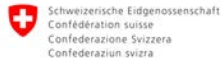


A photograph of a man standing in a marshy area with tall grass and water. He is shirtless and wearing a striped loincloth. He is holding a long stick in his right hand and a bundle of sticks in his left hand. The background is a dense field of tall grass. The water in the foreground is dark and reflects the man and the grass.

**SPEAKING TRUTH
TO POWER IN
SOUTH SUDAN**
**ORAL HISTORIES OF
THE NUER PROPHETS**

.....

Speaking Truth to Power in South Sudan
Oral histories of the Nuer prophets



Published in 2018 by the Rift Valley Institute
PO Box 52771 GPO, 00100 Nairobi, Kenya
107 Belgravia Workshops, 159/163 Marlborough Road, London N19 4NF,
United Kingdom

THE RIFT VALLEY INSTITUTE (RVI)

The Rift Valley Institute (www.riftvalley.net) works in eastern and central Africa to bring local knowledge to bear on social, political and economic development.

CREDITS

RVI EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: Mark Bradbury
RVI HEAD OF SOUTH SUDAN OFFICE: Anna Rowett
RVI SENIOR PUBLICATIONS MANAGER: Magnus Taylor
EDITOR: Kate McGuinness
DESIGN: Lindsay Nash
MAPS: Jillian Luff, *MAPgrafix*
ISBN 978-1-907431-60-9

COVER: MAN FISHES IN BENTIU, SOUTH SUDAN

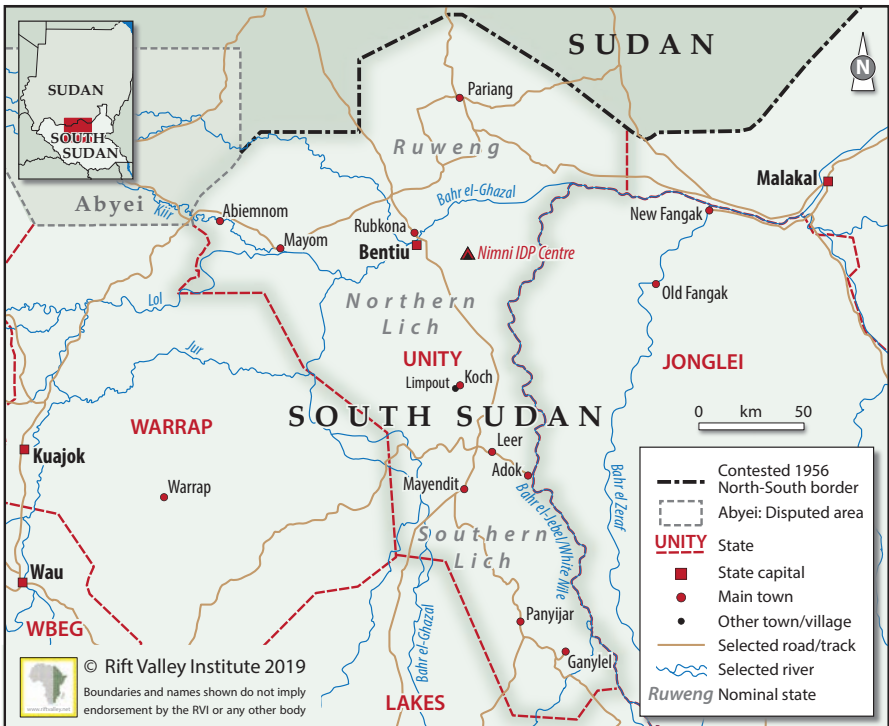
RIGHTS

Copyright © Rift Valley Institute 2018
Cover image © UN Photo/JC Mcllwaine
Text and maps published under Creative Commons License
Attribution-Noncommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International
www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0
Available for free download from www.riftvalley.net
Printed copies are available from Amazon and other online retailers.



Contents

Acknowledgements	6
Summary	7
1. Situating the histories of Nuer prophets	9
Introducing the Nuer prophets	9
The western Nuer region	12
Listening to oral histories in times of war	13
2. The life of Kolang Ket, prophet of MAANI	17
Early life and family	17
Possession by MAANI	20
Travels to Omdurman	25
Death and legacy	28
3. Interpreting MAANI and other Nuer divinities	32
Authority and youth	37
Relationship with government	40
Conclusion	51
Glossary of acronyms, words and phrases	52
Bibliography	53
Map 1. South Sudan	4
Map 2. Bentiu and surrounding states	4



South Sudan states are according to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (2005)

© MAPgrafix 2019

Nominal states are according to 2 October 2015 decree

Map 1. South Sudan

Map 2. Bentiu and surrounding states

Authors

Jedeit J. Riek and Naomi R. Pendle

Jedeit Jal Riek is a graduate of the University of Juba, College of Social and Economic Studies. He formerly worked for the Ministry of Finance (Unity State) and local NGOs. He is currently a researcher focusing on histories and current sociopolitical dynamics among the western Nuer. His research contributes to projects undertaken by the Rift Valley Institute (RVI) and the London School of Economics (LSE).

Naomi R. Pendle is a research fellow at the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa at the London School of Economics. Over the last, decade she has carried out various ethnographic and qualitative research on violent conflict, law, displacement and authority in South Sudan.

Acknowledgements

This report includes many oral histories collected in the Bentiu UN Protection of Civilian sites (POCS) in 2017. It is also informed by previous oral histories collected by Naomi Pendle in 2013, when many of those now living in the Bentiu POCs still lived in rural areas of the western Nuer region. The paper is also heavily indebted to Douglas Johnson, including for his generous comments and his sharing of notes on various archive collections.

The report was made possible by the plentiful contributions and support of Dingding Kuol Kolang. Sadly, Dingding died in late November 2018 and was not able to see the final publication of this work. The authors would like to dedicate this report to his memory.

Dingding was a senior chief in Koch from 2012. More importantly, Dingding was very close to former Nuer prophetess, Nyaruac Kolang. After Nyaruac's death, Dingding was recognized as having a unique understanding of her divine power. He was tasked with the guardianship of property and rituals associated with the divinity of MAANI. In the absence of a prophet of MAANI, Dingding oversaw the care of the prophets' luak (cattle byre) and carried out necessary rituals associated with prophetic power. He also had the authority to give out blessed tobacco to the sick and needy. As recently as 2018, community leaders in the Bentiu POCS were asking for Dingding's blessing for peace agreements so that Nuer youth would fear MAANI's wrath if the peace was broken. The significance of his death was clear when the leaders of South Sudan's main warring parties all committed to guarantee security for the immediate burial of Dingding in the village of Limpout near Koch.

Summary

Prophets—those recognised as having been ‘seized’ by a divinity—have played an important role in the history of South Sudan, particularly that of the Nuer people. Already influential within the Nuer community, they first came to wider prominence in the early 20th century, when they were noted by British colonial officials for their ability to mobilize the Nuer—particularly young men—to engage in raiding activities against their Dinka neighbours. They were seen as being powerful political actors and, alongside chiefs, important intermediaries for the colonial officials who sought to maintain stability in the regions inhabited by the Nuer and Dinka peoples.

However, the influence of the Nuer prophets, which persists to this day, goes much further than mobilizing or de-mobilizing the Nuer population to or from violence. In the UN Protection of Civilians Site (POCS) in Bentiu, where over a hundred thousand war-displaced now live, the histories of the prophets have become a means through which POCS residents explain both the spiritual causes of war and their current predicament. These histories offer hope that by adherence to the teaching and moral norms of prophets, their material situation might be improved. These historical accounts implicitly challenge the idea that only the warring parties can dictate the timings of war and peace.

The Nuer prophets form an important part of the moral and spiritual universe of the Nuer people and their continuing power and influence should not be underestimated. This paper focuses on the life of Kolang Ket—a major prophet in the early 20th century whose base was near present-day Koch. Kolang Ket was seized by the deity known as MAANI at the end of the 19th Century. The story of Kolang Ket, as recounted in the Bentiu POCS in 2017, includes his seizure by MAANI; how he wielded the political authority he gained during his life; and his legacy, which extends to the present day.

Acknowledging the influence of the prophets is important to those trying to understand the contemporary political reality of South Sudan.

This, by extension, can help external actors to assist the South Sudanese population in shaping a more sustainable, locally relevant peace, which goes beyond the fragile elite deals normally agreed by the country's politicians.

1. Situating the histories of Nuer prophets

In June 2018, South Sudan’s president, Salva Kiir Mayardit, and his former vice president Riek Machar Teny Dhurgon—the leader of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO)—agreed the latest deal to stop the country’s civil war. The main elite protagonists in the conflict agreed on the mutual benefits of ending the war, including the reopening of oilfields in the former Upper Nile and Unity states—where production had been disrupted by the conflict. Their promised reopening increased the available resources to shape an elite bargain between government and opposition. Millions of South Sudanese hope that even a fragile elite deal can create the political space for others to build a more lasting settlement. To this end, various other authority figures across South Sudan are developing their own power locally by offering different visions of how peace can be built. One such group are the Nuer prophets or *guaan kuthni* (sing. *guan kuoth*)—literally, ‘owners of a divinity’¹—who play an influential role within their communities.

Introducing the Nuer prophets

The ‘prophets’—first termed as such by British colonial officials—emerged among the Nuer in the nineteenth century.² To gain the status of a prophet, individuals claim to be seized by a named divinity that gives them powers over life and death, and also often over rain, cattle, health and prosperity.³ For more than a century, Nuer communities have experi-

1 This follows the translation used by Godfrey Leinhardt and Douglas H. Johnson in the latter’s *Nuer Prophets*. See: Douglas H. Johnson, *Nuer Prophets: A History of Prophecy from the Upper Nile in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1994.

2 Douglas Johnson, ‘Prophecy and Mahdism in the Upper Nile: An Examination of Local Experiences of the Mahdiyya in Southern Sudan’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 20/1 (1993), 47.

3 Sharon Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War, and the State*. Berkley, US: University of California Press, 1996; Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*.

enced prolonged periods of destabilizing violence and conflict. Prophets have built their authority through their ability to creatively respond to these contexts. During the most recent conflict in South Sudan, prophets have been seen to mobilize and demobilize large groups of armed youth, which has made them powerful political actors. They are trusted by many South Sudanese to provide safety and instill peace between rival factions of the Nuer ethnic community.⁴

Outsiders, be they colonial authorities, diplomats or modern-day NGOs, who have encountered the Nuer prophets have often associated them solely with war. These outsiders, however, generally have ignored the role that the prophets play in helping their communities navigate and push back against violent conflict. In practice, much of the authority of the prophets rests on their ability to bring communities together into social groupings where grievances can be peacefully resolved.⁵ Prophetic peacebuilding strategies vary and can include violent approaches, as well as judicial peacebuilding activities.⁶

Political and military leaders in South Sudan have long been acutely aware of the powerful role of the Nuer prophets, and have tried to co-opt their authority to mobilize political and military support.⁷ At the beginning of the twentieth century, British officials in the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium government—concerned by Nuer attacks on their Dinka neighbours—became preoccupied by the Nuer prophets, in particular their capacity to control cattle raiding.⁸ More than half a century later, in the war years of the 1980s and 1990s, politico-military elites targeted prophets or tried to co-opt them, due to their ability to mobilize local support. Since the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which ended

.....
4 Naomi Pendle, 'Protection and Prophets: Struggles to protect in South Sudan', Oslo: Norwegian Refugee Council, 2018.

