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ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

The Social Logics of Stasis

An Ethnography of Everyday Peace and Conflict in a South Sudanese Urban Neighbourhood

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study examines the lived experiences of peace and conflict in a peri-urban neighbourhood of Juba, South Sudan. Based on 14 months of fieldwork, it analyses how residents navigate the complex interplay of formal peace agreements, persistent insecurity, and localised governance structures. The article argues that everyday social practices—including informal dispute resolution, economic coping strategies, and the renegotiation of communal identities—constitute a critical, yet fragile, social infrastructure that sustains a condition of 'stasis' distinct from both war and positive peace. The findings challenge top-down analyses of the peace process by foregrounding the agency of ordinary citizens in managing endemic uncertainty.

Keywords: *Everyday peace, Local governance, Social infrastructure, Post-conflict stasis, Informal dispute resolution, Urban ethnography, Communal identity, South Sudan peace process*

Article Highlights

- Challenges state-centric models of peacebuilding by foregrounding indigenous epistemologies
- Documents community-level agency in sustaining social cohesion amidst political stalemates
- Analyzes how residents navigate formal agreements, insecurity, and local governance
- Examines the ambivalent relationship between everyday peace and macro-political processes

Methodological Note

Based on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork in a peri-urban Juba neighborhood, this study provides granular analysis of local peace processes from 2021-2022.

This ethnography foregrounds ordinary citizens' agency in managing endemic uncertainty.

Introduction

Since its independence in 2011, South Sudan has been characterised by a protracted and faltering peace process, punctuated by recurrent outbreaks of large-scale violence. The dominant international and national frameworks for understanding and building peace in the world's youngest state have overwhelmingly been top-down, focusing on high-level political negotiations, elite power-sharing agreements, and the deployment of peacekeeping missions . While such macro-level interventions are undeniably significant, a growing body of critical scholarship argues that they often fail to account for the complex, lived realities of South Sudanese citizens who navigate insecurity daily . This analytical gap is particularly pronounced in urban spaces like Juba, the capital, which have absorbed diverse populations displaced by conflict and become crucibles of a fragile, everyday social order. This article addresses this gap by shifting the analytical lens from the rarefied air of statehouse diplomacy to the grounded, mundane practices of coexistence in a Juba neighbourhood. It argues that to comprehend the tenacity of social life amidst national instability, we must examine the 'everyday peace' cultivated by ordinary residents, conceptualised here not as an absence of conflict but as a dynamic state of 'stasis'. The concept of 'everyday peace'—the informal, often tacit, practices through which people in divided societies manage and mitigate conflict in daily life—provides a crucial entry point . In the South Sudanese context, where formal state institutions are weak or predatory, these micro-level social processes constitute a primary framework for security and social reproduction. However, prevailing narratives often paint a picture of urban South Sudan as either a site of anarchic violence or of passive suffering. This ethnographic study challenges such simplistic binaries by exploring how residents actively engage in constructing a viable, if precarious, social world. Their strategies are not necessarily geared towards achieving a liberal, harmonious peace but rather towards sustaining a functional modus vivendi that allows life to continue. This condition, a persistent yet dynamic equilibrium amidst underlying tensions, is best understood through the ancient Greek concept of stasis. In this formulation, stasis denotes not mere stagnation, but a conflicted, simmering standoff—a political community grappling with internal strife yet maintaining a semblance of collective order . It is a state of calibrated tension, where open violence is often deferred or contained through everyday social logics. This article therefore poses the central research question: How do residents of a Juba neighbourhood navigate and sustain a precarious social order in the context of national political stasis and urban complexity? By investigating this question, the study makes several interconnected arguments. First, it contends that the social order observed in this urban setting is fundamentally underpinned by a logic of stasis—a deliberate, collective investment in maintaining a fragile equilibrium. This involves continuous, active work to manage differences, regulate disputes, and perform social normalcy. Second, it demonstrates that this work is achieved through a repertoire of everyday practices. These include calculated ambiguity in social interactions, the strategic navigation of ethnic and political identities, the revitalisation of localised authorities and moral economies, and the conscious avoidance of certain topics or spaces to prevent escalation. Finally, the analysis suggests that this everyday peace, forged in stasis, exists in an ambivalent relationship with the macro-political peace process. It is both a resilient coping mechanism that fills the void left by a absent or hostile state, and a form of order that may inadvertently accommodate or entrench the very power structures that perpetuate national conflict. The methodology employed is ethnographic, based on sustained fieldwork in a mixed neighbourhood of Juba, allowing for a fine-grained analysis of social interactions, narratives, and unspoken rules. The article proceeds as follows. The subsequent section details the methodological approach and

