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"We Are Not a Failed State, We Make the Best Passports": South Sudan and Biometric Modernity

Ferenc David Markó

Abstract: In January 2012, six months after the declaration of independence, South Sudan introduced a state-of-the-art biometric identity management system to handle its citizenship and passport databases. Scholars have shown that despite the remarkable failures of biometric schemes, states maintain their belief in high-modernist technologies. This article argues that South Sudan introduced biometrics to convey an image of a "non-failed" state to the international community, while effectively doubling the bureaucracy to keep all important decisions about inclusion and exclusion in the hands of the military elites. This duplication of the office reveals a great deal about the fundamental nature of the South Sudanese state. Citizens of any state tend to imagine the nation through their relations to bureaucracy, and identity documents act as a new kind of evidence of a successful negotiation between them and state agents. This situation creates a constant state of citizenship limbo for the South Sudanese.

Résumé: En janvier 2012, six mois après la déclaration de son indépendance, le Soudan du Sud a introduit un système moderne d'identité biométrique pour gérer ses bases de données de citoyenneté et de passeport. Les chercheurs ont montré que, malgré les échecs remarquables des systèmes biométriques, les États maintiennent

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leur foi dans les technologies modernes de pointe. Cet article soutient que le Soudan du Sud a introduit la biométrie pour offrir à la communauté internationale une représentation d'un état "robuste," tout en doublant la bureaucratie, pour garder l'ensemble des décisions importantes au sujet de l'inclusion et de l'exclusion dans les mains des élites militaires. Cette duplicité du bureau révèle beaucoup la nature fondamentale de l'État sud soudanais. Les citoyens d'un État ont tendance à imaginer la nation à travers leurs relations avec la bureaucratie et les documents d'identité agissent comme un nouveau genre de preuve d'une négociation réussie entre eux et les agents de l'État. Cette situation crée un état constant d'incertitude de citoyenneté pour les Soudanais du Sud.

Keywords: Anthropology; South Sudan; biometric; citizenship; sovereignty; bureaucracy

Introduction

Two days before the declaration of independence, South Sudan set up the new country's citizenship and immigration office. The role of the Directorate of Nationality, Passports and Immigration (DNPI) is twofold. On the one hand, the migration officers have to police the international—and often still undemarcated—borders of the new state (Johnson 2010). On the other hand, the citizenship office is responsible for registering and documenting the citizens of the country. After four months of unsuccessful efforts, the DNPI contracted with a German ID-management company and decided to implement a state-of-the-art, biometrics-based system in which the full biometric profile of every registered citizens would be captured and stored in a central database. Given the difficult circumstances and financial challenges of the new country's postwar economy, several questions present themselves. Why did South Sudan opt for this exceptionally complex system? And what can we learn from an ethnographic study of a high-modernist bureaucracy in one of the most fragile states in the world?

In his influential book *Seeing Like a State*, James Scott asks why so many state-driven schemes that were introduced to "improve the human condition have gone so tragically awry" (1998:4). In his analysis, one of the central elements of these failed schemes is what he calls "high-modernist ideology," "the self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, the expansion of production, the growing satisfaction of human needs, the mastery of nature . . . , and, above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws" (1998:4). A perfect example of this ideology would be the biometrics-driven South Sudanese citizenship scheme, celebrated as a perfect tool to ease the life of ordinary citizens.

Nevertheless, this article argues that one of the main reasons the South Sudanese state decided to apply the high-modernist vision and introduced the biometric identity management system was not the belief in enhanced state surveillance capacity or the goal of achieving a better grasp on its

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citizens, but the possibility of creating an image of a modern, efficient, depoliticized, and professionally bureaucratized state—in other words, a non-failed state. Instead of the will to improve, the ideology was reduced to the will to impress.

Based on a yearlong ethnographic study inside the DNPI in 2013, this article argues that South Sudanese imagine state belonging through their relation to bureaucracy. The carefully kept and looked-after application materials—the embodiment of Weberian bureaucratic modernity—lose importance at the very end of the procedure, without being integrated into a filing system. During the citizenship application the officers scan and save the application file but none of the supporting evidence—that is, none of the evidence that makes each case unique. The files are kept in modern, computerized databases, but these remain untouched in the case of later investigations. In every single case when the genuineness of someone's citizenship is later questioned, the accused has to go through the whole procedure of proving his or her worthiness for citizenship all over again. The article concludes, however, that this limbo of citizenship is not an unexpected consequence of the bureaucratic system, but rather the exact way in which the system was supposed to work from the start.

The state deliberately organized the office into two distinct clusters. The first cluster—run by older, high-ranking former soldiers of the liberation army—makes all the important decisions in regard to citizenship inclusion and exclusion, while the second cluster of young and professional officers maintains the image of the non-failed state. The effective doubling of state bureaucracy was a very logical way for the South Sudanese state to be able to produce internationally accepted travel documents while keeping important decision-making procedures of inclusion and exclusion out of sight and in the hand of the military elite. There are, however, broken joints and discrepancies between the two clusters and the two bureaucratic logics. This article, building on an ethnographic fieldwork spent mostly inside the state bureaucracy, unearths and analyzes a few of these broken joints.