5 Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*; and Sharon E. Hutchinson and Naomi R. Pendle, 'Violence, legitimacy and prophecy: Nuer struggles with uncertainty in South Sudan', *American Ethnologist* 42/3 (2015).

6 Hutchinson and Pendle, 'Violence, legitimacy and prophecy'.

7 Naomi Pendle, 'Protection and Prophets'.

8 Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*.

the war between the Sudan government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), prophets have played their part in politics and armed conflict. Since December 2013, the armed wing of the SPLM-IO, the Sudan People's Liberation Army-in-Opposition (SPLA-IO) has used Nuer prophets both to help recruit fighters for the SPLA-IO and to coordinate the SPLA-IO aligned *gojam* and the Nuer White Army—armed cattle keeping youth to the west and east of the Nile respectively.⁹

At the same time, in this age of militarized government power, Nuer prophets have pushed back against the 'simplified, secularized, and objectified forms of violence glorified by rival government elites'.¹⁰ Their ability to counter the actions of warring parties has been influenced by their (re)interpretation of the root causes of conflict, and the moral responses to these, whether through violence or peace. Prophets have maintained their ability to speak truth to power and to contest the authority of elites. Their role is not simply to predict the future but also to offer alternative interpretations of both the past and present, which allow them to challenge the discourses of military commanders.

The partial retelling of histories is one way that public authority figures in South Sudan—both governmental and customary—seek to justify their decisions to promote war or peace. Leaders have reinterpreted history to reshape political belonging, promote exclusive identities and demand violence. Among the Nuer, these histories have often included stories of the prophets. In offensives as recent as those in May 2018, military leaders used historic accounts of the Nuer prophet Kolang Ket in the 1920s to mobilize youth and to justify or encourage violence against civilians.

While political elites have evoked historic memories to mobilize youth, other public authorities have sought to challenge these interpretations. Even when prophets themselves are absent, such as in the Bentiu POC, elders still reproduce histories of these figures that challenge exclusive ideas of identity, and the inevitable or chaotic nature of war. These

9 Naomi Pendle, 'Protection and Prophets'.

10 Hutchinson and Pendle, 'Violence, legitimacy and prophecy'.

histories push back against simplified understandings and demand a more nuanced interpretation.

Many people now recognize that peace in South Sudan is not just simply a case of making changes to the behaviour of political elites but is also ultimately dependent on altering the system of power itself. The contemporary retelling of prophetic histories is one way in which South Sudanese, including some of the most vulnerable and disempowered, are trying to reshape the basis of legitimate power. In doing so, they are also reshaping the way that wars are understood.

The western Nuer region

The western Nuer region has long been an area of major political and economic significance for South Sudan. The region includes the homelands of some of the most significant contemporary politico-military actors in the country, including SPLM-IO leader Riek Machar, Vice President Taban Deng Gai and the Bul Nuer forces that have provided pivotal support for Juba at key moments in the last five years of civil conflict. The region has gained particular significance due to the location of major oilfields within its territory. When fully operational, these oilfields produce up to 40 per cent of South Sudan's oil output.

In the western Nuer region, the histories of the Nuer prophet Kolang Ket remain particularly important and evocative. Kolang Ket was one of the first Nuer prophets, having been seized by the divinity of MAANI in the late nineteenth century.¹¹ His *luak* (cattle byre) is still identified as being in Limpout Village near Koch Town, although he eventually died a violent death near Adok (near Ler) in the 1920s.

By the time of his death, Kolang Ket had risen to a position of seniority among the prophets and authorities in the western Nuer region. His daughter, Nyaruac Kolang, was then seized by MAANI and remained the most powerful Nuer authority figure to the west of the Nile until her death in the 1970s. During their lifetimes, these prophets of MAANI

.....
 11 Following scholarly convention, including Douglas H. Johnson's classic historical anthropology *Nuer Prophets*, the names of divinities names are represented in uppercase.

became some of the most powerful authorities in the western Nuer region, shaping people’s understanding of authority, war and peace, life and death.¹²

Histories of Kolang Ket, his activities and his prophecies continue to shape how power and war are understood in the western Nuer region. In addition, a prophetess of MAANI—Nyachol—is currently one of the most powerful prophets in the western Nuer; for the last five years, she has played a key role in the mobilization of armed youth in the region.¹³ Nyachol’s authority rests on her ability to link herself to custom and to her interpretations of the histories of MAANI. A critical reflection on these histories is important in evaluating her own claims to power.

Listening to oral histories in times of war

The oral histories presented in this report were retold in 2017 in the Bentiu United Nations Protection of Civilian (POC) site. The Bentiu POC came about as a result of the outbreak of conflict in South Sudan in December 2013. As the SPLA in Bentiu divided politically and fought itself for control of this administrative centre, people ran to the POC to seek UN protection. Many have not left since and the Bentiu POC, as well as other POCs across South Sudan, have become accidental sites of internment. In addition, in 2015 large government offensives into rural areas of the western Nuer region killed thousands and stripped people of access to harvests and markets, inducing a famine. Facing death from military violence or lack of food, tens of thousands of people travelled days to the POC site for protection. Bentiu POC has become a semi-permanent urban centre with a population of more than 100,000 people.

Collecting oral histories in times of war can be problematic. The context of war is complex and the telling of histories may encourage the telling of polarizing narratives that mimic and reinforce the discourses of the conflict itself. Attention needs to be given to the layers of history

.....
 12 Johnson, ‘Prophecy and Mahdism’, 50.

13 Hutchinson and Pendle, ‘Violence, legitimacy and prophecy’; and Pendle, ‘Protection and Prophets’.

to avoid politicized historical discourses naturalizing difference and conflict.¹⁴ At the same time, oral histories are not only useful in the way that they offer insights into the past. They are also valuable for the light they shed on contemporary representations of needs, concerns and debates. Listening to oral histories in times of war can help reveal how people use historical narratives to understand both these past and present experiences. The political and social purpose of these histories is complex, but they can help to gather understanding, remake hope and offer opportunities for peace in contexts of brutality and violence.

The histories of MAANI presented in this report do not only disclose facts about the past but also help better understand contemporary normative values and the debates that surround them. By listening to the histories of MAANI, the continuities and changes in the use of this cultural archive can be observed to ask why these histories are being reproduced at this time, in this way and during this war.¹⁵

Many of the histories in this report are told by the family of Kolang Ket and others who are closely associated with Kolang and Nyaruac, his daughter. While many spent decades watching first-hand the lives of these prophets, providing this unique and intimate perspective, they also have a vested interest in preserving the importance of MAANI and its association with their family. At the same time, the nature of space in the POC sites means that these histories were not told privately but were widely shared through their public retelling to researchers. This added an element of popular accountability to the process. The popularity of these histories in the POC hints at the appetite for certainty, hope and alternative interpretations of history that is provided through the historical lens of the prophets' lives.

The histories of MAANI recorded here have a clear theological and normative message. One dominant theme is that famine and loss during conflict is often caused by intra-prophetic competition. Even military

14 Gillian Mathya, 'Bringing History Back In: Past, Present, and Conflict in Rwanda and the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo', *Journal of African History* 58/3 (2017).

15 Wendy James, *The Listening Ebony: Moral Knowledge, Religion, and Power among the Uduk of Sudan*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999 [originally 1988], 4–6.

defeats that appear to have occurred because of superior government or Dinka power can be explained by the failure to honour the correct divinity and prophet. Histories of MAANI recounted in the POC present the prophet as being more powerful than the accounts recorded in the 1990s.¹⁶ At the same time, much of this portrayal of superior power attributes success and death to MAANI instead of climatic or battlefield events, or the power of government.

Those living in the POC are confronted by a context of death, uncertainty and exile. Living confined in the POC, they can easily lose hope that they have any ability to change their circumstances. The histories of MAANI offer an aspirational promise of a better, more certain political order. These histories give us a glimpse of how people use their cultural archive to make sense of the violence of war or the elite nature of peace, and how they place it into a larger story. In this way, they are able to refute the seemingly arbitrary nature of the deadly violence which with they live and use the agency provided by the telling of history to take back control. While the latest peace deals may bring South Sudanese hope, they also reinforce the idea that peace and war are held in the hands of unaccountable elites. Through histories of divinities, South Sudanese, in this case the Western Nuer, have sought to re-take control of both experiences.

Although told at a time of war, the histories of MAANI that are shared in 2017 by those in the Bentiu POC do not consistently reinforce the polarizing narratives of the war. While political elites have attempted to frame the war in divisive ethnic terms—mostly Nuer versus Dinka—the histories of MANNI complicate the polarizing ethnic shifts that the warring parties have used to win support. Histories of MAANI and other prophets not only link power to preexisting Nuer religious authorities but also to migration, travel and connections to foreign peoples.

People in the Bentiu POC rely on secular internationally funded protection and provision from the UN to survive. For those in the Bentiu POC, the UN has become the *de facto* government and arbiter of the moral order,

.....
16 Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*.

even if it has been reluctant to formally assume this role.¹⁷ At the same time, the POC site itself brings uncertainty. UNMISS (United Nations Mission in South Sudan) has repeatedly discussed disbanding the site. The accounts of MAANI recorded in the Bentiu POC reveal a confidence in the historic powers of divinities (and their prophets), which makes space for believers and advocates to claim the continued need for MAANI and his moral authority. These accounts portray MAANI's authority and protection as being more certain and long-lasting than any contemporary form of secular power.

.....
17 Rachel Ibreck and Naomi Pendle, 'Community Security and Justice under United Nations Governance: Lessons from Chiefs' Courts in South Sudan's Protection of Civilians Sites', *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* 6/1 (2017), 16.

2. The life of Kolang Ket, prophet of MAANI

Early life and family

Histories of the original seizure of Kolang Ket by MAANI portray a Nuer community and religious idiom that was intimately entangled with foreign influence and travel. The Nuer were not an isolated and static community, but people who were familiar with migration and change. Kolang Ket's great grandfather is remembered as being originally from *Bar* (the Anyuak) before he migrated to the western Nuer region.¹⁸ One day towards the end of the eighteenth century, he was travelling and came across Nyagaani, the unmarried and only daughter of a powerful Western Nuer man named Yeth (of the Jagei Nuer).¹⁹ He impregnated Nyagaani. Her two brothers were furious and threatened to kill him. Hearing of their anger, he approached the brothers and begged them not to kill him. He said that as he brought the child into being, he should not be killed. He asked the brothers to wait for their sister's child to be born and then take the child as one of their own. The brothers were persuaded. Nyagaani gave birth and called her son Kual. Kual grew up in Yeth's house and eventually fathered Nen, who fathered Ket, who in time fathered Kolang. Kolang Ket was the first generation to be fully accepted by his maternal uncles as their own and as a member of the Yeth clan. Although later Kolang Ket moved away from the homelands of Yeth, the Yeth still perform rites over his family, such as funerals.²⁰

.....
18 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer.