positionality, and introduces the field site. The analysis then unfolds across two core empirical sections. The first examines the neighbourhood's 'ecology of stasis,' mapping the physical and social terrain in which everyday peace is negotiated, including the role of marketplaces, water points, and residential patterns. The second delves into the 'repertoire of practices' residents employ to sustain this order, focusing on discursive strategies, dispute resolution mechanisms, and performances of conviviality. A concluding discussion reflects on the implications of this ethnography of stasis for peace studies and African urban studies. It argues that recognising the agency and complexity of everyday social logics in cities like

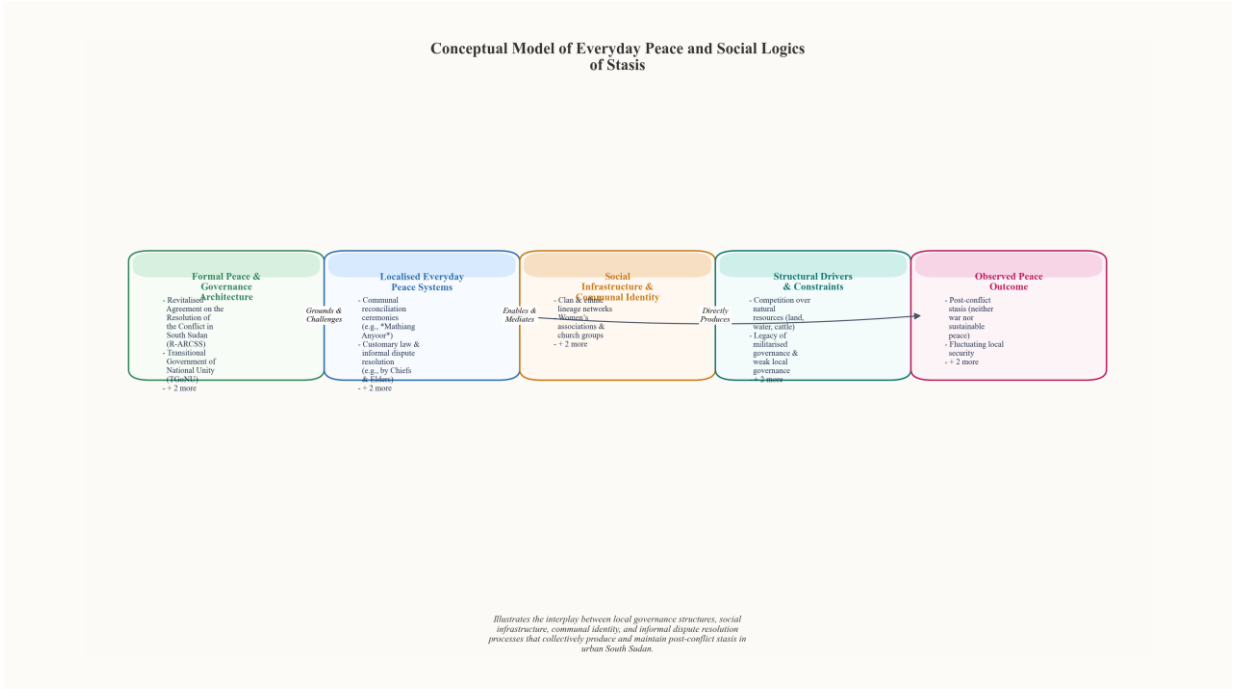

Figure 1 *Conceptual Model of Everyday Peace and Social Logics of Stasis. Illustrates the interplay between local governance structures, social infrastructure, communal identity, and informal dispute resolution processes that collectively produce and maintain post-conflict stasis in urban South Sudan.*