The clustering of the citizenship office and the limbo of citizenship reveals something very fundamental about the nature of the South Sudanese state. The article concludes that citizenship—and the ID-documents, as signifiers of it—is not final and decisive, but a constantly renegotiable status. Being a citizen is not a given birthright but a questionable position. The expensive, ultramodern, and infallible ID cards do not mark the end of a road but only a momentary accomplishment, a successful negotiation between the subject and state agents. The costs of the state-of-the-art technology, the promises and pitfalls of technological high modernism, and the vision of biometric modernity are secondary in this context.

The Tour

"Follow me! This is impressive. . . ." In January 2013 I was about to start my ethnographic fieldwork in the South Sudanese citizenship bureau

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when I was given an unofficial tour of the premises by Craig, a middle-aged Canadian expat of one of the U.N. agencies working closely with the migration branch of the DNPI.[1] The huge air-conditioned room was indeed impressive; twenty young South Sudanese bureaucrats sat behind professional workstations digitally registering fingerprints, taking photographs, scanning application forms, instructing, ordering, typing, printing.

In the middle of our tour, a young officer from Bor, one of the provincial capitals, arrived with a personalized USB drive containing the data of a few dozen new citizens. He went straight to the team leader and handed over the device, which was followed by the filling in of reports and forms. The team leader, a young, industrious woman, deciphered the information with a password and copied the data of new citizens into the database, carefully checking every application. Finally she sent the data to the ID-card-producing machinery, and she told her colleague to pick up the documents the next day and return to Bor.

This bureaucratic performance—the movement of files, the queuing of citizens, the distribution of tasks and duties, and the decisively murmured orders—had a certain aesthetic beauty. They all powerfully implied the image of a young and modern state, full of self-esteem and the will to improve. The high-modernist technology of the office and the bureaucrats' knowledge in handling the state-of-the-art machineries were in a striking opposition to the postwar, "millennial capitalist" (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000), militarized, violent, and "failed state in the making" reality of South Sudan.[2] Max Weber's bureaucratic rationality seemingly drove the place, which seemed to operate

> under the principle of *sine ira et studio*, . . . [in which] the professional bureaucrat is . . . only a small cog in a ceaselessly moving mechanism which prescribes to him an essentially fixed route of march. . . . The individual bureaucrat is, above all, forged to the common interest of all the functionaries in the perpetuation of the apparatus and the persistence of its rationally organized domination. (2006:58–62)

Indeed, during my fieldwork the DNPI was quite often referred to by NGO expats and visiting journalists as a model institution of modernity and efficiency "run entirely by South Sudanese."[3]

Following the declaration of independence in July 2011, the new country was not ready techologically to provide identity documents and passports to its previously mostly undocumented population. However, the local political and business elite immediately needed to travel, and the citizenship office therefore came under immense pressure. The DNPI had only been launched two days before independence, and the first months were spent on the renovation of the dilapidated buildings and the selection and training of the first officers. The office haphazardly started issuing diplomatic passports, but these documents were so unprofessional looking that

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foreign immigration authorities made it difficult—sometimes even impossible—for the political elite to cross international borders (interview with Major General Agustino Madout Parek, director general of the DNPI, Juba, February 2013).

In November 2011 the Interior Ministry selected the German company Mühlbauer AG to supply the machinery and the technical training for the DNPI staff for approximately €20 million (discussion with a leader of the office, Juba, May 2013). The Mühlbauer AG is very active in the region, having won the contract from Uganda in 2010 to supply and run its biometrics-based identity management system for €64 million (Hosein & Nyst 2013). The South Sudanese state signed up for the most state-of-the-art biometric solution. The full biometric profile, containing ten fingerprints and a facial photograph, is recorded from every citizen. At the official launching of the national registration center, the Minister of Interior praised the new system and the vice president of the company proclaimed that "South Sudanese now have first-class national certificates, national identity cards and electronic environmental passports which none of your neighbours in this region have. You are one of the leading nations in electronic identification documents" (quoted in Juma 2012).

The issue of South Sudan being called a failed state is a contentious subject. "We are not a failed state, we make the best passports," one leader of the office angrily grumbled in June, waiving the daily *Citizen* newspaper. He was bitter about the recently announced results of the 2013 Fund for Peace Failed States Index in which South Sudan debuted as the fourth "most failed state," just behind Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan (Fund for Peace 2013). The very same week a motor-taxi driver, a policeman, and a university professor complained to the author about the Failed State Index and the "unfair treatment of South Sudan by the West."[4] All of them, like the officer of the citizenship office, gave physical examples of the apparent "non-failure" of South Sudan: new license plates, a new roundabout, and a new—albeit yet empty—wing of Juba University (for an academic response, see Wassara 2015). A year later—in the midst of the latest civil war—South Sudan topped the renamed 2014 Fragile State Index of the Fund for Peace. The government officially complained about the ranking.[5]

This article argues that in South Sudan, and in similarly fragile states, what matters is merely the *impression* of possessing high-modernist technology, rather than the perfection of this technology. South Sudan embarked on the road of biometric modernity while calculating in advance that the technology would be imperfect. In fact, in order to keep important decisions in the hands of the military elites *and* convey an image of a modern and effective state bureaucracy capable of producing internationally accepted identity and travel documents, the state built up parallel structures within the same office, with real power residing in the less technocratic and less visible military cluster.