19 Interview with Paramount Chief Dingding Kuol Kolang Ket of the Jabany Section, Bentiu POC, 16 July 2017, in Nuer.

20 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI,

Oral histories of Kolang Ket highlight that wealth and success were not preconditions for MAANI's coming and, therefore, of his authority. From an early age, Kolang was heavily burdened and made poor by his family responsibilities. Kolang had two sisters, Nyanyuot and Nyaboura, who both gave birth to sons. At the same time, Kolang was the only living adult man in the family to care for them all. When a small pox outbreak (*guol*) killed both his sisters and their sons, Kolang had the customary responsibility to provide a posthumous wife for the dead baby sons of his sisters. Kolang married wives on their behalf but the bride prices stripped Kolang of the cattle he had. The wives then gave birth to sons for whom he also then had the responsibility to care.²¹ Kolang was left a poor struggling man.

In addition, Kolang's poverty meant that he was less able to resolve disputes peacefully by paying compensation in cattle. Kolang ended up in many a public fight in Yeth. As he was alone in his family, not only did he not have cattle to pay but he had to fight alone. Others in the Yeth section would come to attack him in groups, so he had to fight fiercely. In the end, during these fights, Kolang killed two men. He did not have the cattle to meet the compensation demands of the families. His poverty and debts increased further.²² The families of the dead demanded revenge.

When demands for revenge increased, Kolang Ket decided to escape from the Yeth and sought protection from Jiath Kor, a powerful figure among the neighbouring Jabany section of the Jagei Nuer. Jiath Kor's ancestors were originally from the Nyuong Nuer but his ancestors had risen to power in the Jagei.²³ Jiath's power was cemented by his acquisition of a gun—one of the only firearms in the western Nuer region at the

.....
Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, Bentiu POC, in Nuer. The most recent funeral officiated by Yeth was Kuol's funeral.

21 Interview with Paramount Chief Dingding Kuol Kolang Ket of the Jabany Section, Bentiu POC, 16 July 2017, in Nuer.

22 Interview with Paramount Chief Dingding Kuol Kolang Ket of the Jabany Section, Bentiu POC, 16 July 2017, in Nuer.

23 Interview with Paramount Chief Dingding Kuol Kolang Ket of the Jabany Section, Bentiu POC, 16 July 2017, in Nuer.

time. This was during the period when merchants and governments were making new headway through the swamps that allowed them to access Southern Sudan. Firearms were traded for ivory, slaves and other locally produced goods or loyalty. Jiath's offer of protection to Kolang mimicked the protection offered by the *kuar muon* (earth priests or leopard skin priests; see below), although his power to protect was based on the gun and not divine authority. Through his protection, Jiath invited comparison between his powers to protect using the gun and spiritual powers to protect (such as by the *kuar muon*). Many Nuer continue to contrast these different abilities to provide safety and protection.

Kolang Ket settled and built his *luak* in a place called Bar. From there, he would feed himself and his family by fishing at Nour Gatkek Doup on the Yuarjuathni River.²⁴ Kolang Ket became known as an excellent fisherman. At the time, Kolang was a young man and still had few cattle. He was such a good fisherman that he would tell his mother to boil water as he left to go out because he was confident that there would be a good catch.²⁵

Although these histories recount events that took place more than a century ago, they have contemporary resonance. For example, many Western Nuer still believe in the importance of marrying on behalf of their dead brothers. The moral and spiritual obligations to marry for the dead can, however, create a large economic burden for the living. Many Nuer refugees are now debating when and how they will buy wives for their dead brothers who fought in the most recent war. Kolang Ket's story highlights that he was also confronted with the same heavy costs of bride prices for his dead male relatives. The war also means that, similar to Kolang Ket, most Western Nuer do not have access to cattle. The lack of cattle in the Bentiu POC, in particular, has brought an acute awareness

.....

24 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer; interview with great grandson of Nuan from Jabany (Jagei), 1 August 2017, Bentiu POC, in Nuer.

25 Interview with Paramount Chief Dingding Kuol Kolang Ket of the Jabany Section, Bentiu POC, 16 July 2017, in Nuer.

of the difficulty of peaceful redress of grievances without cattle, with violent revenge becoming common in the Bentiu POC sites.

The first prophet of MAANI was neither disqualified from divine help because of his poverty nor because of his failure to avoid violence. Kolang Ket chose to uphold his moral obligations to his deceased relatives and to recognize the role of cattle in legitimately acquiring wives. There is a clear message here about the moral and spiritual necessity of such norms, even if they may bring about material and social hardship in the short term.

Possession by MAANI

The history of Kolang Ket makes it clear that MAANI did not come to a man of perfect moral behaviour or consistent moral purity. MAANI only came to Kolang after he had both recognized the frightening power of existing spiritual leaders and reconciled with those whom he had aggrieved. For contemporary listeners, these histories reinforce the realities of moral obligations.

The histories of Kolang Ket, recounted in the Bentiu POC in 2017, record that on the days Kolang went out to fish he would rest beneath a palm tree. Nearby, there lived a powerful elderly *kuaar muon* named Nuan Liep.²⁶ *Kuar muon* (sing. *kuaar muon*) is usually translated as an ‘earth priest’ or ‘leopard skin priest’ and was the principle spiritual authority among the Nuer prior to the arrival of the prophets.

A period of severe hunger came to the Jagei Nuer, with large-scale famine recorded as having occurred between 1888 and 1892.²⁷ From 1893 to 1896, there was also a period of sustained flooding.²⁸ During the famine, one of Nuan Liep’s younger wives was attracted to Kolang and would often walk past the palm tree where he sat. They talked more and more,

.....
26 Interview with great grandson of Nuan from Jabany (Jagei), Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

27 Interview with Paramount Chief Dingding Kuol Kolang Ket of the Jabany Section, Bentiu POC, 16 July 2017, in Nuer. Also see: Johnson, ‘Prophecy and Mahdism’, 46.

28 Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 247.

and Kolang ended up impregnating her.²⁹ Kolang was too poor to pay the fine for adultery so knew he could not approach Nuan for a peaceful settlement. Fearing Nuan Liep's anger, Kolang Ket immediately ran away to hide in the fishing camps between the rivers.³⁰ These fishing camps are on small islands of reeds and are hard to find as they nestle between the papyrus and water hyacinth of the *Sudd* (a vast swamp region formed by flooding of the White Nile). In the wars since 2013, people have often hidden from attacking government forces on these islands.

When Nuan realized his wife was pregnant and that it could not be his child, he interrogated her until she confessed that Kolang was the father. Furious, Nuan immediately searched for Kolang to seek revenge. At first, he could not find him. At the same time, Kolang began to realize that Nuan's power was too great and that eventually he would be found. Kolang decided to confront Nuan.³¹

Kolang travelled to Nuan's *luak* and found that he had gone out farming; only his children were at home.³² As Kolang waited for Nuan, he decided to bring fish for him—cooked, fresh and dried. Kolang carefully prepared his best fish and soup. He told Nuan's wife to serve it to him. Nuan enjoyed it. Knowing that the food tasted different from her usual cooking, Nuan then questioned his wife and asked who had provided the food. She answered that it was Kolang Ket. Nuan ordered her to bring Kolang to him.³³

.....

29 Interview with great grandson of Nuan from Jabany (Jagei), Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer; interview with grandson of Yoak Lual, who made the first sacrifice that resulted in the emergence of the MAANI divinity and the possession of Kolang Ket, Bentiu POC, 20 July 2017, in Nuer.

30 Interview with grandson of Yoak Lual, who made the first sacrifice that resulted in the emergence of the MAANI divinity and the possession of Kolang Ket, Bentiu POC, 20 July 2017, in Nuer.

31 Interview with great grandson of Nuan from Jabany (Jagei), Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

32 Interview with great grandson of Nuan from Jabany (Jagei), Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

33 Interview with Paramount Chief Dingding Kuol Kolang Ket of the Jabany Section, Bentiu POC, 16 July 2017, in Nuer.

Kolang Ket then approach Nuan Liep with a sharpened spear in his hand.³⁴ As he reached Nuan, he did not threaten him but instead laid down flat in front of him. Kolang told Nuan to behead him for the act of adultery.³⁵ Kolang confessed that he had wronged Nuan and he knew there was no escape.³⁶

Nuan was surprised. Kolang's words hit his ears like thunder. Yet, Nuan still doubted his sincerity. He called for elders to witness the beheading, including Jiath Khor. Even when the elders were called, Kolang did not flee. Nuan started to believe Kolang's willingness to sacrifice himself. To test him further, Nuan told Kolang to lie down again as if he really was willing to be beheaded. Kolang still did not flee. Nuan was amazed by his bravery and remorse.³⁷

Eventually, Nuan agreed to accept Kolang's remorse and no longer seek revenge against him. He realized that Kolang had no cattle to pay. Instead, he asked if Kolang had anything on him that he could offer to Nuan. All that Kolang had was fish oil (*thiir*) that had been left over from the preparation of the meal. Nuan ordered Kolang to find a *cum* (snail shell) from the riverbank and fill it with the oil.³⁸ When the fish oil had cooled, Nuan poured it on to Kolang's penis. He said, 'Kolang, my nephew, if God of this country is there for us, then something big is waiting for you.'³⁹ He told Kolang that his struggles would come to an

.....
 34 Interview with great grandson of Nuan from Jabany (Jagei), Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

35 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer; interview with great grandson of Nuan from Jabany (Jagei), Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

36 Interview with great grandson of Nuan from Jabany (Jagei), Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

37 Interview with grandson of Yoak Lual, who made the first sacrifice that resulted in the emergence of the MAANI divinity and the possession of Kolang Ket, Bentiu POC, 20 July 2017, in Nuer.

38 Interview with great grandson of Nuan from Jabany (Jagei), Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

39 Interview with grandson of Yoak Lual, who made the first sacrifice that resulted in the emergence of the MAANI divinity and the possession of Kolang Ket, Bentiu POC, 20

end.⁴⁰ He blessed him, said his name would be famous and that he would have many children.⁴¹

As the dispute was settled, the time of harvest came and the hunger ended for the year.⁴² The whole earth appeared to be responding to the new peace between Nuan and Kolang. Kolang's confession of adultery, and Nuan's mercy in sparing Kolang from the full justice that he deserved, brought the world back into its fruitfulness. Peace, reconciliation and an end to famine were intimately interconnected. In addition, the connection between Nuan's blessing and the coming of MAANI are important to tether this event to preexisting Nuer religious authority in the *kuar muon*.⁴³

After Nuan blessed him, Kolang Ket left and went to stay with Jiath Khor until the floods came and forced him back to the fishing camps. The flooding the next year was again severe and seemed to threaten another poor harvest.⁴⁴ It was after this that MAANI emerged as a divinity.⁴⁵

Approximately a year after his blessing by Nuan, Kolang went as usual to the river to fish. Kolang first fished using the technique of *tiir*, whereby small sticks or thick grass are fixed in the water to show the movement of the fish in the water; however, the small sticks did not move. Kolang

.....

July 2017, in Nuer.

