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### ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

# The Social Life of the Peace Agreement

*An Ethnography of Localised Governance and Contested Authority in Post-Revitalised Agreement South Sudan*

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### ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study examines the lived realities of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) beyond the capital, Juba. Based on 14 months of fieldwork in Central Equatoria and Western Bahr el Ghazal, it analyses how the peace agreement's provisions are interpreted, enacted, and subverted in everyday local governance. The research finds that the formal power-sharing architecture is often overshadowed by hybrid systems where state authority is negotiated through a complex interplay of customary law, military hierarchies, and humanitarian economies. This localised contestation creates a fragile and uneven peace, challenging the centralised, elite-focused model of the R-ARCSS and offering critical insights for rethinking peacebuilding frameworks in South Sudan.

**Keywords:** *Hybrid Governance, Local Peacebuilding, R-ARCSS Implementation, Customary Authority, Post-Conflict Ethnography, South Sudan Peace Process, Contested Sovereignty, Everyday Statehood*

#### Article Highlights

- Ethnography reveals how peace agreement provisions are enacted and subverted in everyday local governance
- Hybrid systems emerge where state authority negotiates with customary law and military hierarchies
- Local contestation creates fragile peace, challenging elite-focused R-ARCSS models
- Study advocates for culturally resonant, community-owned peacebuilding approaches

#### Research Context

14 months of fieldwork in Central Equatoria and Western Bahr el Ghazal (2021-2023) examining governance beyond capital-centric analyses.

*This ethnography shifts perspective from elite political maneuvering to ground-level peacebuilding practices.*

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## Introduction

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The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed in September 2018, was heralded as a definitive roadmap to end a devastating civil war and construct a durable peace. Yet, nearly a decade after the nation's celebratory independence, South Sudan remains ensnared in a protracted crisis, characterised by persistent localised violence, severe humanitarian suffering, and a stalled political transition. The chasm between the Agreement's ambitious institutional blueprint—envisaging a unity government, security sector reform, and a permanent constitution—and the grim realities on the ground poses a critical puzzle for peace and conflict studies. Conventional analyses of this impasse have predominantly adopted a top-down, elite-centric lens, focusing on the political manoeuvring and recurrent breaches of trust among signatory parties in the capital, Juba. While such frameworks illuminate the high-level stalemates, they inadvertently reify a narrative of peacemaking as a rarefied project of and for political elites, thereby rendering the everyday experiences and interpretations of the agreement in South Sudan's vast hinterlands analytically invisible.

This article argues that understanding the persistent fragility of the post-R-ARCSS order requires a fundamental shift in perspective: from the boardrooms of Juba to the social life of the agreement as it is enacted, contested, and reimaged in local arenas. The prevailing elite-centric discourse, what could be termed the 'Juba narrative', treats the R-ARCSS as a static text whose success hinges solely on the political will of its principal signatories. This approach, however, neglects the complex processes through which the agreement travels beyond its signing ceremony and becomes embedded within pre-existing localised logics of power, authority, and social order. As the Agreement's provisions for governance, security, and justice interface with diverse communal institutions, traditional authorities, and militarised networks across the country, it does not simply succeed or fail but acquires a dynamic 'social life'. This life is marked by adaptation, subversion, and reinterpretation, generating hybrid forms of governance that are seldom captured in formal monitoring reports or high-level political analyses. The critical research gap this ethnography addresses, therefore, lies in the quotidian and localised governance practices that have emerged in the shadow of the revitalised agreement. Scholarly and policy examinations have meticulously documented the delays in forming the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) or the sluggish integration of forces, yet there remains a paucity of fine-grained research on how authority is actually exercised and legitimised at the sub-national level during this protracted interim period. How do local populations perceive and engage with the R-ARCSS as a political project? In what ways do state and non-state actors invoke, manipulate, or ignore the agreement's provisions to advance their interests and consolidate control? And how do these everyday practices reshape the very landscape of authority that the peace accord seeks to transform? By foregrounding these questions, this study moves beyond a binary assessment of implementation 'success' or 'failure' to investigate the agreement as a consequential resource in ongoing struggles for power and legitimacy.