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Return of the Colonial Logic

Recent scholarship on South Sudan shows that in certain governmental practices the SPLA/M returned to the British colonial logic (see, e.g., Cormack 2016; Leonardi 2011; Mampilly 2011; Thomas 2015). The comparison of the legislation and implementation of Sudanese and South Sudanese citizenship shows that while postcolonial Sudan developed an inclusive but stratifying citizenship regime, South Sudan returned to the colonial understanding of subjects of easily definable and governable ethnic groups ruled by the citizens from the urban centers of power (Markó 2015; see also Assal 2011; Seidel 2013). The Nationality Act of 2011 offers two criteria for acquiring citizenship by birth:

> (1) Any Parents, grandparents or great-grandparents of such a person, on the male or female line, were born in South Sudan; or
> (2) Such person belongs to one of the indigenous ethnic communities of South Sudan. (South Sudan 2011)

In practice, the first criterion is only used for people with foreign ancestry, mostly descendants of Greek merchants or Northern Sudanese. The overwhelming majority of citizenship applicants need to prove their ethnic affiliation according to the second requirement, which suggests a return to the colonial logic. On the one hand, chiefs' support letters often act as essential evidence in authenticating the applicant's citizenship, thus placing a powerful tool in the hands of so-called traditional authorities. On the other hand, the emphasis on tribal origin and the applicant's "ancestral land" also imagines South Sudanese as members of easily definable ethnic groups.

For South Sudanese and aspiring foreigners, documentary evidence of citizenship is important for a variety of reasons, at least in Juba, where government control is tight. Only citizens can legally run a business, drive a motor-taxi, occupy positions reserved for South Sudanese in NGOs, or work in the public sector. The government also has made known its plans (so far unrealized) to ensure that the majority of market traders, hotel and restaurant employees, construction workers, and casual laborers also are South Sudanese citizens. Due to these requirements, as well as tangible and growing xenophobia among urban youth against the influx of East African citizens, some people from Uganda and Kenya, as well as from marginalized regions of Sudan (Blue Nile, Kordofan, and Darfur) have maneuvered (often successfully) to get South Sudanese identity documents by gaming the system and gathering false documentary evidence, chiefs' statements, and witnesses based on invented life stories and kinship modifications (Markó 2014, 2015). By the end of 2013 the DNPI had issued 250,000 nationality certificates for applicants, approximately 350 per day. The busiest office is the central bureau in Juba, but the DNPI opened up branches in all state capitals before the eruption of the civil war in late 2013. While the verification of applicants and their enrollment

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in the biometric database have been carried on in all branches, only the central office has the machinery to produce the ID cards and passports.

The following section discusses in detail the procedure that every applicant for citizenship has to follow. The article argues that by separating the citizenship office into two distinct clusters, the South Sudanese state deliberately organized parallel structures inside one bureaucracy. One cluster is a flashy bureaucratic model of the "not-failed state"; it contains state-of-the-art technology and young skilled officers, but it is largely a façade, staffed by officers without any real decision-making authority. In the other less visible, and seemingly less important, cluster, the war-trained military elite keep the decision-making power firmly in their own hands.

The Typical Route of the Applicant

Every citizenship applicant has to go through a ten-step procedure in order to acquire citizenship documents. The process takes between three weeks and a few months, and acquiring the Nationality Certificate (the plastic ID card) costs U.S.$20–30 on average. Even before entering the citizenship office an applicant who lacks a birth certificate (as is usually the case) needs to visit the local medical commission and receive an age assessment certificate. With birth certificate or age assessment in hand (along with other supporting evidence such as chief's and military principal's support letters, photocopies of old identity documents, school certificates, referendum registrations, club membership cards, and driver's licenses), the applicant, as well as an accompanying "next of kin" witness, must then appear in the morning at the gate of the citizenship office (see 1 on the map below) to receive the application forms. Uniformed military doctors and nurses perform a blood test in the second room (2), and they attach a stamped and signed slip of paper with the applicant's blood type to the application form. "Fixers" and scribes sit under an open tent in the middle of the courtyard (3). Just like the numerous fixers in the neighboring streets, they help illiterate or unprepared applicants to fill out the forms and photocopy papers, and for a negotiable fee they may offer missing evidence to support the applicant's claim. Both the applicant and the witness have to "seal" the application file with a signature and their inked fingerprints, and the applicant adds two passport-size photos. With the carefully filled-out forms, the applicant and witness then tell the applicant's story to one of the verification officers (4). The verification officers are mid-ranking police officers—second lieutenants to captains—in uniform. They carry out a short interview with every applicant and witness trying to verify if the life story is genuine, if the witness is a "true" next of kin, and if the evidence supporting the claim is authentic.[6]

The successful applicant then enters the room of approval (5) alone and is interviewed quickly by a high-ranking officer—captain to colonel—who calls the witness only in doubtful cases. An applicant who is also applying for a passport visits the passport approval office (6) next and then,