40 Interview with great grandson of Nuan from Jabany (Jagei), Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

41 Interview with Paramount Chief Dingding Kuol Kolang Ket of the Jabany Section, Bentiu POC, 16 July 2017, in Nuer; interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer; interview with great grandson of Nuan from Jabany (Jagei), Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

42 Interview with Paramount Chief Dingding Kuol Kolang Ket of the Jabany Section, Bentiu POC, 16 July 2017, in Nuer.

43 This offers contemporary affirmation that the emergence of Nuer prophets includes continuity and change from previous Nilotic religious idioms. For example, see: Johnson, 'Prophecy and Mahdism' and *Nuer Prophets*.

44 Interview with Paramount Chief Dingding Kuol Kolang Ket of the Jabany Section, Bentiu POC, 16 July 2017, in Nuer.

45 Interview with grandson of Yoak Lual, who made the first sacrifice that resulted in the emergence of the MAANI divinity and the possession of Kolang Ket, Bentiu POC, 20 July 2017, in Nuer.

then used a technique called *buor*, which involves making a large sound to chase out the fish. No fish came, however. Kolang could not catch a single fish. He started to work through all the techniques that he knew.⁴⁶ Yet he caught nothing. His mother's pot would be empty. Day after day, Kolang went back and could not catch anything. His hunger became acute.

Kolang's cousin Yoak heard about Kolang's struggles and took a black and white goat to the riverbank to petition the divinities and ask for more fish. He called out, 'If you are really a true divinity, then rescue my cousin Kolang.'⁴⁷ Later that day, as the sun was setting, something strange moved from the riverbed towards Kolang. First, there was a small fish known as *dok*. Then the movement in the water continued and grew. He hoped it was a big fish. As the creature swam backwards and forwards through the water, Kolang's terror grew. He wanted to run away. Having tried to find a fish for so long, however, he retained hope that it might be the catch for which he had been waiting. As it got closer and closer, Kolang poised to spear it. The creature came within his reach, and he slammed his fishing spear down upon it. Kolang hit it on the back of the head. There was an explosion.⁴⁸ It had not been a fish but a snake (*lou*).

Kolang was thrown away from the water as if dead. He remained barely alive, swaying in and out of consciousness. Getting to his feet, he tried to find his way home but kept being sick and falling down, unconscious.⁴⁹

At home, when darkness fell, Kolang's mother and Jiath Khor began to wonder what had delayed him. As they talked, they started to fear that animals might have eaten him. They ran to the river to search for him. Yet, in the darkness, they had little hope of finding him. They called out his name. Eventually, they heard a whispered answer in reply. Those

46 Interview with Paramount Chief Dingding Kuol Kolang Ket of the Jabany Section, Bentiu POC, 16 July 2017, in Nuer.

47 Interview with grandson of Yoak Lual, who made the first sacrifice that resulted in the emergence of the MAANI divinity and the possession of Kolang Ket, Bentiu POC, 20 July 2017, in Nuer.

48 Interview with Paramount Chief Dingding Kuol Kolang Ket of the Jabany Section, Bentiu POC, 16 July 2017, in Nuer.

49 Interview with great grandson of Nuan from Jabany (Jagei), Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

people interviewed in the Bentiu POC remember it as a miracle that Kolang was found at all, with some saying that the divinity of DENG had directed them to where he was lying.⁵⁰

At this time, MAANI appeared to Kolang in the image of a hornless black bull (*thak ma cot*).⁵¹ Upon seeing the bull, Kolang collapsed and was powerless. He realized he had seen a divine vision and that he needed to make sacrifices accordingly.⁵² When they approached him, Kolang advised them not to touch him but to throw grass on him first. Jiath and his mother obeyed. MAANI had seized him and he seemed mad.⁵³ At home, they laid him by a burning fire to keep warm.

Kolang Ket's apparent madness then deepened. He started running around holding a shrine stick (*riek*). People debated what was happening to Kolang and many attributed it to his mother's minor *guan kulong* (a form of *kuuth piny*, or earth spirits).⁵⁴ Those who called Kolang Ket mad and who dismissed his authority, started to die. In turn, this made people question if something more powerful had seized Kolang.

Travels to Omdurman

Histories of Kolang Ket link his powers to the foreign travels that he undertook in his life, highlighting the Nuer's historic link to northern Sudan. Kolang Ket went to the base of the Mahdiyya, more popularly known as Omdurman.⁵⁵ The name 'MAANI' itself is commonly assumed

.....
50 Interview with Paramount Chief Dingding Kuol Kolang Ket of the Jabany Section, Bentiu POC, 16 July 2017, in Nuer.

51 Interview with teacher and community leader from Dok, Bentiu POC, 19 September 2017, in Nuer.

52 Interview with teacher and community leader from Dok, Bentiu POC, 19 September 2017, in Nuer.

53 Interview with Paramount Chief Dingding Kuol Kolang Ket of the Jabany Section, Bentiu POC, 16 July 2017, in Nuer.

54 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely *Lelnyang*) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer.

55 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely *Lelnyang*) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer.

to derive from Mahdi—the prophetic Islamic religious leader of the Mahdiyya.⁵⁶ Kolang stayed three years and saw the defeat of Khalifa Abdallai in September 1898.⁵⁷ This would have given him unique insights into the force behind the Anglo–Egyptian Condominium government.⁵⁸

Much remains mysterious about MAANI’s time in Omdurman. Accounts recently retold in 2017 in Bentiu POC suggest that MAANI took Kolang to his father’s house. There, MAANI is said to have left Kolang while he went into the house to tell his father that he was accompanied by a human being. His father asked MAANI if he had burnt a fire in a circle around him. When people—especially women—arrive after a long journey, the Western Nuer often burn a fire around them. The fire is believed to end any of the problems that might have been acquired on the journey. MAANI’s father then questioned him as to why he brought Kolang Ket to Omdurman and why he had not killed him. MAANI replied that he was going to stay with Kolang Ket and therefore he would not kill him. A cow was then killed to welcome Kolang Ket. That evening, the slaughtered cow rose up and started walking again.⁵⁹ While in Omdurman, it is clear Kolang Ket experienced new forms of power that he knew threatened him with death but that, in the end, he was protected from.

MAANI is said to have brought Kolang Ket into his father’s home and laid him under the alter for three years. During this time, MAANI took things from his father that would bring eternal life and he gave them to Kolang Ket. He gave Kolang Ket a calabash full of seeds for cooking and a gourd that would not burn. He also claimed to have seen a gourd full of milk that was poured onto a plate. Regardless of how many times he

.....

56 Interview with teacher and community leader from Dok, Bentiu POC, 19 September 2017.

57 This is affirmed by the interviews conducted for this study, as well as in Johnson, ‘Prophecy and Mahdism’, 50.

58 Johnson, ‘Prophecy and Mahdism’, 50.

59 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, POC, in Nuer.

drank from it, the milk never ran out. He was satisfied before he could finish it.⁶⁰ During his journeys, Kolang saw many new material goods. This non-burning gourd could have been inspired by new experiences of metal pots and pans.

Kolang's time in proximity to the Mahdiyya, when MAANI was still a nascent Nuer divinity, has prompted speculation that MAANI was based on the new Islamic divine revelations of the Mahdiyya or that the Nuer prophets were part of the Mahdiyya. Despite such suggestions, the Nuer associate MAANI with a continuation of Nilotic religious idioms, with no reference to Islam.⁶¹ It has even been suggested that the reference in MAANI's name to the Mahdiyya could have been a parody.⁶² Nonetheless, it is clear that Kolang Ket's travels became a key part of his ability to claim authority.

For Kolang, his superior understanding of government—a consequence of his travels—was a source of his authority. Although no government tried to administer the western Nuer region until the 1920s, from the middle of the nineteenth century, the Western Nuer had been aware of the new powers that were brought with traders and other foreigners when they gained access through the *sudd* to the south. This foreign and government power brought new dilemmas, insecurities and violence. There had also been a temporary but important port in Adok for about six months in the 1870s. From here, traders carried out a series of raids, killing cattle and taking women and slaves.⁶³ In neighbouring Bahr el-Ghazal, by the late nineteenth century, there was a dense commercial and military network, including the trade in slaves and ivory.

The proximity of the western Nuer region to these military networks contrasted with Nuerlands to the east, the inhabitants of which knew

.....
60 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer.

61 Johnson, 'Prophecy and Mahdism', 51.

62 Johnson, 'Prophecy and Mahdism', 53.

63 H. G. Wedderburn-Maxwell, District Commissioner Western Nuer District, 'Dok and Aak Nuer', 1 January 1945, P.P. Howell papers, Sudan Archive, University of Durham.

less of government.⁶⁴ The Western Nuer sat adjacent to the busy river port of Mashra' al-Rek. Many of the Western Nuer's annual grazing lands, especially those of the Jagei, brought them into close proximity to this port and provided them with an awareness of the flow of goods up and down the Nile, as well as the experiences of slavery. In the 1870s, Dinka sought refuge from slaving raids among the Western Nuer.⁶⁵ In the 1880s, there were joint Nuer and Dinka attacks on government.⁶⁶ As the power of foreigners was something with which the Nuer now had to contend, Kolang's insights into foreign affairs gave him an important authority in that political moment.

Death and legacy

The story of Kolang Ket's death sets the power of MAANI against the power of government force. The government is portrayed as brutal and MAANI as ultimately victorious. For Nuer listening to these histories in the present day, this demonstration of MAANI's ability to triumph against government repression provides great comfort and inspiration. Many Nuer still call on MAANI for help during times of war. Some believe in Nyachol and her contemporary possession by MAANI. Others call on the powers of a disembodied MAANI as they wait for the next great prophet of the divinity.

By the beginning of 1925, the Anglo–Egyptian Condominium government decided to take action against Kolang Ket based on accusations of his disobedience to government and impending raids on the Dinka. His *luak* was burned and his supporters were killed, and he eventually surrendered and was arrested in March 1925.⁶⁷ During his arrest, Kolang complained of being sick.⁶⁸ By this time, he was an elderly man. He asked to be allowed to return home to recover or to die at home but Caath

64 Johnson, 'Prophecy and Mahdism', 44.

65 Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 245.

66 Johnson, 'Prophecy and Mahdism', 45.

67 Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 263–264.

68 Interview with teacher and community leader from Dok, Bentiu POC, 19 September 2017.

Obang, a government chief, refused to release him. He told Kolang that he could die anywhere and mocked him about his age.⁶⁹

One day, Caath warned Kolang Ket to look at the sun because it would be the last time that he would see it. They were in Thor near Adok and Caath started to dig a grave. As an apparent sign of MAANI's resistance, the grave kept exploding and collapsing.⁷⁰ When the grave was dug, Caath tried to force Kolang Ket into it while he was still alive. Kolang managed to come out three times before he eventually died.⁷¹

Both Kolang's wife, Biel Deng, and his daughter, Nyaruac Kolang, were present.⁷² Kolang had sent all his other supporters home to care for the cattle and children.⁷³ Before Kolang died, he removed his ring and leopard skin, took his sleeping rug and pipe, and handed them all to Nyaruac. At the time, he told Nyaruac that his descendants should never sleep in Thor. It was only after he had spoken to Nyaruac that he could finally be buried.⁷⁴ Just before he was forced beneath the earth, he warned Caath that he would come back to seek his revenge and that Caath would mistake him for an elephant.⁷⁵

.....
69 Interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer.