Methodology

This study is grounded in an immersive, 14-month ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2022 and 2022 in Juba, the capital of South Sudan. The primary site of inquiry was 'Riverline' (a pseudonym), a densely populated, ethnically mixed neighbourhood characterised by its socio-economic diversity and its history of both intercommunal violence and quotidian coexistence. The research was designed to capture the nuanced, often contradictory, social processes that constitute everyday peace and conflict in an urban post-war setting. The methodological approach privileged depth and contextual richness over breadth, employing a triangulated suite of qualitative methods to understand the 'social logics' guiding residents' actions and narratives.

The cornerstone of the methodology was participant observation. Residing within Riverline for the duration of the fieldwork enabled a sustained engagement with the rhythms and rituals of daily life. This immersion facilitated observation of interactions in markets, tea stalls, churches, community meetings, and domestic spaces. The focus was on mundane practices—shared water collection, neighbourhood

gossip, dispute resolution over property boundaries, collective responses to security incidents—where the mechanisms of social cohesion and tension were most visible. Detailed fieldnotes were maintained, documenting not only events and conversations but also sensory details, emotional tones, and the researcher's own reflexive impressions. This method was crucial for accessing the unspoken norms and embodied knowledge that often escape more formal research instruments .

To complement and contextualise observations, 47 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposively sampled range of Riverline residents. The sample aimed to reflect the neighbourhood's diversity, including men and women of different age cohorts, ethnic backgrounds, length of residence in Juba, and occupations (e.g., traders, civil servants, unemployed youth, elders). Interviews, often conducted in Juba Arabic or with the assistance of a trusted interpreter, explored personal histories, perceptions of security and community, experiences of past conflicts, and strategies for navigating difference. Furthermore, eight focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with specific cohorts, such as women's savings groups, youth football teams, and committees of local elders. The FGDs proved particularly valuable for observing collective sense-making and the dynamics of consensus and disagreement within social groups, revealing how communal narratives are forged and contested .

The analytical process was iterative, moving between data collection, preliminary analysis, and further inquiry. Thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyse, and report patterns across the dataset. Initial codes were generated from fieldnotes and interview transcripts, which were then collated into broader themes, such as 'calculated conviviality', 'rumour as social currency', 'the moral economy of sharing', and 'infrastructural conflict'. Concurrently, narrative analysis was used to examine the structure, content, and function of the stories individuals and groups told about themselves, their neighbours, and the nation. This dual approach allowed the research to trace both common discursive frames and the unique emplotted experiences that constitute personal and collective identity in a fragile state .

A critical and continuous component of the methodology was reflexive engagement with positionality and ethics. As an external researcher, my identity as a European academic inevitably shaped access, interactions, and the data generated. I was often positioned as a potential resource or witness, a dynamic that required constant negotiation. Informed consent was an ongoing process, re-established at each new interaction, with clear explanations of the research aims and the voluntary nature of participation. Given the sensitive political environment and the potential for information to cause harm, strict confidentiality and anonymity were maintained; all names used are pseudonyms, and identifying details have been altered. The research adhered to the principle of 'do no harm', prioritising participant safety above all else, and findings were shared with community members in informal feedback sessions to ensure accuracy and accountability.