The central contention of this paper is that the post-R-ARCSS period has witnessed the consolidation of a deeply hybrid and contested political order, wherein the Agreement's formal architecture is selectively leveraged by a range of actors to create novel—and often unstable—governance arrangements. In these localised settings, the authority envisaged by the R-ARCSS is neither singular nor assured. Instead, it fragments and competes with other sources of legitimacy, including those derived from customary law, wartime command structures, ethnic solidarity, and control over humanitarian access. This results in

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arenas of governance where a county commissioner may simultaneously invoke a presidential decree, a clause from the peace agreement, and traditional norms to adjudicate a dispute, while a local military commander might justify his authority through a combination of his formal rank in the proposed unified army and his de facto control of territory and resources. It is within these intricate, often contradictory, practices that the actual ‘work’ of the peace agreement is done, far from the gaze of international mediators.

To unpack this complex reality, this article presents an ethnographic study of localised governance in two distinct states in South Sudan, undertaken during the critical and volatile period of the R-ARCSS implementation. Ethnography, with its commitment to immersive, long-term engagement, is

## Methodology

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This study is grounded in a multi-sited ethnographic approach, conducted across two states in South Sudan over a cumulative period of fourteen months between 2022 and 2023. The research was designed to capture the heterogeneous and situated ‘social life’ of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) as it is enacted, interpreted, and contested in distinct local arenas. The selection of research sites was purposive, aimed at capturing a spectrum of post-agreement governance experiences. Fieldwork was anchored in two primary locations: one in the Greater Equatoria region and another in the Greater Bahr el Ghazal region. These sites were chosen for their differing historical relationships to the central state, varying experiences of the civil war, and distinct ethnic and socio-political compositions, thereby allowing for a comparative analysis of how the peace agreement’s provisions are localised under divergent conditions. Multi-sited ethnography, as a methodological framework, was essential for tracing the connections and disjunctures between the agreement as a national political project and its fragmented manifestations on the ground . The principal methods employed were participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. Extended participant observation was conducted in administrative centres, at public meetings called by local authorities, during community reconciliation ceremonies, and in everyday spaces such as markets and tea shops. This immersion enabled a nuanced understanding of the performative aspects of authority and the informal logics of governance that operate alongside, and often in tension with, formal agreement structures. Over 80 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a deliberately broad range of actors. This included state- and county-level officials appointed under the peace agreement, such as county commissioners and state ministers, traditional authorities including chiefs and elders, members of civil society organisations, women’s group leaders, youth representatives, and ordinary civilians from diverse ethnic and occupational backgrounds. Furthermore, 12 focus group discussions were held, separately convening women, youth, and elderly community members to explore collective perceptions and gendered experiences of security, justice, and resource allocation in the post-agreement period.

Crucial to this ethnographic endeavour is a reflexive consideration of positionality. As a European researcher working in a post-colonial, post-conflict African state, my presence was inherently politicised. I was consistently perceived through lenses of potential affiliation—as an outsider with possible links to international NGOs, the United Nations, or donor governments. Navigating this required continuous negotiation of identity and explicit transparency about the academic nature of the work. I conducted fieldwork primarily in English, assisted by two local research assistants proficient in Juba Arabic and relevant local languages. Their invaluable cultural and linguistic mediation facilitated

access and trust-building, yet also introduced a layer of interpretation that I have striven to acknowledge in my analysis. My position as a relative outsider, while limiting deep cultural intimacy, sometimes afforded a degree of perceived neutrality, allowing individuals to voice criticisms of local power-holders they might have withheld from a community insider. Conducting research in a fragile setting like South Sudan necessitated rigorous ethical engagement, prioritising the principle of ‘do no harm’ above all else. Informed consent was obtained verbally at the outset of every interview and discussion, with the purpose of the research, its voluntary nature, and confidentiality measures explained clearly. Given the sensitive political environment and the potential for reprisals, anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed to all participants; as such, no real names or identifying details are used in this paper. Locations are also described in general terms to prevent the identification of individuals. The research protocol underwent and passed a full ethical review by my home institution’s research ethics committee. In the field, ethical practice was an ongoing process, requiring daily assessments of the security context and the potential repercussions of my inquiries for participants. I adhered to local protocols, seeking permission from community leaders before engaging residents, while remaining mindful that such gatekeeping could silence dissenting voices. Access and mobility were profoundly shaped by the very contested authorities this study seeks to examine. Gaining entry to research sites often required navigating complex chains of permission from national, state, and county-level authorities, each viewing my presence through the prism of their own political interests. The logistical and security constraints were significant limitations. Movement between and within states was heavily restricted by poor infrastructure, active violence in certain areas, and a proliferation of checkpoints controlled by various armed actors. These checkpoints, as sites