70 Interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer; interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer; interview with elder from Koch, 1 August 2017, Bentiu POC, in Nuer.

71 Interview with teacher and community leader from Dok, Bentiu POC, 19 September 2017.

72 Interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer.

73 Interview with elder from Koch, Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

74 Interview with teacher and community leader from Dok, Bentiu POC, 19 September 2017.

75 Interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer; interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer.

Some accounts of Kolang's death do not record him being buried alive. Nonetheless, Caath's refusal to allow Kolang to return home to die amounts to a violation of Nuer ethnical codes that effectively meant he was buried alive (even if he in fact might have already been dead when he was buried). The government dismissed Caath a couple of months later for being too authoritarian.⁷⁶ Although the government records the reason for Caath's dismissal as not hearing cases fairly, the unease around his treatment of Kolang in his last days is likely to have been at the heart of these tensions with the community.

Sometime later, a large elephant appeared from the north and moved south through Jagei to Adok. People were amazed by its size and frightened of its appearance. It eventually reached Gul in Tharcieng Dok, between Nyuon, Dok and Mayendit, where Caath had his base. When people saw the elephant, they cried out and tried to attack it. Caath commanded them to stop. As he possessed the only gun in the area, he would go and kill the elephant.⁷⁷ He was confident that his gun would make it easy. When Caath shot at the elephant, the gun's bullets failed to kill it.⁷⁸ The elephant charged him, caught him and disappeared with him, as if in a storm. No one ever traced Caath or his gun.⁷⁹ After Caath's death, a *jakok* (crow) sat in the *luaks* and sang that he had been killed by

.....
76 Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 266.

77 Interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer; interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer.

78 Interview with teacher and community leader from Dok, Bentiu POC, 19 September 2017.

79 Interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer; interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer.

an elephant. The *jakok* did this in many *luaks* until everyone in the area knew.⁸⁰

Government records indicate that Caath Obang was killed by an elephant in July or August 1930 while he was out on a hunt.⁸¹ Records of the timing of Caath's death range from just four days after Kolang's death to up to five years later.⁸² Most important, however, appears to be the association between Kolang Ket's and Caath Obang's deaths. Caath's death from an elephant attack, which is consistent in all accounts, is what allows Nuer histories to assert the link between Caath's killing of Kolang and his own death. For the Nuer, it is important that the killing of a prophet of MAANI did not happen without accountability and fatal repercussions.

Kolang Ket's death matters because understanding death resonates with daily concerns for people in the Bentiu POC. In the history of Kolang Ket, Caath's death brought justice even against the powerful hand of government. This brings hope that, even after death, there might still be justice for the Nuer population in the Bentiu POC. The account of Caath's death highlights the importance of justice and the ability of divinities to provide it. The story of Caath's death is one of the most well-known parts of MAANI's story precisely because it maintains a promise that justice might still be possible one day.

.....
80 Interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer.

81 P. Coriat, Western Nuer District, In. Willis, C. A. (compiled) and Johnson, D., (ed.) *The Upper Nile Province Handbook*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 302–303.

82 Interview with elder from Koch, Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer; P. Coriat, Western Nuer District, In. Willis, and Johnson, *The Upper Nile Province Handbook*, 303.

3. Interpreting MAANI and other Nuer divinities

The histories of the Nuer prophets offer South Sudanese a lens through which to interpret violent conflict both then and now. They hint at alternative readings of the war that do not limit authority over war and peace to elite deals, which seem outside of the control of ordinary people. When these histories were told in Bentiu POC in 2017, the people there were experiencing an intense and immediate feeling of loss, which they associate with the government. Perceived by most Nuer as being Dinka dominated, the government is seen by the Nuer as being responsible for killing so many of their people, destroying property and taking their cattle.

These histories are retold at a time when, due to the overwhelming power of the government, it would be easy for the Nuer to feel weak and powerless. The histories of MAANI, however, highlight that the cause of their current predicament can be understood as an internal Nuer problem, including as a consequence of a lack of commitment to MAANI. If Nuer losses are understood to be the result of Nuer divisions and inappropriate belief, it is possible to conclude that Nuer spiritual agency could improve the situation. By this logic, war and peace are about readjusting relationships to divinities, not about elite deals that lie outside the control of most people. The histories of MAANI that are told in Bentiu POC in 2017 differ from previous accounts of the prophet's life. In the POC retellings, MAANI is remembered as stronger and more consistently victorious than in many previous accounts.⁸³

Nuer prophets to the west of the Nile have long competed and formed alliances with each other. This point is consistently made in historical accounts and in more recently retold oral histories.⁸⁴ To estab-

.....
83 For example, see those recorded by Johnson in the 1990s.

84 Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 252.

lish authority, prophets often had to show their superior divine power, including as masters of life and death. This means that death, loss and violent conflict during periods of prophetic rivalry are appropriately understood as being the result of intra-prophetic politics. These histories offer a reformed understanding of the causes of Nuer loss in war. Conflict and loss, despite appearances, might not be caused by the strength of the Dinka opponents but ultimately be the fault of intra-Nuer competition and the failure to honour the most powerful divinities. For those who currently live in the Bentiu POC, these historic understandings describe a context in which they could reclaim mastery over the conflicts that confront them by reforming their relationship to the divine.

In the nineteenth century, before MAANI seized Kolang, the powerful divinity of DENG had already possessed a Jagei woman called Nyabour Yoal.⁸⁵ She was also known as Nyapuka, in reference to *puka*—the dung of the campfires that she used to bless. She announced her seizure by DENG and established her authority sometime before the early 1880s.⁸⁶ She was married at the time of her seizure, which occurred during a period of hunger when crops were failing and cattle dying.⁸⁷ Every day, large crowds gathered at her home to seek DENG's help.⁸⁸

Nyapuka was already in a situation of enmity with Dinka leader Wol Athiang and the neighbouring Dinka. In 1883, she had joined with Wol Athiang to help the Dinka attack the Egyptians stationed at Rumbek.⁸⁹ The Nuer prophet Macot, who was seized by the divinity of TENY, joined her in this raid. Macot was killed.⁹⁰ TENY then passed to Macot's brother, Puot, who remained friends with Nyapuka.⁹¹ Apart from Macot's death,

85 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer; and Johnson, 'Prophecy and Mahdism', 47.

86 Johnson, 'Prophecy and Mahdism', 47.

87 Johnson, 'Prophecy and Mahdism', 47.

88 Johnson, 'Prophecy and Mahdism', 50.

89 Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 249.

90 Johnson, 'Prophecy and Mahdism', 48.

91 Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 249.

the Nuer and Dinka offensive on Rumbek was successful. After the battle, however, the Dinka also raided the Nuer, starting a period of war between the Agar Dinka and the Nuer.⁹²

When MAANI seized Kolang Ket, he was confronted with the powerful prophetic rivalry of Nyapuka. A notorious incident occurred involving a *riek* (shrine stick).⁹³ Histories, told in the Bentiu POC in 2017, recall a day in the late nineteenth century when Puot, accompanied by a crowd of people, had been visiting Nyapuka. Kolang Ket stormed through the masses of people carrying his *riek*, which he then forced down between the branches of Nyapuka's *riek*. DENG's supporters were horrified at this bold and offensive act against DENG and they removed MAANI's *riek* immediately.⁹⁴ For Nyapuka's supporters, this only confirmed Kolang Ket's madness and they mocked his apparent growing insanity.⁹⁵

That evening, Kolang Ket is said to have retired to a small camp a short distance away from Nyapuka, where he collected dry cow dung and made a fire. He called out to the people of Jagei to save themselves and safeguard their cattle.⁹⁶ He took some of the dung and ate it. Seeing Kolang Ket as no more than a mad man, the followers of DENG dismissed his warning.⁹⁷

.....
92 Johnson, 'Prophecy and Mahdism', 48.

93 Johnson, 'Prophecy and Mahdism', 48.

94 Interview with great grandson of Nuan from Jabany (Jagei), Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

95 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer. Johnson's account differs slightly, but also records this rivalry and Kolang's dismissal. See: Johnson, 'Prophecy and Mahdism', 49.

96 Interview with grandson of Yoak Lual, who made the first sacrifice that resulted in the emergence of the MAANI divinity and the possession of Kolang Ket, Bentiu POC, 20 July 2017, in Nuer.

97 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer.

After this, a fast-killing disease afflicted the cattle of DENG and those who were with him.⁹⁸ All Nyapuka's cattle suddenly became sick and died. This continued until DENG's base was 'brought to ash'.⁹⁹ At the sight of this, people scattered away from DENG and started to recognize the more powerful presence of MAANI in Kolang Ket.¹⁰⁰

Raiding of Dinka cattle was also seen through a lens of Nuer prophetic rivalry. A year after his seizure, MAANI is said to have demonstrated his power by raiding cattle, as others such as DENG had done before him.¹⁰¹ At the beginning of his seizure, people were skeptical of MAANI's powers, so only a few went with Kolang Ket on his first raid into the Dinka lands. On reaching the Dinkalands, he hit the ground with his stick and the Dinka fled. The cattle were all taken without the Dinka resisting.¹⁰² Despite this successful raid on the Dinka, however, people could not believe it was MAANI and instead credited DENG.¹⁰³ MAANI is said to have known this and punished them by allowing the Dinka

.....

98 Interview with great grandson of Nuan from Jabany (Jagei), Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer; interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer.

99 Interview with great grandson of Nuan from Jabany (Jagei), Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

100 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer; interview with great grandson of Nuan from Jabany (Jagei), Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer. Johnson's accounts provide a different order of events and instead associate Kolang with the death of Puot at a later point in Kolang's story. See: Johnson, 'Prophecy and Mahdism', 50.

101 Interview with grandson of Yoak Lual, who made the first sacrifice that resulted in the emergence of the MAANI divinity and the possession of Kolang Ket, Bentiu POC, 20 July 2017, in Nuer.

102 Interview with grandson of Yoak Lual, who made the first sacrifice that resulted in the emergence of the MAANI divinity and the possession of Kolang Ket, Bentiu POC, 20 July 2017, in Nuer.

103 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer.

to take back all the cattle.¹⁰⁴ When it was clear that the Dinka were overwhelming them and that calling to DENG was not helping, they started to call out for MAANI's help. Kolang reached out for his stick, struck the ground and the Dinka were repulsed. All the Dinka cattle were taken.¹⁰⁵ This time the Nuer raiders gave praise to MAANI.¹⁰⁶

According to government records, Nyapuka was carrying out her own retaliatory raids against Wol and the Agar Dinka. She is said to have reached as far as Mvolo and captured Dinka cattle but Wol quickly counter-attacked and regained all the captured cattle.¹⁰⁷ Nyapuka was then brutally killed during a raid by the Dinka on her base. The attacking Dinka pushed a large wooden cattle peg through her vagina because they knew she could not just be killed by a bullet or a spear.¹⁰⁸

Recently told histories also describe how MAANI then instructed DENG to move to the area of the Bul Nuer.¹⁰⁹ MAANI is also remembered as ordering TENY to the south.¹¹⁰ MAANI was then left to remain dominant in Jagei and over the central western Nuer.¹¹¹ At present, prophets of DENG dominate the politically powerful Bul Nuer.