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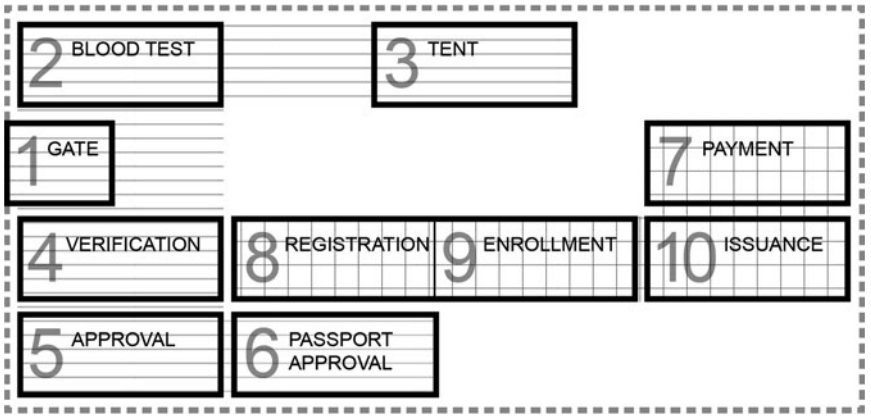
Schematic Map of the DNPI: The Applicant's Route and the Two Clusters of the DNPI



after paying the necessary fees to the clerks of the Ministry of Finances (7), enters the registration room (8). There the applicant's personal data are entered into the central database, with the procedure visible on control monitors. In the next room (9), the applicant's full biometric identity is captured, and the application form—but not the supporting evidence—is scanned into and saved in the database. After waiting a couple of weeks for printing of the ID card and passport, the applicant receives the documents at the issuance office (10), where the entire application file, including the supporting evidence, goes astray in the unordered paper boxes, without any chance of later use.

The aesthetics and performativity of the bureaucratic process are remarkable. Similar to the Islamabad city authority described so vividly by Matthew Hull (2012), the South Sudanese citizenship office is driven by a strict process leading to the accumulating layers of the application file. No one, not even people who can jump the first queue because of connections, can proceed from one step to the next without carefully carrying out the bureaucratic tasks prescribed in that given room. Comments, orders, and notes of officers are inscribed in the file and validated by the signature and personal stamp of the bureaucrat. Even the color of the pen matters and signifies the strength of the order; low-level officers use blue biros, while their high-ranking colleagues use red. In the inner pages of the application form are empty lines for verification officers to fill in after they have investigated the applicant and witness, writing down similar sentences a dozen times every day: for example, "I verify that the applicant is from South Sudanese ancestry. She hails from the Pojulu tribe. She is a housewife in Rock City, Juba. Her ancestral land lies in Yei."

A striking contradiction exists between this document-centered bureaucratic performance and the final treatment of the application form. At the issuance office the issuing officer, after handing over the ID and

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passport, places the application material and photocopied supporting documents—which often amount to a few dozen pages—in a basket. By the end of the day, all of these papers have been deposited in unordered, undated paper boxes, without the slightest chance of later use. If someone's citizenship is later questioned—which happens almost on a daily basis—the record kept by the high-modernist, expensive technology is almost useless. The infamous Criminal Investigation Department will investigate the case from scratch. The burden of proof is on the accused, who has to gather all the evidence again. The logic (and founding pillar) of modern citizenship—the assumption that states can question someone's citizenship birthright only in exceptional cases—is turned upside down in South Sudan. One leader of the office even claimed in an interview that because "many Ugandans and Kenyans got the NCs [Nationality Certificates], a new round of authenticating will be necessary . . . once we change from NCs to IDs," questioning basically each and every person's citizenship (interview, Juba, October 2013). In this fashion, citizenship is not a given, birthright condition in South Sudan, but a renegotiable status that can be questioned at any given moment by various state agents. In these cases, the accused needs to prove his or her "innocence" again.

Parallel Bureaucracies

If citizenship is not a secure status in South Sudan, neither is the South Sudanese state—where even inside the state bureaucracy competing visions, interests, images, processes, and negotiations continuously clash with one another—a firmly established entity. As Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan argue,

> In Africa, as in Europe, all public bureaucracies are permeated by tensions between prescribed and real conduct, between official and practical norms, between organizational charts and professional cultures and between public policies and their implementation. Bureaucracies are, without exception, subject to a host of contradictory directives. (2014:18)

The South Sudanese citizenship office is such a place, although paradoxically it is also one of the very few "working" institutions of the state—a "pocket of effectiveness" (Roll 2013) where service delivery is not supervised and outsourced to NGOs and U.N. agencies, and where "things get done" and decisions are made after—as far as circumstances allow—a fair evaluation of evidence.

The competing images and practices of the state can be best demonstrated by examining the striking dichotomies and differences between the two distinct clusters of the citizenship office. The first cluster (rooms 1–6) consists of the gate, the blood-test room, the tent of the fixers, and the verification, approval, and passport offices. The second cluster (rooms 7–10) consists of the payment, registration, enrollment, and issuance offices.

