South Sudanese politics ever since.

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