.....
104 Interview with great grandson of Nuan from Jabany (Jagei), Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

105 Interview with grandson of Yoak Lual, who made the first sacrifice that resulted in the emergence of the MAANI divinity and the possession of Kolang Ket, Bentiu POC, 20 July 2017, in Nuer.

106 Interview with great grandson of Nuan from Jabany (Jagei), Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer; interview with grandson of Yoak Lual who made that first sacrifice that resulted in the emergence of the MAANI divinity and the possession of Kolang Ket, Bentiu POC, 20 July 2017, in Nuer.

107 Johnson, 'Prophecy and Mahdism', 49.

108 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer; Johnson, 'Prophecy and Mahdism', 49.

109 Interview with great grandson of Nuan from Jabany (Jagei), Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

110 Interview with grandson of Yoak Lual, who made the first sacrifice that resulted in the emergence of the MAANI divinity and the possession of Kolang Ket, Bentiu POC, 20 July 2017, in Nuer.

111 Interview with great grandson of Nuan from Jabany (Jagei), Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

These recently told histories strengthen the memory of Kolang Ket compared to histories heard in the 1990s. In the latter histories, it is instead suggested that Kolang left Jagei because of the rivalry with Nyapuka and only returned after Nyapuka's death, when famine was devastating Puot's cattle.¹¹² In these earlier histories, Dinka violence and famine are the opportunity by which Kolang succeeded in the midst of prophetic rivalry.¹¹³ The contemporary histories, which assert Kolang's role in the defeat of his rivals, focus on (and possibly exaggerate) the agency of the prophets.

In these current times of violence, there is a clear popular demand for a strong alternative power which can rival that of government and attribute these events as the consequences of intra-prophetic rivalry. In this respect, the power of MAANI brings comfort to the people on the Bentiu POC and strengthens the historical memory of Kolang Ket.

Authority and youth

Since June 2018, there has been an elite-backed drive for peace in South Sudan. The capacity of elites to deliver peace relies, however, on their ability to control men of fighting age. Control over the male martial age-set remains a key indicator of authority in South Sudan. In struggles to maintain this authority, even the most powerful elites have to make compromises with local authorities, who have a more direct relationship with men of fighting age. Nuer prophets have built their authority on the control they exert over these men.

This authority is, in part, rooted in the power wielded by prophets to decide when one generation should be initiated into a new age-set with responsibility to fight. A sign of Kolang Ket's growing authority was his insistence that he should preside over the marking ceremonies that would begin the next age-set. Before Kolang went north to Omdurman, he is said to have hung up his marking knife (*ngom*), which would be needed to make the marks (scarifications) associated with

.....
112 Johnson, 'Prophecy and Mahdism', 49.

113 For example, see Johnson, 'Prophecy and Mahdism'.

initiation. Kolang left instructions not to take it down until he returned. Upon Kolang Ket's return home, he heard ululations from an initiation ceremony. While Kolang was away, a woman called Nyadak Liat had been seized by a divinity and quickly became so powerful that she ignored Kolang's warning to wait. Instead, she took the *ngom* from the *luak* and had started to mark the boys. Kolang questioned what was happening and Nyadak called out to him mockingly. Nyadak invited him to join her but Kolang said that he had other affairs to attend to.¹¹⁴ Upset by Nyadak's lack of respect, Kolang is said to have buried the items he had brought back from the north.¹¹⁵

Kolang Ket went home and made a sacrifice there. On his return journey, he went past Nyadak's base, where he found people already digging her grave.¹¹⁶ To establish his authority, Kolang used the powers of MAANI to curse and kill many people who resisted submission to his rule. Many of the common songs that are sung about Kolang Ket's life chronicle the people he killed after they challenged his authority.¹¹⁷ Accounts given in the Bentiu POC are confident in MAANI's strength, highlighting the prophet's superior power over rivals.

.....
114 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer; interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer.

115 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer.

116 Interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer; interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer. Some accounts specify that he returned the next day, while others are vaguer and just mention that he passed Nyadak's home again on his return journey.

117 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer.

For example, Cat Kuoth was a *kuar ghok* (master of the cows) and visited Kolang in his *luak*.¹¹⁸ Kolang asked his wife to bring a mat for his guest upon which he could sit. Kolang's wife delayed and Cat Kuoth protested about having to stand for so long. Kolang tried to appease Cat Kuoth and calm him down. He called for his wife to hurry. Cat Kuoth was infuriated by this apparent lack of respect and walked out. Another account suggests that Kolang intentionally created enmity between himself and Cat by getting his wife to serve Cat a mixture of cow's and goats' milk, which is something a *kuar ghok* cannot safely do. While Cat drank the mixture, he suddenly realized what had happened and started to vomit.¹¹⁹

Later, the time came to release the cattle for grazing. A wild animal attacked and killed some of Kolang's cattle. Kolang declared that Cat Kuoth had done this to him. Cat Kuoth heard Kolang's accusation against him and he tried to run away but he could not escape. A fatal illness soon came upon him and he died.¹²⁰

Kuat Jal also fell out with Kolang Ket because Kuat killed the husband of Kolang's daughter. As a result, Kuat fled his home and settled in a place called Rubnor, near his sister's *luak*. When Kolang heard this, he circulated a warning to everyone not to give refuge to Kuat. Kuat's sister's husband, Jal Jackok, saw someone outside his *luak* with cattle and went to investigate. He found it was Kuat and called him to come and bring his cattle with him. Kuat explained the seriousness of the situation but Jal still insisted that he come to his home with his cattle. Jal then took

.....
118 Interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer.

119 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer.

120 Interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer; interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer. Other accounts recall an outbreak of disease among his cattle and Cat Kuoth burning in his *luak*.

the decision to confront Kolang and tell him that Kuat was in his *luak*. Nyaker, Jal's wife, tried to stop him but he ignored her. On his arrival at Kolang's house, Jal refused to wait for the mat to be brought and instead sat on wood. Kolang urged him to sit on the mat and tried to ask of his family's health. Jal thought his business was so urgent that he immediately told Kolang that Kuat was in his *luak* and demanded Kolang tell him what he was going to do about it. Kolang said he would follow him to his home. When Jal left, Kolang stepped out after him and followed him to Rubnor. Kolang stood in the entrance of the *luak*, holding his hands out and wondering about the bravery of Jal. He said, 'Even scorpions can bite.' As Jal entered his *luak*, he took a mat upon which to sit. A scorpion had been in the mat and bit his bottom, killing him instantly.¹²¹

Despite his growing authority, throughout Kolang's life people challenged him. One day, for example, Doh Kuay questioned whether, after a successful cattle raid that had been blessed by Kolang, he should be permitted to oversee the distribution of cattle. Doh also challenged whether Kolang Ket should receive any cattle from these distributions. He described how Kolang Ket was old with a grey beard and said that, of course, he does not go on cattle raids any more. He claimed, therefore, that he did not deserve a share of the cattle that had been won. Then, one day, as an act of rebellion, Doh Kuay took a *jack bul*—one of Kolang Ket's best cattle. Instantly, chaos erupted and people started to snatch cattle from each other. Kolang eventually restored order.

Relationship with government

The wars of the last five years have deepened debate within the Western Nuer about what the right relationship with government is. For many in the western Nuer region, the preceding nine years, since the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, had brought uncertainty. The government was also dominated by actors that they had fought against during the 1990s. Since December 2013, many more have suffered from the

.....
 121 Interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer.

actions of the warring parties as they have sought to seize control of government and the power it holds. The difficult relationship with government is, however, not new. The histories of the Nuer prophets provide accounts of how rural Nuer can respond to government power.

It was not until the 1920s that the Anglo–Egyptian Condominium government attempted to administer the Western Nuer. By this point, Kolang had established his possession by MAANI and MAANI’s power in the region. Kolang Ket’s rule over the western Nuer region pre-dates any foreign administration. By 1921, the Condominium government had an established administration in many Dinkalands surrounding the western Nuer region but had no presence in the region itself. The government became concerned that Nuer raids into Dinka areas that they administered would threaten its authority among the Dinka.¹²² The government’s main aim was to establish supervision over the Western Nuer to gain a commitment to stop raids on tribes friendly to government.¹²³ In this era, which came soon after the end of the First World War, the government approach to its administration of Sudan was focused on ruling through preexisting local authorities (known as ‘Indirect Rule’). This motivated the new willingness to work with the Nuer prophets.¹²⁴

District Commissioner Captain Fergusson was tasked with starting government administration in the Western Nuer region.¹²⁵ Fergusson assumed that the prophets had replaced legitimate chiefs in the region but he recognized the importance of working with these current authorities.¹²⁶ Fergusson says of Kolang Ket that he ‘is universally feared and his

.....
122 Douglas H. Johnson, ed., *Empire and the Nuer: Empire and the Nuer: Sources on the Pacification of Southern Sudan 1898–1930*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 164.

123 Johnson, *Empire and the Nuer*, 64.

124 Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 256.

125 Wedderburn-Maxwell, ‘Dok and Aak Nuer’.

126 Captain V. H. Fergusson, Inspector Bahr el-Ghazal Province, ‘Summary of information on the Nuong Nuer in the northern Bahr el-Ghazal’. Extracted from a report by Captain V. H. Fergusson on a tour in Nuer country, February and March 1921 (SMIR 323 [June 1921], App. A), in Johnson, *Empire and the Nuer*, 165.

word is law'.¹²⁷ Fergusson's clear message to the Western Nuer was that they must stop raiding.

Kolang's northern travels had highlighted to him the potential power of government and he was initially eager to accept cooperation with these forces.¹²⁸ With his age and authority, he was also showing a declining inclination for raiding. Personal obligations, notions of justice and the demands of the youth of the community nonetheless would draw Kolang into raids and protection of raiders and, therefore, into conflict with government. The events that brought Kolang into conflict with the government highlight that even established prophets themselves are subject to a variety of local constraints and assertions of alternative approaches by their supporters. In understanding their strategies and powers to make war and peace, it is also crucial to understand these political limitations and ongoing negotiations over power.

Majok was Kolang Ket's oldest son. One dry season, Majok planned a raid on the neighbouring Dinka. The whole of Kolang's family, cattle and community were staying in a dry season cattle camp at Joklual, at a distance from Limpout, Kolang's main wet season base. Joklual gave the cattle access to water and grazing lands. Majok knew his father had given instructions not to go out to raid.¹²⁹ The youth were dissatisfied with this ruling.¹³⁰ Majok and his friends ignored the warning. His friends even encouraged Majok to believe that MAANI had now passed to Majok because his father was growing old and was reluctant to raid.¹³¹

At the time, there was ambiguity about government instructions with respect to raiding.¹³² Government records suggest that the prophets had agreed to its request to stop raiding but they reserved for themselves

.....
127 Fergusson, 'Nuong Nuer', in Johnson, *Empire and the Nuer*, 167.