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The spaces of the first cluster are either unconnected to electricity or supplied with power only when the city grids are functioning—which is not more than a few hours a day. Therefore, the rarely cleaned and neglected rooms are without air conditioning and lights. The spaces of the second cluster—where I was given the tour on my first day—are the image of modernity. The backup generators are constantly running to produce electricity for the computers and the ID card–producing machineries. All the frequently cleaned and painted rooms are cooled by air conditioners and lit by fluorescent lamps.

Apart from the civil fixers of the tent, the rooms of evidence evaluation in the first cluster are staffed by uniformed, mid- to high-ranking military officers, most of them male, middle-age veterans of the civil war. These officers see their work as a logical continuation of their military career. They are proud to have been nominated for this important job, in which they have to distinguish the "real" South Sudanese who deserve to be citizens from the "unscrupulous aliens" who try to disguise themselves as South Sudanese and want to "steal the jobs, the land, the women, and the business opportunities of locals" (interview with an approval officer, Juba, May 2013). Since their job is a continuation of their previous life, they think and argue in military terms. The conversations between them and the applicants and witnesses are normally conducted in Juba Arabic, and while the tone is apparently light-hearted, it can easily become tense and authoritarian. The officers of the first cluster make their living purely from their salaries, and they travel often to their home villages in preparation for their retirement. They speak nostalgically about the civil war and the hardships and beauties of the fighting.

The rooms of the second cluster are staffed by police sergeants and privates in civil clothes. The language of communication is mostly English, the process is more transparent due to the control monitors facing the applicants, and the tone of conversation is friendly, sometimes even flirty. These bureaucrats are young and professional, and they have been selected because of their competence in English, their education (at least through the secondary level), and their computer skills. Both the ethnic and the gender composition of this group are more heterogeneous than those of the military officers of the first cluster. They see their job, on the one hand, as a duty for the nation, and on the other hand, as a profession of choice and an opportunity for upward social mobility. Their goal as policemen is to be promoted—which, they argue, can be achieved through hard work—and then to be deployed to one of the embassies of South Sudan. Quite a few resigned when the DNPI signed them up for a months-long police training at Rajaf Police Academy. As the twenty-five-year-old former deputy-manager of the registration office told me about his resignation, "I have not returned from Canada to hold guns and serve in an armed force. That I can do in Canada if I want, and I promise you that the pay is better there. I can serve my country without guns" (interview, Juba, June 2013). Most of them hope eventually to land a civil-sector job at one of the NGOs or U.N.

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agencies, and they apply frequently for these openings. Many also run private businesses such as shops and restaurants in partnership with civilian friends or they rent out living spaces at their compounds. They socialize with one another across lines of ethnicity and kinship, and they are proud to be living in a big multicultural city. They visit their hometowns only for celebrations and funerals.

I observed the daily work of one young Dinka officer from the issuance office for two weeks. He handed out the ID cards and used his nickname for the final signature on the application forms, before they went astray into the basket. "Zachariah, that's my name," he said. "KillCOw, my nickname, like Eminem or Bangs. KillCOw, my rap-name. That's how I sign and stamp the papers at the end. 1st Lieutenant KillCOw. It's my trademark" (personal conversation, Juba, July 2013). It was impossible to miss the provocation and creativity in the Dinka nickname "KillCOw." Zachariah is from the countryside but survived the war in an Ethiopian refugee camp. He has almost no living relatives. He has no herd, and thus no possibility for a traditional Dinka marriage. He is dating girls from Juba, regardless of their ethnicity, and he has no desire to return to the countryside. "My tribe is South Sudan," he said—a frequent claim of the young officers when the subject of ethnicity came up during lunch breaks. This is not to say that the second cluster of the citizenship office was any sort of peaceful multicultural heaven. From time to time it was a place of heated debates navigating around tribal belonging. However, these young officers were able to discuss these questions freely among themselves.

There are also differences in work organization between the clusters. Just as applicants provide material proof of identification in the first cluster (passport photo, fingerprint, manual signature) military officers of the first cluster fill in the sheet of attendance register manually and they mark their comments, orders, and notes on the application forms with a signature and a personal stamp. They take notes manually by pen on separate pieces of paper or on the first page of the application form. These notes can only be seen by them and are kept secret from the applicants. While ICAO-standard photographs, fingerprints, and signatures are digitally captured in the second cluster, the bureaucrats who work here use their personalized USB token to register their working hours, and their decisions and activity can be traced in the digital backup files. The most important difference between the two clusters, however, lies in how the system approaches and understands the individual applicant. In the first, militarized cluster the applicant, in a sense, is never considered strictly as an individual, but rather as a member of one of the "indigenous ethnic communities of South Sudan," as prescribed by the Nationality Act (South Sudan 2011). The first matter to be verified is the applicant's tribe, and a traditional chief (who according to the application of the law must be an elder and "next of kin" from the patrilineal family; see Markó 2014) may need to appear as a witness. Once leaving the "interrogation" offices of the first cluster, the applicant remains alone. The witness cannot enter the registration and enrollment rooms, the

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applicant's ethnic belonging rarely becomes a topic, and ethnicity is not saved in the database.

The real citizenship decisions of inclusion and exclusion are all made in the first cluster, and if an officer in the second cluster becomes suspicious about a given case, he can only send the applicant back to the verification or approval officers. Throughout my fieldwork I witnessed almost no communication between the two clusters.