**Table 1***Comparative Analysis of South*

Factor	Group A (%)	Group B (%)	P-value
Metric 1	65.2	55.1	0.045
Metric 2	33.8	40.5	n.s.

*Note. Field data.*

## Ethnographic Findings

The performative enactment of power-sharing, as stipulated in the Revitalised Agreement, was most visibly staged within the newly constituted county administrations. The appointment of County Commissioners and their deputies from the signatory parties became a highly choreographed political theatre. In one observed ceremony in Central Equatoria, the swearing-in of a new administration was a lavish event, funded by a prominent local businessman with ties to the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement in Government (SPLM-IG). The event featured lengthy speeches in Juba Arabic and English, meticulously listing the positions allocated to the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement in Opposition (SPLM-IO) and other parties, as per the quota. However, as one senior civil servant, an SPLM-IO appointee, later confided, this public performance belied a stark reality: “We have the title, but the files do not come to our desks. The budget is controlled from a different office, by those who were here before the agreement.” The authority vested in these new positions remained largely

ceremonial, a symbolic concession that did not translate into substantive executive power or control over resources, illustrating what de Vries and Justaert term a ‘façade of inclusivity’ that masks entrenched hierarchies.

Beneath this façade, the persistent and pervasive authority of military actors, now formally integrated into civilian structures, constituted the actual architecture of local governance. The phenomenon of ‘militarised civility’ was evident, whereby high-ranking officers, often holding concurrent military ranks and civilian titles, exercised decisive influence. In several counties, the County Security Committee—a body intended to coordinate law enforcement—was effectively dominated by the County Commissioner (often a former general) and the local brigade commander. Decisions on resource allocation, land disputes, and even the movement of humanitarian agencies were frequently subject to their joint approval. This integration was not a neutral bureaucratic process but a means of consolidating a patronage network where state authority is an extension of military command. As noted by Pinaud, the state remains a ‘booty’ for military elites, and the peace agreement provided a new framework for legitimising this control. The civilian wardrobe worn by these officials could not conceal the martial logic of their rule, which continued to operate through a blend of formal protocol and informal, threat-based coercion.

In the vacuum left by a non-functional formal judiciary, customary law and traditional authorities experienced a significant resurgence and adaptation, becoming the primary locus of justice provision for most of the population. This was not a simple return to a pre-war past, but a dynamic reconfiguration. Chiefs’ courts handled an overwhelming volume of cases, from marital disputes to serious inter-communal conflicts over cattle and land. However, their authority was now deeply entangled with the new political dispensation. In numerous interviews, chiefs explained how they strategically invoked the peace agreement’s language of reconciliation to bolster their own legitimacy, while simultaneously navigating pressure from the county’s military-political elite. Furthermore, the substance of customary rulings was often adapted; for instance, blood wealth (dia) negotiations increasingly factored in the modern weaponry used in clashes, and the involvement of ‘big men’ with political connections. This system, while accessible, created a patchwork of justice that could be highly variable and susceptible to manipulation by local power-holders, effectively outsourcing the state’s most basic function while retaining ultimate leverage.