128 Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 261.

129 Interview with elder from Koch, Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

130 J. P. Crazzolaro, *Zur Gesellschaft und Religion der Nuer*, Vienna: Missionsdruckerei St Gabriel, 1953, 168.

131 Interview with elder from Koch, Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer; Crazzolaro, *Zur Gesellschaft*, 168.

132 On this ambiguity, see: Johnson, *Empire and the Nuer*.

the right to carry out one last raid. In June 1921, Fergusson writes, ‘The Northern Chiefs, Madi and Teng, accepted the Government proposals gladly but reserved to themselves the right to make one more attempt before establishment of Government control to pay off old scores on Wal Athiang of the Agar Dinka.’¹³³

Fergusson’s return was delayed, which could have been interpreted as the government giving permission for this last raid.¹³⁴ The government attributed the first raids to a Nuer prophet from further south in the Nyuong named Gaaluak Nyagh. Kolang Ket had been approached to help with the raid into Dinkalands but he refused.¹³⁵

Wol Athiang also hoped to incite the Nuer to raid again and, therefore, undermine government support for them. Wol told the Nuer that the government would not return.¹³⁶ Wol is reported to have also sent messages to Kolang to incite him. He mocked Kolang for raiding the wrong Dinka and for failing to raid him, even though he possessed the most cattle. On another occasion, Wol Athiang mocked Kolang for his semi-retirement and lack of raiding, suggesting that he was becoming powerless due to old age. Wol joked with his friends that Kolang was now so old that he could not even chew boiled grains. It is difficult for the elderly to chew these grains; if he was unable to chew them this therefore might be a sign of weakness.

Wol decided to send a small delegation to ask Kolang. Before the delegation arrived, however, MAANI knew of their visit and purpose. He ordered his wife to boil grains for him. When the visitors arrived, he welcomed them and asked his wife to bring the boiled grains for them to eat. He pretended as if he was eating them although in reality he could not. The delegation then returned home. Wol’s delegation was a provocation to MAANI as it questioned his strength to fight and raid.¹³⁷

133 Fergusson, ‘Nuong Nuer’, in Johnson, *Empire and the Nuer*, 165.

134 Johnson, *Empire and the Nuer*, 165–170.

135 Fergusson, ‘Nuong Nuer’, in Johnson, *Empire and the Nuer*, 153.

136 Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 257.

137 Interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer.

Irrespective of Kolang's calls for restraint, there was growing demand among the Nuer to raid. At the time of the raid, Majok told his father that he was going fishing with his friends so that his father would not stop him from raiding.¹³⁸ Government records suggest that the raid might have been the result of a dispute over fishing rights.¹³⁹ In contrast, oral history suggests that fishing was just an excuse for Majok's planned raid. Majok raided the neighbouring Dinka and Kolang heard of this from others. Kolang summoned his son Majok and his friends, asking them to explain where they had been. They answered that they had gone fishing but Kolang warned them not to raid ever again.

Majok and his friends waited a long while but then approached Kolang again to ask if they could go fishing. They had already hidden their shields in advance before approaching Kolang so that he would not know they were about to raid. Kolang again warned them not to raid. As the young men left, Kolang called to Majok's mother and told her to look at her son closely, from head to toe. He warned her that it would be the last time she saw him.¹⁴⁰

In June 1922, they went out to raid and clashed with the Dinka.¹⁴¹ Government records also record this as a second raid.¹⁴² Majok and his group were defeated and most of the *Karam* age-set were killed, including Majok and his cousin Yuac Liem.¹⁴³ Those who had survived returned that evening but before they reached Kolang, he had already gathered his wives to warn that they would receive heavy news. Those returning from

.....

138 Interview with elder from Koch, Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

139 Johnson, *Empire and the Nuer*, 171.

140 Interview with elder from Koch, Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer; Crazzolara, *Zur Gesellschaft*, 168.

141 Fergusson to Governor, Waw, 9 June 1922, NRO Civsec. 1/8/5, in Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, p.258.

142 Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, p.258.

143 Interview with elder from Koch, Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer; Crazzolara, *Zur Gesellschaft*, 168; Johnson, *Empire and the Nuer*, 171; H.G. Wedderburn-Maxwell, 'The Jagei Nuer', 16 July 1945, P.P. Howell papers, Sudan Archive, University of Durham.

the raid moved separately and secretly, fearing that if they were noticed Kolang would ask after Majok. They feared to tell him of his death.¹⁴⁴

Finally, Gatwich, Kolang's nephew, told him the news. Upon hearing this, Kolang could not speak. He stayed seated until dawn broke and then he rose up with his pole to march out of the dry season camp. Behind him, the cattle wrestled themselves free from their tethers and began to follow Kolang. All the inhabitants of the camp moved from where there were and headed back to Limpout with Kolang. Despite it being the dry season, a thick cloud accompanied Kolang on his journey. At Limpout, it had rained and streams flowed with water, which meant Kolang and his people could spend the dry season at home.¹⁴⁵

MAANI's powers extended to comforting Kolang in his grief. The prophet's powers—even to protect his own son—were limited by the ambitions of youth and the violence of war. For many Western Nuer, both then and now, this is a familiar experience. After Majok's death, Kolang was responsible for avenging his deceased son. As Fergusson later notes:

It seems that on the death of Majok, he [Kolang] lost all that he valued in his life, and, realizing that the dreams he had fostered of seeing his son take his place as the greatest Nuer Chief were not to come true, turned his thoughts solely to that of revenge irrespective of the consequences.¹⁴⁶

Kolang came out of semi-retirement to avenge his son's death.¹⁴⁷

Kolang Ket and Fergusson first met at the former's home in late July 1923.¹⁴⁸ After their first meeting, Fergusson reports hope of assistance from 'the "kujur" chief Madi'.¹⁴⁹ Fergusson believed that despite the

.....
144 Interview with elder from Koch, Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

145 Interview with elder from Koch, Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

146 Fergusson, 'Nuer. Ba[h]r El Ghazal', Appendix, SMIR 350 (Sep 1923) 5, in Johnson, *Empire and the Nuer*, 170-172.

147 Crazzolara, *Zur Gesellschaft*, 168-169; Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 258-259.

148 Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 261.

149 As Fergusson writes, 'The Rill Nuer Chief Madi is universally feared and his word is law' [SNR (1921), 12], in Johnson, *Empire and the Nuer*, 147.

death of his son, Kolang accepted government authority. Kolang had petitioned Fergusson for government help in defeating the Dinka and apparently he was devastated when this was not assured.¹⁵⁰ Kolang had killed a bull to welcome Fergusson, with the latter threatening to replace it (and therefore reject his welcome) until Kolang finally agreed not to raid. Fergusson promised that he would investigate the circumstances of Majok's death and hold the Dinka accountable if they were to blame.¹⁵¹ With this commitment, and the threat of enmity with the government, Kolang promised not to raid.

Government faith in Kolang's loyalty was to be short lived. Gaaluak Nyagh, a Nuer prophet from Nyuong, had married Nyakuach, the daughter of Kolang Ket. Therefore, as his son-in-law, Gaaluak knew he could run to Kolang for safety.¹⁵² When threatened with government arrest for raiding, Gaaluak escaped from Nyuong and ran north. He tried to hide in Dok but people kept telling the government authorities where he was. Eventually, Gaaluak made it to Jagei by crossing the Gol River at Wic Cieng.¹⁵³ From March 1924, he sought refuge with Kolang Ket.¹⁵⁴ The government demanded that Kolang hand over Gaaluak to the authorities but he refused to do so.¹⁵⁵ This created enmity between Kolang Ket and the government.¹⁵⁶ The government blamed Gaaluak's influence for

150 Johnson, *Empire and the Nuer*, 171.

151 Johnson, *Empire and the Nuer*, 172.

152 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer; interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer; interview with elder from Koch, Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

153 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer.

154 Interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer.

155 Interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer.

156 Interview with elder from Koch, Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer; interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25

Kolang's rebellion and the mobilization of his youth against the government. They also suspected that Kolang no longer controlled the youth around him and that they were increasingly obedient to Gaaluak.¹⁵⁷

Kolang was pulled between his commitments to his son-in-law and to government. His granting of refuge to his son-in-law was not an intentional rebellion against the order of the government. Instead, Kolang was upholding core values of the Nuer moral order and, therefore, cementing this moral community and its stability. Many Nuer prophets since the times of Kolang Ket have been forced to make similar choices between deeply embedded social obligations and the passing demands of the government of the day, including to make peace or mobilize for war.

In order to establish its authority and stop raiding, the government took firm action. Government forces established a base at the edge of Limpout (Kolang's camp) in an area known as Choatjok. They moved soldiers and heavy military equipment there. At the same time, Kolang Ket instructed all Jagei not to advance on the government but to gather at Limpout and wait. He instructed them not to be the first to attack but to wait and see if the government would advance. Only if the government advanced as far a specific point, marked by a *loic* (cattle peg) and a large white bull (*thak bour*), would Kolang's forces then retaliate.¹⁵⁸

Kolang's travels to northern Sudan had taught him about the force of government. There, he had seen bullets set light to coconut palms. The Jagei only had one gun among them and Kolang knew this would not save them. It was clear that they would be no match for the machine guns and rifles of the government.¹⁵⁹ Nonetheless, many men kept mobilizing

.....
 July 2017, in Nuer; interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer.

157 Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 262.

158 Interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer; interview with elder from Koch, Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

159 Interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer.

to fight the government, despite Kolang's instructions.¹⁶⁰ They openly criticized Kolang's response.¹⁶¹ Kolang's wife, Kan Wuer, also incited people to attack.¹⁶² Many of the Jagei were persuaded and attacked the government at Coatjok.¹⁶³

On 6 January 1925, the first major government military offensive against the Western Nuer took place, targeting Gaaluak and Kolang.¹⁶⁴ The government column was attacked at Khor Yirkuo by 2,000 Nuer warriors.¹⁶⁵ As they attacked, they were quickly chased back by the government forces.¹⁶⁶ They ran to MAANI's base. Kolang instructed those who had remained to hang up the drum (*bul*). They retreated from the fighting as far as Wut, near Nyalo. People also ran to Thor. The government pursued them and kept attacking, burning MAANI's *luak*. They killed more than 300 Nuer and took more than 1,500 cattle.¹⁶⁷ The government offensive was so large that the Jagei feared all their people would be killed.¹⁶⁸ The fighting was so severe that human and animal bones could be seen littering the ground for a long time, until a heavy flood washed them away.¹⁶⁹

.....

160 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer; interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer.

161 Interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer.

162 Interview with elder from Koch, Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

163 Interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer.

164 Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 262.

165 Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 262.

166 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer; V. Fergusson, *The Story of Fergie Bey*, London: Oxford University Press, 1930.

167 Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 262.