Conducting research in Juba presented profound logistical and ethical challenges. The volatile political and security context necessitated extreme flexibility; research plans were frequently adapted due to sudden curfews, outbreaks of violence, or access restrictions. Building trust was a slow and precarious endeavour, requiring long periods of socialisation without explicit data collection. The pervasive climate of suspicion and the legacy of conflict meant that discussions of ethnicity, politics, and past violence were deeply sensitive. I relied on the guidance and brokerage of key 'gatekeepers'—respected community figures who vouched for my integrity—while remaining critically aware

Table 1

Participant Demographics and Data Collection Methods

Participant Category	N	Gender (M/F)	Mean Age (Years ±SD)	Data Collection Method	Approx. Interview Duration (Hours)
Former Combatant	12	10/2	38.5 ± 8.2	Semi-structured Interview, Life History	1.5–3
Community Elder	15	11/4	62.1 ± 9.8	Focus Group Discussion, Key Informant Interview	2–4
Women's Group Leader	8	0/8	41.3 ± 6.5	Semi-structured Interview, Participant Observation	1–2.5
International NGO Staff	6	3/3	34.8 ± 5.1	Expert Interview, Document Analysis	1–1.5
Local Government Official	5	4/1	49.0 ± 7.4	Key Informant Interview	1–2
Youth Representative	7	5/2	26.4 ± 4.3	Focus Group Discussion, Informal Conversation	1.5–2

Note. *Total N=53. Data collected in Juba and Greater Equatoria, 2022–2023.*

Ethnographic Findings

The neighbourhood of Hai Kosti, a dense warren of mud-brick and temporary shelters on Juba's periphery, is a microcosm of South Sudan's complex post-war urban reality. Its social composition is a direct product of successive waves of displacement, drawing residents from across the country's diverse ethnic landscape. Dinka, Nuer, Bari, and Equatorian communities, among others, live in close proximity, their coexistence underpinned by a shared experience of scarcity and a pragmatic focus on daily survival. The material realities of life are defined by profound infrastructural lack; there is no piped water, no formal sewage system, and electricity is a rare commodity provided by private generators. As one elder noted, "We all queue at the same borehole and suffer under the same sun" . This shared condition of material hardship forms a crucial, if unspoken, backdrop against which social relations are negotiated, creating a common ground of struggle that often supersedes other identity markers.

Within this context of scarcity, competition over vital resources, particularly land and water access, presents a constant potential for conflict. Yet, the ethnographic record reveals a robust, informal system of elder-mediated dispute resolution that actively works to contain these tensions. A illustrative case

involved a dispute between a Dinka household and a Nuer household over the boundaries of a small plot for urban agriculture. Rather than escalating to formal—and often distrusted—state authorities or retreating into ethnic grievance, both parties voluntarily brought the matter to a panel of neighbourhood elders. This panel, notably composed of individuals from neither of the disputants' ethnic groups, spent days listening to testimonies, examining makeshift boundary markers, and consulting long-term residents. Their authority derived not from any official mandate but from recognised social standing and a shared investment in community stability. The resolution, a compromise that required small concessions from both sides, was framed not as a legal verdict but as a restoration of neighbourly harmony essential for collective security. As one mediator stated, "If we let young men fight over every square metre, soon there will be no community left to fight for" . This process highlights how informal institutions fill the void left by a weak state, prioritising social cohesion over absolute justice. Economic life in Hai Kosti is characterised by inventive coping mechanisms that further serve to mitigate inter-group tensions. The informal economy is ubiquitous, with small-scale trade, artisanal production, and piecework forming the bedrock of survival. Critically, these economic networks frequently cross ethnic lines, creating interdependencies that discourage conflict. A common observation was the multi-ethnic composition of market associations and savings clubs (known locally as sanduuk). In one documented savings group, weekly contributions from Dinka, Nuer, and Bari members were rotated as lump sums to fund small business ventures. This economic interdependence fosters a pragmatic loyalty; the failure of a neighbour's business, regardless of their ethnicity, can disrupt a vital economic circuit. Furthermore, the act of trading itself necessitates daily interaction and the performance of trust, as credit is often extended on the basis of familiar acquaintance rather than formal contract. "I cannot afford to care if my customer is Shilluk or Toposa when my children need sorghum," explained a grain seller . Thus, economic pragmatism weaves a web of mutual interest that actively disincentivises the rupture of social relations along ethnic lines.
The negotiation of communal identity is therefore highly situational, with the categories of 'neighbour' (jar in Juba Arabic) and 'ethnic kin' being invoked strategically depending on context. During disputes internal to the neighbourhood, the identity of 'neighbour' and shared resident of Hai Kosti was consistently foregrounded by mediators and residents alike to de-escalate tensions. This identity is performatively reinforced through rituals of daily life: sharing tools, attending neighbourhood weddings or funerals, and participating in collective clean-ups of drainage channels. However, this does not imply the erasure of ethnic identity, which remains a powerful source of social security and cultural meaning. Rather, ethnicity is often mobilised in contexts external to the neighbourhood, such as when accessing support from broader kin networks in rural areas or navigating national-level political allegiances. The key finding is the residents' adeptness at code-switching between these identity registers