Seeing Like a Failed State

In developing countries in particular, biometrics-based state, private, and NGO surveillance systems—"elusive panopticons," to use the expression of Keith Breckenridge (2008)—are being introduced in rapidly growing numbers. These biometric management solutions and databases—used by elections officials and international observers to verify polling data, and by NGOs and U.N. agencies for aid distribution and the management of refugee camps—come with a hefty price tag.

> This new technology does not come cheap, and only donor support makes these purchases possible. In DRC, the elections cost a staggering $360 million, with $58 million of that spent on biometrics. In Ghana, the figures were $124 million and $76 million respectively. Kenya's elections cost $293 million, with donors putting in $100 million. In established democracies, polls cost an average of $1 to $3 per head. In Kenya, where six ballots were staged on the same day, they cost over $20. (Wrong 2013)

Scholars have shown how developing countries genuinely believe in the usefulness of biometrics-based identification systems, even if these schemes often fail and despite the hesitation shown by more developed countries to rely on them (Breckenridge 2005, 2008, 2015; Donovan 2015; Magnet 2011; Maguire 2009; Maringanti 2009; Hosein & Nyst 2013). This article argues, however, that the situation is more nuanced in South Sudan, where biometric technology both does and does not work. An examination of the difference between the workings of the South Sudanese population registry and similar experiments in India and South Africa is instructive.

Using the example of the South African biometric welfare reform, Kevin Donovan defines the "biometric imaginary" as a "collective understanding" that "posits biometric technology as a necessary, suitable and effective means of constructing a standardised and objective welfare state" (2015:817). Drawing on the argument of Donovan, one can include in the notion of the "biometric imaginary" the belief that biometrics-based civil registries—containing the whole or parts of the population—are unquestionably useful for the construction and functioning of standardized, effective, and working states. Biometric protocols, according to their proponents, effectively depoliticize and technicalize the relationship between citizens and the state, thereby removing human agency—and the associated corruption,

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error, and inefficiency—from bureaucracy and replacing it with impersonal technology, computerized standards, and infallible algorithms.

In India the biometric imaginary has been championed by one of the wealthiest persons, Nandan Nilekani, the CEO of Infosys, one of the largest Indian IT companies. In 2009 Prime Minister Manmohan Singh appointed him as the chairman of the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI), which plans to issue a Unique Identification Number (UID) for every Indian citizen, with a complete biometric profile attached for identification purposes (see Rao 2013). Nilekani calls the UIDAI the "biggest social project on the planet" (quoted in Parker 2011).

The project started out on a voluntary basis, but more and more local governments have tied the UID-number to the distribution of welfare funds and public work, and thus enrollment has become de facto compulsory for the impoverished. The biometric database is accessible not only to various state agencies but to private entrepreneurs as well, from banks and transportation companies to LPG gas sellers. Indian policymakers and social activists argue "that UID will render legible the population and thus create a solid basis for optimised, fair, and corruption-free service and welfare delivery" (Rao 2013:72).

South Africa has long lived in the realm of the biometric imaginary. Indeed, racial discrimination was to a huge extent realized and practiced through the largest pre-computerized biometric database on earth. The Home Affairs department collected, sorted, and managed forty million sets of fingerprints of its black citizens, while the police gathered another 4.5 million fingerprints of—mostly black—convicted criminals. Thousands of fingerprint experts searched the index card records, a database so huge that twenty-five years ago "the records had to be moved because they threatened to bring down the building housing them" (Breckenridge 2005:270). Black bodies' bodily codes thus became associated with criminality. Keith Breckenridge (2005, 2008, 2014) has shown how postapartheid South African governments tried to digitize and reform these biometric databases from time to time and consistently failed. Nevertheless, the South African state believes in the future of biometrics. It was among the first countries to connect digital biometrics with welfare distribution and its Cash Payment Service technology—one of the earliest systems developed to tackle welfare fraud—won the 1995 Smithsonian Computerworld Award for innovation for its novel biometric identification technology (Breckenridge 2014).

The examples of India and South Africa show that the biometric approach—apart from its contribution to enhanced state surveillance capacity (Maringanti 2009)—is an effective way of bringing neoliberal state reform into new spheres, specifically with the involvement of private business. Although "rarely have these systems functioned as promised" (Donovan 2015:816), India and South Africa, like the majority of developing countries, believe that biometrics provide the best approach for tackling corrupt administrations and welfare fraud, and that the state can be reformed by means of superdatabases and outsourcing its operations to those who

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have developed successful businesses outside of government. As Nandan Nilekani—whose company is the largest outsourcer of the world—argued, "we're good at I.T., and we're bad at governance, and we can use one to improve the other" (quoted in Rosen 2011). As Keith Breckenridge concludes,

> the administrators [of South Africa] implementing the new biometrics of our own era believe that they will radically improve the state's grasp of the identity, and history, of its elusive citizens. . . . Computerised biometrics, like its paper-based predecessor, is driven by the fantasy of administrative panopticism—the urgent desire to complete and centralize the state's knowledge of its citizens. (2005:271)

This article argues, however, that South Sudan went one step further than India and South Africa in its embrace of the biometric imaginary in that it was indifferent about the possible success or failure of the system. In other words, perhaps in the case of South Sudan the "imaginary" was conceived of a bit too literally. South Sudan needed a state-of-the-art technology to convey the image of a modern, "non-failed" state to the international community and to be able to produce widely accepted travel documents to the elites. It also needed an effective system of citizenship verification, according to the military logic of the new state. As a consequence, the state developed parallel bureaucracies to accommodate both tasks. This is not to suggest that the biometric identity management system has been a complete failure in South Sudan or that the state bureaucracy has been completely cynical in its application. Several of the useful features of technological modernism will be discussed below. However, the main promises of biometric modernism—the provision of a cost-effective, secure, and accurate bureaucracy—remain unfulfilled in South Sudan.