168 Interview with elder from Koch, Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

169 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI,

As the government attacked, the Jagei were split into two groups. One group, which was led by Jiath, decided to surrender.¹⁷⁰ He handed over this daughter, Nyakat, as a sign of peace.¹⁷¹ The government then raised a British flag at his base.¹⁷² Everyone who did not want to fight the government was instructed to report to Jiath's base. The other group of Jagei refused to submit to the government and ran to Bar, where Kolang was first possessed by MAANI. They hid if they saw anyone. Kolang travelled with them and would sit down to hide, while his escorts lay besides him.¹⁷³ The brutal government offensives continued. Fearing deadly consequences for his people and having heard of the actions of Jiath Kor, Kolang realized that the conflict with the government would only end if he surrendered. By 7 March 1925, both Gaaluak and Kolang had done so.¹⁷⁴

Caath Obang was then the government chief and friend of Captain Fergusson. Caath had no personal history of leadership but gained power through his association with government. He replaced Gaaluak in this position.¹⁷⁵ Shortly afterwards, the government came to see him as oppressive and a tyrant for his treatment of his people.¹⁷⁶ He lacked

.....

Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer.

170 Interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer.

171 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer; interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer; interview with elder from Koch, Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer.

172 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer.

173 Interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer.

174 Fergusson to Civil Secretary, 7 March 1925, NRO Intel 2/27/217, in Johnson, *Empire and the Nuer*, p.276.

175 H.G. Wedderburn-Maxwell, 'The Nyuong' n.d., P.P. Howell papers, Sudan Archive, University of Durham.

176 Wedderburn-Maxwell, 'The Nyuong'. n; P. Coriat, Western Nuer District, In. Willis and Johnson, *The Upper Nile Province Handbook*, 303.

popular appeal, struggled to control his people, and had failed to protect Captain Fergusson's house from looting and being set on fire.¹⁷⁷ The prophets were a threat to his logic of authority and he was eager to replace them. He provided scouts for the government offensive against Kolang and Gaaluak.¹⁷⁸ In order to surrender to government, Kolang Ket reported himself to Caath Obang.¹⁷⁹ He was arrested in Thor.¹⁸⁰

While under arrest, the government tried to move Kolang to Malakal so that he could be formally imprisoned and tried at the provincial government headquarters. They forced Kolang into a boat to travel down the Nile. When they tried to move the boat, however, it would not move. They tried again and again. With Kolang in the boat, even when the engine worked, the boat would not move anywhere.¹⁸¹ In the end, they gave up. When the decision had been made to return to land, Kolang just touched his hand on the water and the boat instantly appeared at the shore side.¹⁸² The government kept Kolang at Thor, which is where he eventually died.¹⁸³

Nearly 100 years after the death of Kolang Ket, many Nuer recognize the dangers of being unintentionally caught up in wars with the government. They know that their loyalties can easily be assumed and that this can prove deadly. Kolang Ket's relationship with government

.....
177 Wedderburn-Maxwell, 'The Nyuong'.

178 Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 264.

179 Interview with elder from Koch whose grandfather was in the same age-set as Kolang Ket (namely Lelnyang) and who himself is known for singing the songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 25 July 2017, in Nuer.

180 Interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer.

181 Interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer; interview with elder from Koch, Bentiu POC, 1 August 2017, in Nuer; interview with teacher and community leader from Dok, Bentiu POC, 19 September 2017. Some recall that the engine did not work.

182 Interview with teacher and community leader from Dok, Bentiu POC, 19 September 2017.

183 Interview with elder from Koch in same age-set as Kuol Kong Kolang and brother of man who sings songs of MAANI, Bentiu POC, 31 July 2017, in Nuer.

resonates with the experiences of many Nuer today. It reminds them that the powers of the divine can provide opportunities to push back—even against militarized and technologically superior power.

Conclusion

The history of Kolang Ket, as re-told in the Bentiu POC in 2017, highlights the prophet's shifting agenda between war and peace. Neither approach is consistently favoured and war is sometimes seen as legitimate. What is consistent is the belief that war and peace are both intimately related to divine power and behaviour. Many wars can be explained as being the consequence of disobedience to the prophets or as a result of a failure to recognize their authority. While wars are fought by people with guns—over political power, land, other resources or for other reasons—they nonetheless have divine causes and consequences. If the causes of war are found in the relationship between humanity and the divine, then people have the capacity to correct this situation. They can rectify their relationship to the divine, both as individuals and a community.

South Sudanese can easily feel powerless about the realities of war, peace and their experience of day-to-day violence. The wars around them are dictated by powerful elites who fight battles for their own political and material advantage. For the residents of Bentiu POC, recognition of the divine element in their current situation provides the opportunity to reclaim agency over their lives. Through their relationship with Nuer prophets, people in the Bentiu POC feel empowered to believe that peace, or a redress of the consequences of war, is still possible. These histories push back against discourses and other interpretations of history that make war feel inevitable.

As observers decide how to respond to the unfolding peace agreements in South Sudan, greater attention should be paid to the detailed realities through which South Sudanese try to claim their own authority to make war and peace. More than just supporting a silencing of weapons, there is a continued need to support a shift in power away from turbulent elite politics to authorities who seek a more lasting and meaningful peace.

Glossary of acronyms, words and phrases

<i>jakok</i>	(Nuer) crow
<i>kuar ghok</i>	master of the cows
<i>kuar muon</i>	earth priests or leopard skin priests; singular, <i>kuaar muon</i>
<i>luak</i>	cattle byre
<i>ngom</i>	marking knife; used in age-set initiation ceremonies
POC	Protection of Civilians; UN protection zones
<i>riek</i>	shrine stick
SPLA-IO	Sudan People's Liberation Army-in-Opposition
SPLM-IO	Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition

Bibliography

- Crazzolara, J. P. *Zur Gesellschaft und Religion der Nueer*. Vienna: Missionsdruckerei St Gabriel, 1953.
- Fergusson, V. *The Story of Fergie Bey*. London: Oxford University Press, 1930.
- Hutchinson, Sharon E. and Naomi R. Pendle, 'Violence, legitimacy and prophecy: Nuer struggles with uncertainty in South Sudan', *American Ethnologist* 42/3 (2015): 415–430.
- Hutchinson, Sharon E. *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War, and the State*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.
- Ibreck, Rachel and Naomi Pendle. 'Community Security and Justice under United Nations Governance: Lessons from Chiefs' Courts in South Sudan's Protection of Civilians Sites', *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* 6/1 (2017): 16.
- James, Wendy. *The Listening Ebony: Moral Knowledge, Religion, and Power among the Uduk of Sudan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. [originally 1988]
- Johnson, Douglas H., ed. *Empire and the Nuer: Sources on the Pacification of Southern Sudan 1898–1930*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Johnson, Douglas H. *Nuer Prophets: A History of Prophecy from the Upper Nile in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.
- Johnson, Douglas H. 'Prophecy and Mahdism in the Upper Nile: An Examination of Local Experiences of the Mahdiyya in Southern Sudan', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 20/1 (1993): 42–56.
- Mathya, Gillian. 'Bringing History Back In: Past, Present, and Conflict in Rwanda and the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo', *Journal of African History* 58/3 (2017): 463–487.
- Pendle, Naomi. 'Protection and Prophets: Struggles to protect in South Sudan'. Oslo: Norwegian Refugee Council, 2018.
- Wedderburn-Maxwell, H.G., 'The Nyuong', n.d.. P.P. Howell papers, Sudan Archive, University of Durham.
- Wedderburn-Maxwell, H.G. 'Dok and Aak Nuer'. 1 January 1945. P.P. Howell papers, Sudan Archive, University of Durham.
- Wedderburn-Maxwell, H.G. 'The Jagei Nuer'. 16 July 1945. P.P. Howell papers, Sudan Archive, University of Durham.

Willis, C. A. (compiled) and Johnson, D, (ed.) *The Upper Nile Province Handbook*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Selected RVI publications



Politics, Power and Chiefship in Famine and War

This report investigates how customary authorities on South Sudan's border with southern Darfur have managed repeated wars and famines, both for the communities that they claim to represent and for their own survival and benefit.



Changing Power Among Murle Chiefs

This report investigates how Murle customary authorities navigate and negotiate political, military and spiritual authority, while simultaneously challenging the view that Murle society has no organic leaderships structures.



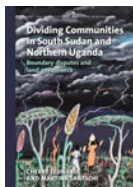
Instruments in Both Peace and War: South Sudanese discuss civil society actors and their role

A series of public debates on the role of civil society that took place in June 2016 at the Catholic University in Juba.



Now We Are Zero

A report based on the first meeting of traditional leaders and chiefs from opposing sides of the conflict since 2013, which took place under the RVI SSCA project in Kuron in 2016, where they discussed their own roles in peace and conflict.



Dividing Communities in South Sudan and Northern Uganda: Boundary disputes and land governance

This report argues that boundary disputes must be understood in the context of changing land values, patterns of decentralization and local hybrid systems of land governance.



The role of transnational networks and mobile citizens in South Sudan's global community

This report explores the nature of the impact of South Sudan's international community on the evolution of the country's civil wars.



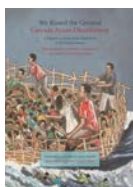
Expectations and belonging in Dire Dawa

This report analyses the drivers and dynamics of rural to urban migration in Ethiopia and the impacts on the physical and social infrastructure in Dire Dawa.



Un microcosme de militarisation: Conflit, gouvernance et mobilisation armée en territoire d'Uvira

Ce rapport analyse la militarisation en territoire d'Uvira et la manière dont celle-ci façonne les rapports entre conflits locaux, gouvernance et mobilisation armée. *Also in English.*



Carrada Ayaan Dhunkanny: Waa socdaalkii tahriibka ee Somaliland ilaa badda Medhiteeraniyanka

Sheekadani waa waraysigii ugu horreeyay ee ku saabsan waayo aragnimadii wiil dhallinyaro ah oo reer Somaliland oo taahriibay. *Also in English.*

RVI books and reports are free to download from www.riftvalley.net. Printed copies are available from Amazon and other online retailers, and from selected bookstores.

Prophets—those recognised as having been ‘seized’ by a divinity—have played an important role in the history of South Sudan, particularly that of the Nuer people. They were seen as being powerful political actors and, alongside chiefs, important intermediaries for the colonial authorities. However, the influence of the Nuer prophets goes much further than mobilizing or de-mobilizing the Nuer population to or from violence. In the UN Protection of Civilians Site (POCS) in Bentiu, where over one hundred thousand war-displaced now live, the histories of the prophets have become a means through which POCS residents explain both the spiritual causes of war and their current predicament.

Speaking Truth to Power focuses on the life of Kolang Ket—a major prophet in the early twentieth century. His story, as recounted in the Bentiu POCS, includes his seizure by the deity known as MAANI, how he has wielded political authority and his legacy, which extends to the present day. Acknowledging the influence of the prophets is important to those trying to understand the contemporary political reality of South Sudan. This, by extension, can help external actors to assist the South Sudanese population in shaping a more sustainable, locally relevant peace, which goes beyond the fragile elite deals normally agreed by the country’s politicians.



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra



Rift Valley Institute
Taasisi ya Bonde Kuu
معهد الأخذود العظيم
Machadka Dooxada Rift
የስምታ ሸለቆ የጥናት ተቋም
Instituto do Vale do Rift
东非大裂谷研究院
Institut de la Vallée du Rift

ISBN 978-1-907431-60-9



9 781907 431609 >