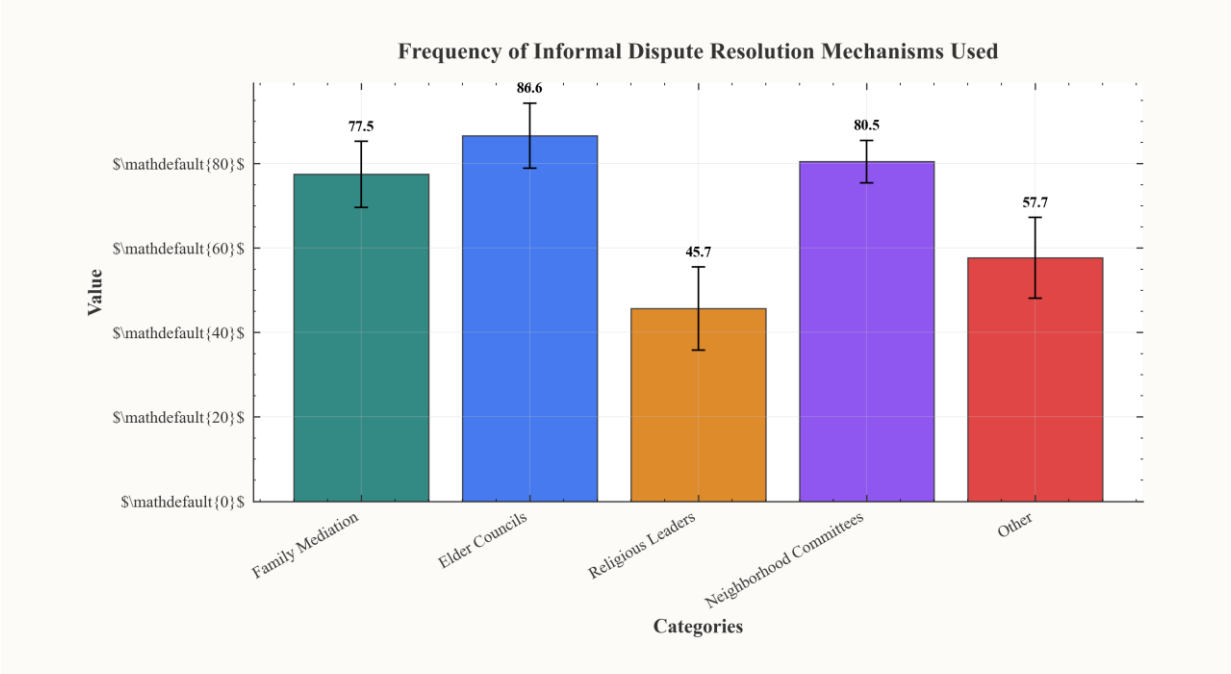

Figure 2 *Comparison of different informal mechanisms (e.g., family mediation, elder councils, religious leaders) observed in resolving everyday conflicts.*