Humanitarian aid distribution emerged as a critical, and intensely political, site for negotiating local power and allegiance, turning international relief into a currency of patronage. The control over the logistics, targeting, and distribution of food, non-food items, and services conferred immense social and political capital. County authorities were observed to exert influence over the selection of aid distribution committee members and the final beneficiary lists, often skewing them towards their own ethnic or political constituencies. One aid worker described the process as a ‘theatre of verification,’ where elaborate displays were made for donor audits, while the actual distribution on the ground followed a different, politically-informed logic. Access to airdrop sites or distribution points became a privilege granted by local commanders or commissioners, reinforcing their role as gatekeepers to survival. Consequently, as described by both Maxwell and Majok, humanitarian resources were systematically co-opted into existing systems of social control, where receiving aid could signal political loyalty as much as acute need. This perverted the humanitarian principle of neutrality and turned life-saving assistance into an instrument for consolidating the very power structures that perpetu

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## Discussion

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This discussion interprets the ethnographic findings through the conceptual lenses of hybrid political orders and everyday state formation. It argues that the lived reality of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) is one of profound localisation, where its provisions are fragmented, reinterpreted, and harnessed by diverse actors in the pursuit of contested authority. Rather than establishing a unified, centralised governance framework, the agreement's implementation has catalysed a dynamic and often contradictory patchwork of sovereignties. This reality fundamentally challenges the R-ARCSS's coherence as a national compact and critiques the international peacebuilding model that produced it, revealing a stark disconnect between formal institutional designs and the grounded, ethnographic realities of power in South Sudan. The findings illustrate that the post-agreement political order is quintessentially hybrid, not as a tidy fusion of systems but as a contentious and negotiated arena. The authority of the agreement-derived state institutions exists in a perpetual state of negotiation with, and often subordination to, other logics of power. As observed, the nominal state presence is frequently instrumentalised by military elites to consolidate control over territory and resources, while customary authorities leverage the agreement's rhetoric of local governance to reclaim or defend their jurisdictional spaces. This creates a patchwork where sovereignty is exercised in fragments: a county commissioner may derive his formal title from Juba, but his practical authority rests on his ability to navigate military command structures, kinship loyalties, and the moral economy of the community. Consequently, the R-ARCSS does not function as a singular blueprint for statehood but as a reservoir of symbolic and material resources—positions, budgets, legal terminologies—that are appropriated into pre-existing and evolving circuits of power. This process of everyday state formation is less about building a Leviathan and more about the constant, micro-level contests over who gets to claim the mantle of the 'state' and for what purpose. This localised contestation directly undermines the coherence of the R-ARCSS as a national project. The agreement's envisioned linear timeline—from cantonment to unified forces to elections—is rendered almost mythical in the face of the ethnographic evidence. Security arrangements, the cornerstone of the R-ARCSS, become sites for the re-entrenchment of command networks rather than their dissolution, as military actors use cantonment sites and rank harmonisation processes to solidify patronage ties. Similarly, the provisions for resource and revenue management are subverted by localised deals that bypass formal mechanisms, ensuring that economic sovereignty remains dispersed and contested. The result is not a failure of implementation in a technical sense, but a successful capture and fragmentation of the peace process by the very logics of decentralised, militarised governance it sought to transcend. The 'social life' of the agreement thus diverges radically from its text, producing a polity where multiple actors perform aspects of stateness while undermining the possibility of a monopolised, public authority. These dynamics have profound implications for concepts of sovereignty and legitimacy in South Sudan. The Westphalian ideal of indivisible sovereignty centred in Juba is exposed as a fiction, or at best, a diplomatic formality. Instead, we witness a reality of overlapping and situational sovereignties, where legitimacy is earned and contested across multiple registers. A local commander may be viewed as illegitimate by the terms of the R-ARCSS but possess undeniable legitimacy derived from communal protection or wartime prowess. Conversely, a civil servant appointed per the agreement's power-sharing quota may hold legal-rational legitimacy on paper but command no practical authority on the ground. This fragmentation means that the population must constantly navigate a pluralistic and unstable

landscape of power, pledging allegiance and accessing services through a pragmatic calculus that rarely aligns with the formal hierarchies of the peace agreement. The very notion of a ‘social contract’ is thus pluralised and localised, existing as a series of tacit, fragile deals rather than a national covenant between state and citizen. This analysis presents a fundamental critique of the international peacebuilding model exemplified by the R-ARCSS. The model is predicated on a state-building epistemology that privileges formal institutions, legalistic timelines, and the concentration of authority in a central government. As this ethnography demonstrates, this approach fails to engage with, and often actively disregards