The first of the promises is the cost-effectiveness of biometric identification. The official cost of a South Sudanese Nationality Certificate (for age assessment, the purchase of the application form, and the registering of the final document) was around U.S.$20–30 in 2013. However, considering the added costs of travel, accommodations, mediators, chief's support letters, scribes, and witnesses, the average total cost was more than U.S.$50. The promise of biometrics as a cost-effective solution clearly has not been fulfilled; instead the system has created a situation in which the majority of the population is left out due to the high costs of the documents. In late 2013, before the outbreak of the civil war, only about a quarter-million South Sudanese were documented—less than 3 percent of the estimated population. South Africa, by contrast, has registered 19 million social welfare beneficiaries (approximately one-third of the population; see Donovan 2015), and the UIDAI in India will reach the billionth registration by the end of 2015 (effectively building a biometric registry of three-quarters of the population; see Arakali 2015).

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The second promise of biometric modernism is that a biometric system will produce secure documents and passports. During the height of the public debate in the U.S. about a proposed biometrics-based national ID card system, the Gartner Group, an influential information technology firm, pointed out the serious problems involved with the implementation of a digital biometric identity document, the first of which would likely be "the problem of deliberate or accidentally mistaken identity," since "the biometric data contained on a smartcard and on the national database is only as reliable as the original scanning" (Breckenridge 2005:280). Indeed, previous research on the South Sudanese citizenship office showed that due to the lack of genuine birth certificates, "identity creation" is an easy task in South Sudan, as the whole process of citizenship verification is based on an age assessment certificate, a witness, and what is often a "modified," "invented," or "stolen" life story (Markó 2014, 2015).

The final promise of biometric modernism has to do with accuracy. Despite India's comparative success with biometrics, one study in India found that "approximately five per cent of any population has unreadable fingerprints, either due to scars or aging or illegible prints" and that "the failure to enroll is as high as 15 per cent due to the prevalence of a huge population dependent on manual labour" (Maringanti 2009; see also Ramakumar 2011). In South Sudan, where the challenges are similar, I in fact witnessed cases in the DNPI in which fingerprint scanners failed and bureaucrats registered applicants without fingerprints.

As Shoshana Magnet shows in her pioneering book *When Biometrics Fail* (2011), biometric systems fail most often in serving "the others": women, people of color, and people with disabilities. Indeed, experiences of past failures and the search for new sites for testing the new technologies are significant reasons that biometric companies are so interested in projects in countries like South Sudan. One engineer from the Mühlbauer AG told me that "it is especially useful for us to do the job here on the facial recognition software" as it never really worked among "such a dark population" (personal communication, Juba, May 2013).

India and South Africa implemented their systems with good intentions. Both countries argued that they were in an "identity crisis" (Rao 2013:72) in which marginalized people needed the government's help to make themselves visible. In South Africa one of the main objectives of the biometic system was welfare database reform (Donovan 2015), while India introduced the UID system "as a magic bullet that would provide poor and marginalised citizens with a means to accurately identify themselves before authorities of the state or the market" (Rao 2013:71). In South Sudan, by contrast, the biometric database has not been set up as a state project for uplifting the marginalized poor, but rather as a means to ensure the documentation of the urban middle class.

There are some elements of the technology that are unquestionably working in South Sudan. For cases in which the fingerprint scanning system works, the AFIS (Automatic Fingerprint Recognition System) successfully

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matches the fingerprints of an applicant with the database, avoiding double registration of the same person.[7] In addition, the issued identity document might even support the argument that the application process transforms the applicant from a premodern subject coming from a complex set of binding kinship and ethnic ties into a modern, responsible citizen—the image that the DNPI seeks to convey. Although an applicant's witness has to come from the patrilineal line, and many questions are asked specifically about the applicant's paternal family, the final identity document only states the mother's name and makes no reference to ethnicity. It is not like the old infamous identity document of Rwanda—directly growing out of Belgian colonial heritage—which baldly defined ethnicity in the first heading (Longman 2001).

But in fact, this transformation of subjects into responsible citizens is indeed highly imaginary. If the authorities question the genuineness of someone's citizenship, the person can return to the office and go through the whole procedure again. The citizenship database remains untouched both in doubtful cases and in police investigations. And recently documented citizens themselves mock the system. Instead of using the original ID, most citizens carry photocopied and laminated versions of the card, which are just as useful as the original ones. I have seen citizens use these easily forgeable photocopies to open bank accounts, cross international borders, and verify citizenship for U.N. agencies. Even the officials staffing the first cluster of approval and verification in the citizenship bureau accept from a witness a laminated version of the high-modernist, biometric card produced by the second cluster.