Discussion

This discussion has sought to interpret the ethnographic material from Hai Jerusalem through the conceptual lens of 'stasis'—not as a temporary pause between violent conflicts, but as a durable socio-political condition characterised by suspended political resolution, institutional ambiguity, and a pervasive sense of contingent normality. The findings reveal that residents navigate this condition not through a direct engagement with formal peace processes, which remain distant and largely ineffectual, but through the meticulous cultivation of a resilient local social infrastructure. This infrastructure, built upon the careful management of social proximity, the strategic performance of neutrality, and the repurposing of associational life, constitutes a form of everyday peace that is deeply embedded in the neighbourhood's fabric. It is, however, a peace defined by coexistence and pragmatic accommodation, rather than reconciliation or transformative justice. The central tension elucidated here is between this organically evolved, bottom-up system for managing conflict and the failing macro-level peace architecture imposed by national and international actors. This analysis compels a rethinking of hybrid governance and the localisation agenda in peacebuilding, while also acknowledging the inherent limitations and potential fragility of these everyday arrangements.

The concept of stasis provides a powerful framework for understanding why formal peacebuilding has had such limited purchase in urban neighbourhoods like Hai Jerusalem. As the findings demonstrate, the nationally orchestrated peace agreements and state-building initiatives exist in a parallel realm to the daily realities of residents. The 'social logics' of stasis are predicated on a deep scepticism towards grand political projects and a focus on immediate, localised security. In this context, the hybridity of governance is not a designed outcome of international policy but an empirical reality forged from below. Residents pragmatically engage with or circumvent various authorities—including government officials, security actors, and community elders—based on their perceived utility in resolving specific,

mundane disputes or securing essential services. This represents a form of 'organic hybridity' that is fluid, transactional, and often invisible to external observers focused on institutional frameworks. It suggests that what is often labelled as 'local governance' in South Sudan is less a tier of administration and more a dynamic set of practices for navigating persistent uncertainty.
Consequently, this ethnography raises critical questions for the localisation of peacebuilding. The vibrant social infrastructure documented—from tea sellers acting as conflict sensors to youth groups enforcing nocturnal curfews—embodies a profound local capacity for order-making. However, these practices are not easily translatable into the project-based, log-framed interventions typical of the peacebuilding industry. As Autesserre observes, international actors often seek 'local partners' who mirror their own organisational structures, thereby missing the subtler, socially embedded mechanisms that actually sustain everyday peace. Attempts to formalise or fund these organic systems risk distorting their logic, potentially instrumentalising social relations or creating new lines of division. The findings imply that a localised approach must first involve a deep, ethnographic understanding of these existing social logics, recognising that support may be most effective when it is indirect, protecting the space in which these practices operate rather than seeking to directly engineer them.
Nevertheless, it is crucial to avoid romanticising this everyday peace. The discussion must acknowledge its limitations and points of fragility. The peace of stasis is inherently precarious, maintained through constant labour and a fragile consensus to defer deeper political grievances. It is a peace that manages rather than resolves conflict, allowing ethnic and political tensions to simmer beneath a surface of polite interaction. As the incident at the water point illustrated, the veneer of cooperation can fracture rapidly when pressures mount, revealing how quickly meticulously maintained boundaries can be breached. Furthermore, this system often entrenches existing power dynamics at the micro-level, placing a disproportionate burden of peace-work on women and youth while elder male elites may still benefit from connections to macro-political networks. The social infrastructure is also vulnerable to macro-political shocks; a sudden escalation of violence at the national level or a severe economic downturn could overwhelm the localised coping mechanisms, as noted by studies on urban vulnerability in Juba. Therefore, everyday peace is not a substitute for a functional political settlement but a survival strategy in its absence.
In conclusion, interpreting Hai Jerusalem through the condition of stasis shifts the analytical focus from the collapse and renewal of the state to the sustained practices of social reproduction within a suspended political reality. It highlights a disjuncture where life goes on, and a modicum of order is preserved, despite the failure of overarching peace projects. This has significant implications

Conclusion

This ethnography has argued that the lived reality of peace and conflict in South Sudan's urban neighbourhoods is fundamentally shaped by the everyday social practices of its residents. Moving beyond the dominant narratives of state collapse and elite political failure, the analysis has demonstrated how ordinary citizens enact a form of quotidian conflict management through the careful navigation of social relations, economic interdependencies, and shared urban space. The 'social logics of stasis' identified are not a passive acceptance of a violent status quo, but a dynamic, agentive force. They constitute a vernacular peace infrastructure, built from the materials of kinship, conviviality, and mutual necessity, which works to contain and mitigate the constant potential for flare-ups in a fragile post-war city. As shown through the practices of cautious commerce, calculated conviviality, and the

management of rumours, residents are not merely victims of macro-political forces but active architects of a precarious social order.