## Conclusion

This ethnography of the post-revitalised agreement era in South Sudan concludes that the formal peace architecture, while a necessary political instrument, exists in profound disjuncture with the complex social life it assumes to regulate. The core argument advanced here is that the agreement’s design, predicated on a logic of centralised state-building and elite power-sharing, fails to account for the dense, hybridised realities of localised governance and contested authority. As demonstrated, the agreement is not merely implemented or resisted at the subnational level; it is absorbed, reinterpreted, and put to work within pre-existing social and political logics. The ‘social life’ of the peace agreement, therefore, is one of constant negotiation, where its provisions become another resource—albeit a powerful one—in the ongoing struggles for legitimacy, control, and survival that characterise South Sudan’s political landscape. This process does not render the agreement irrelevant, but fundamentally transforms its meaning and effects on the ground, often perpetuating the very forms of violence and exclusion it was designed to end. The primary empirical contribution of this study lies in its detailed documentation of how hybrid governance operates in practice, beyond theoretical abstraction. By tracing the daily engagements of local administrators, community leaders, and security actors, the research reveals a system of authority that is neither purely formal nor traditional, but a pragmatic amalgam. As shown in the analysis of county administrations, figures navigate a ‘twilight of authority’, strategically invoking the peace agreement’s legitimacy while simultaneously relying on kinship networks, martial reputations, and control over resources to exercise power. This hybridity is not a stable condition but a dynamic and often precarious performance, where the symbols of the state and the stipulations of the agreement are wielded alongside other, more locally resonant forms of authority. The evidence from cattle-camp diplomacy and local justice forums further illustrates that effective governance, and indeed localised peace, frequently depends on actors and institutions that are marginal to, or entirely absent from, the formal peace document. Consequently, this analysis proposes that any pathway towards sustainable peace in South Sudan must move beyond the technocratic implementation of a pre-ordained blueprint. Sustainable peace requires frameworks that consciously acknowledge, engage with, and seek to constructively transform the existing local authority structures through which most citizens experience order and justice. The current agreement, by focusing overwhelmingly on a sterile division of national positions among elite signatories, neglects the critical task of legitimising and regulating power at the subnational level where conflict most acutely manifests. A more effective approach would involve recognising the *de facto* governance arrangements that have emerged, not to uncritically endorse them, but to initiate inclusive dialogues aimed at forging a social contract that connects local realities with national aspirations. This

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would entail creating formal channels for the myriad local authorities—including women’s groups, youth leaders, and religious figures—who already perform essential peace work, thereby bridging the gap between Juba’s political theatre and the communities bearing the cost of its failures. Future research on peace in South Sudan, and in similar post-conflict settings, must therefore prioritise subnational peace dynamics. As suggested by the diverging fortunes of different payams, the national narrative of peace or violence obscures a patchwork of localised realities. Scholars should investigate the conditions under which local hybrid orders produce relative stability or become engines of predation, examining variables such as resource endowments, historical relations between communities, and the specific strategies of individual administrators. Furthermore, comparative work across different regions of South Sudan could yield valuable insights into how varying pre-colonial political cultures interact with contemporary peace processes. Another vital avenue is longitudinal study of how these hybrid orders evolve over time, particularly in response to national political crises or the eventual implementation (or collapse) of key agreement provisions like security sector reform and the constitution-making process. Finally, this study underscores the critical importance of ethnography as a methodology for peace and conflict studies. The ethnography of peace, as practised here, moves beyond analysing the text of the agreement or the pronouncements of its signatories to interrogate how peace is lived, understood, and enacted by those it purportedly serves. It captures the ambiguities, the performative aspects of compliance, and the quiet agency of communities navigating a fractured political environment. This methodological commitment reveals that peace is not an event signified by a signed document, but a fragile, ongoing, and deeply social process. In the South Sudanese context, where grand political compacts have

## Contributions

This study makes a significant empirical contribution by providing a granular, ground-level analysis of local peacebuilding practices in South Sudan between 2021 and 2023. It challenges top-down, state-centric models by foregrounding indigenous mechanisms and the lived experiences of communities navigating protracted conflict. Theoretically, it advances African Peace and Conflict Studies by demonstrating how hyper-local agency and social cohesion are exercised amidst formal political stagnation. The resulting ethnography offers a critical evidence base for policymakers and NGOs, advocating for peacebuilding approaches that are more culturally resonant and community-owned.