Conclusions

South Sudanese citizens imagine the state through their relation to bureaucracy. This is mostly due to their history of five decades of civil war, when both local governments, the agents representing them, and the rules they applied changed very frequently. However, this image was shaped by the colonial history of South Sudan as well. Especially in the countryside, people had to deal with the state infrequently and with unpredictable results. Laws, rules, and regulations changed often, just like the personnel trying to enforce them. State bureaucracy, however, always distributed a vast quantity of papers for its elusive subjects. Southern Sudanese learned the rule that paper proves an earlier account of interaction with the state, and thus people learned to hold on to documents. As Sharon Hutchinson writes,

> "Paper" was initially introduced in many areas in the form of medical prescriptions dispensed by touring British district commissioners and missionary personnel. Their recipients were instructed to guard such papers carefully until such time as they could be redeemed at medical dispensaries. . . . These "papers" were commonly stored . . . on the end of a split sorghum stalk or other reed and placed, together with other

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> protective "medicines", above the inner doorway of the cattle byre until such time as a trip to the dispensary could be organized. (1996:285–86)

South Sudanese therefore experience inclusion—or citizenship—as a successful negotiation with state agents, usually in military uniform. However, this inclusion is a momentary situation that may be renegotiated later. The paper issued by the citizenship office—the ultramodern, infallible national identity cards and electronic passports—are not seen as final and decisive documents. They are, just like earlier governmental papers in South Sudanese history, useful and powerful tools in future renegotiations over someone's worthiness for a service. This is why people keep all previous papers—from chiefs' support letters to referendum registration cards, from UNHCR aid records to blood test results. For quite a while I thought that the referendum card, for example, acted mostly as moral evidence—as proof that the applicant had participated in the independence referendum and thus indicating worthiness in cases when other material evidence did not support citizenship. However, verification officers kept giving me another explanation—that the referendum card signified that the applicant had already gone through a previous round of verification. The fact that these previous verifications were a mere formality—the SPLM/A was interested in registering as many voters as possible—did not seem to count. As a policeman who had worked as a registration officer during the referendum recalled, "we registered everyone who is a real South Sudanese, but not the Arabs, not even if they lived here. . . . . But it was very easy for the others" (interview, May 2013). What mattered in the citizenship office, however, was the fact that the person had once successfully negotiated his or her status with a state official and could show evidence of it.

Just as the image of the state is shaped by these negotiations, surely the state itself is also changing during the process. As we have seen earlier with the logic of citizenship legislation (Markó 2015), the DNPI bureaucracy has also returned to the colonial logic of bounded, easily definable ethnic groups. As the director general of the office told me in an interview, "verification is easy, we know each other well in our tribes. . . . You always find family who knows you, and chiefs know you" (interview with Major General Agustino Madout Parek, Juba, February 2013). Group membership is a constantly renegotiable status, not simply a birthright position. Consequently, as the South Sudanese state is imagined by the new leaders as a collage "of the indigenous ethnic communities of South Sudan" (South Sudan 2011), citizenship can be a matter of renegotiation as well. Obviously this logic is in an inherent contradiction with the vision of modern citizenship, one of whose safeguards is the assumption that the state can question citizenship only in extraordinary circumstances (Macklin & Bauböck 2015). But the DNPI has had to amalgamate the two logics into one bureaucracy. Unlike in India or South Africa, in South Sudan biometric modernity is a convenient part of the image of a modern state that has no real interest in fulfilling its promises. The South Sudanese state created a bureaucracy that is

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able to produce internationally accepted travel documents while imposing its own logic of statehood and citizenship onto the population.

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Notes

1. The name and nationality have been changed.
2. On the concept of "failed state in the making," see Manson (2011); Wolff (2013).
3. According to many interviewees, the office, even after the introduction of the high-modernist technology, was much more chaotic in the first few months of its operation. People recall weeklong queues and frequently broken-down machines and some, after having completed the process, were called back because the employees had forgotten to save their photo or had incorrectly captured their fingerprints. The young bureaucrats needed a few months and constant training from the engineers of the German company to acquire the knowledge and competence to run the machinery. I am also grateful to Nicki Kindersley for this information.
4. South Sudanese elites in Juba and in the diaspora also heavily criticized the ranking in newspapers. See, e.g., De Tombouk (2013).
5. On the renaming of the list, see Fund for Peace (2014). For an excellent summary of the debate surrounding South Sudan's listing on the Failed State List, see De Waal (2014).
6. Competing visions and ideas of kinship, gravitating around the question of "who counts as a legible next-of-kin?", constantly clash in the citizenship office, with verification officers often holding views that differ from those of applicants and their witnesses. These negotiations do not simply shape people's ideas about the meaning of the state, but also change the daily practice of the state and the structures of kinship as well (see Markó 2014).
7. Nevertheless, as the applicant is only enrolled in the database *after* approval, nothing prevents rejected applicants from restarting the application with a new application form—maybe with a new name and life story.

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