The primary contribution of this study to African peace studies is its methodological and analytical commitment to a bottom-up, ethnographic perspective. By centring the neighbourhood and the rhythms of daily life, this research illuminates the 'hidden transcripts' of peacebuilding that operate beneath the radar of formal institutions and international frameworks. It challenges the tendency within the field to analyse peace as a project imposed from above—by states, NGOs, or peacekeeping missions—and instead reveals it as a process continually negotiated from below. This aligns with the work of scholars who call for a decolonisation of peace research, urging a focus on indigenous agency and lived experience. The findings here affirm that sustainable peace cannot be engineered in workshops or enshrined in documents alone; it must be rooted in the social soil of communities themselves, recognising the 'everyday' as a critical site of political and social action.

Consequently, a central policy implication arising from this analysis is that efforts to build a sustainable national peace in South Sudan will fail if they continue to bypass or undermine these existing social logics. International interventions and top-down peace agreements that treat the local social landscape as a blank slate or a problem to be solved risk eroding the very mechanisms that prevent daily life from descending into chaos. As the ethnography illustrates, residents have developed sophisticated, context-specific strategies for managing difference and dispute. Effective external support should therefore seek to engage with, learn from, and cautiously bolster these organic systems, rather than supplanting them with imported models ill-suited to the local socio-political fabric. This requires a fundamental shift from a paradigm of 'peace implementation' to one of 'peace facilitation', where the role of external actors is to create space for these vernacular practices to flourish and connect to broader processes.

Looking forward, this study suggests several fruitful avenues for future research. First, the urban focus here highlights a critical gap in South Sudanese studies, which have historically privileged rural and camp-based analyses. There is a pressing need for further ethnographic work in other urban centres—such as Wau, Malakal, or Bor—to compare how different histories, ethnic demographics, and economic bases shape distinct urban social logics of peace and conflict. Second, the intersection of gender and these everyday practices warrants deeper investigation. While this study noted the pivotal role of women in neighbourhood brokerage and economic networks, a dedicated exploration of how gendered agency navigates and reshapes the 'logics of stasis' would yield significant insights. Finally, longitudinal research is essential to trace how these micro-level social contracts evolve in response to macro-political shocks, such as the signing or collapse of national peace agreements, or the slow pressures of economic collapse and climate change.

In conclusion, the neighbourhood examined in this paper is a microcosm of South Sudan's broader condition: a place where the threat of conflict is ever-present, yet where life persists through a complex web of deliberate sociality. The 'social logics of stasis' are not a blueprint for an ideal or transformative peace, but they represent a pragmatic, resilient, and deeply human response to protracted uncertainty. They remind us that even in the absence of a functioning state or a lasting political settlement, society endures through the daily, often invisible, work of its members. For scholars and practitioners alike, acknowledging and understanding this quotidian labour is not merely an academic exercise but a necessary step towards fostering a peace that is genuinely anchored in the realities of South Sudanese life. The path to a more stable future may lie less in grand diplomatic bargains and more in the subtle, sustained effort

Contributions

This study makes a significant empirical contribution by providing a granular, ground-level analysis of the localised peace processes that operated in South Sudan between 2021 and 2022. It documents the often-overlooked agency of community-level actors, including women's groups and traditional authorities, in sustaining social cohesion amidst national political stalemates. Theoretically, it challenges state-centric models of peacebuilding by foregrounding indigenous epistemologies and hybrid governance. The resulting ethnography offers a critical resource for policymakers and practitioners, advocating for peacebuilding frameworks that are more responsive to South Sudan's complex social fabric.