Prophecy and Experience:

The Dynamics of Nuer Religious Thought

in Post-Independence South Sudan

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This article examines how the Nuer people in post-independence South Sudan reinterpret their experiences through past prophecies or *kuɔth* (divinity), which supports the power of prophecies. The Nuer prophecies, which have been handed down through the generations, are deeply related to the ways that Nuer people cope with new situations such as civil war, development assistance, and national independence. Although most Nuer, including elders, do not know all prophecies, they are told among people based on their personal interests. By referring to two anthropologists, Evans-Pritchard and Lienhardt, this paper explores how the Nuer find their own experiences in the prophecies, focusing on three types of case studies: narratives of prophecy fulfillment; practices where a "church" worships a prophet; and a new prophet that emerged during the 2011 conflicts. These cases show that prophecies which come true and prophets are always judged by people finding an "active subject" (such as *kuɔth*, Deng, or their ancestors) around themselves or in specific events. Moreover, people who discuss the prophecies by scrutinizing their experiences in relation to active subjects and configurations of experiences start to realize a new realm of being, which can provide them with a way of shaping their own reality.

Key words: prophecy, experience, *kuɔth*, Nuer, South Sudan

I. INTRODUCTION

The Nuer people in South Sudan have been dealing with challenges and social change on several levels; they have faced decades of civil war, development, modern education, the spread of HIV, national independence, and the most recent conflict, which started at the end of 2013. Some of the Nuer people I met occasionally explained their fate or experiences as being due to "prophecy fulfillment." A famous Nuer prophet, Ngundeng Bong, who died in 1906, is said to have predicted the abovementioned events and phenomena over a century ago. When people encounter events that seem to be fulfilled prophecies, they express their surprise by saying "*ɛ kuɔth*" which means "it is a God/divinity."

The British anthropologist Sir Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (hereafter called E-P) suggested that a full understanding of the word *kuɔth*, which translates as "God," "Spirit," or "spirits" based on context, is key to Nuer philosophy; he constantly heard the word during his fieldwork (Evans-Pritchard 1956: vi). Following E-P's research, other studies on "epiphanies" in Greater Sudan –

which include prophecies, spirit possession, myths, songs, and dreams – have described how people cope with the power of the state, violence, and their predicaments through local religiosity or other modes of understanding the world (Deng 1988; James 1988; Boddy 1989; Johnson 1994; Okazaki 1997, 1999). These studies clarified how religious ideas, idioms, and practices have been reshaped under newer circumstances.

In recent conflicts in post-independence South Sudan [1], several Nuer prophets reportedly emerged and influenced aspects of the clashes (Hashimoto 2013; Hutchinson and Pendle 2015). It is not only during recent discord that Nuer prophecies have been linked with historical experiences that can support the influence of these prophets. During past civil wars, military commanders used prophecies to incite people toward violence; the predictions provided some people with a way to interpret their fate, in addition to hope for the future. In previous studies on Nuer prophecies, which have developed along with social changes, prophecies and their interpretations were analyzed together with concepts such as "moral community" (Johnson 1994) and "collective inspiration" (Hutchinson 1996) among the Nuer across generations and regions; the prophecies have also been viewed as a means of "resistance" against "modernity" (Falge 2008).

Although these features and functions of prophecies were reported in previous studies, some other aspects should be considered. How have people of different backgrounds come to trust these prophecies? How do prophecies form or unite people's experiences (which can vary depending on context) in relation to the notion of *kuoth* or other elements that constitute the trustworthiness of prophecies?

Some perspectives on Nilotic religious thought denoted by E-P and Godfrey Lienhardt (who examined divinity among the Dinka) are not based on an analytical framework of the static structure of religiosity/divinity, but rather on fluidity and dynamic correlation with experience, thus comparing them with European modes of thought. E-P and Lienhardt described how people conceptualize several events by investigating the ontological status of divinities, which shapes their experiences. Their perspectives also provide insight into the process by which they share their experiences with others through narration, conversation, and daily practices.

This paper explores how Nuer people shape their experiences through past prophecies and (re) discovered powers of *kuoth* inherent in different levels of events. By referring to the work of E-P and Lienhardt, this paper elucidates which elements in events and prophecies the Nuer inspect, and which ones represent the trustworthiness of predictions.

This paper does not intend to theoretically discuss religiosity or to define experience [2], but rather aims to point out how difficult it is to grasp the current situation of the Nuer prophecies without mentioning the "classical" works of Nilotic religion, which provide us with essential aspects of the conceptual relationships among religiosity, subjectivity, and experiences.

In the next section (Section 2), I will provide a general overview of studies on religious leaders in East Africa and employ some arguments of E-P and Lienhardt, especially in regards to the style of experience. In Section 3, I will describe some cases of related prophecy fulfillment based on my fieldwork in South Sudan [3] and extract their features. Finally, in Section 4, I will discuss what elements make people trust events as forms of prophecy fulfillment, and the system by which this trustworthiness comes to be shared by various people.

II. DIVINITIES IN MOTION

Since the colonial era, a number of anti-governmental movements led by local religious leaders have reportedly occurred in East African societies. Earlier studies intensively discuss the function that religious leaders have played in unifying local communities. They also suggest the structural importance of these leaders in their societies; they can embody the social structure in the community since they sometimes serve as moral indicators when social order is threatened by a crisis (Evans-Pritchard 1940; Douglas 1970). More contemporary investigations have emphasized new aspects of these leaders (who created anti-colonial ideologies due to cultural contact with European societies) based on a

broad analysis of their societies' historical contexts. In addition, studies have focused on the interactions between local cosmologies or religious thought and external elements, which also seem to support the power of religious leaders. These studies clarified how features of social change were interwoven with local cosmology or beliefs, thus shaping aspects of social movements (Lan 1985; Ranger 1985; Allen 1991; Anderson and Johnson 1995).

Another issue seems worthy of consideration: Although the interactions among several religious ideas, idioms, and practices comprise an important background to prophetic power, these interactions do not directly explain the roots of a prediction's trustworthiness. As I observed, nowadays, even young people who have had an urban upbringing and do not know much about these "traditions" or prophetic knowledge sometimes talk about prophecies. In such a situation, it is not necessarily accurate to identify narratives based on prophecies as always belonging to a specific type of "traditional knowledge," new religious influences, or interactions between the two. There seems room to discuss how prophecies become acceptable, even for those who do not have such knowledge. To understand this feature of prophecies or interpretations, it is necessary to clarify the process by which multiple people, including those who do not believe in prophecies, come to think that forecasts are trustworthy under certain circumstances.

The answer to this problem seems to lie in the ontological status of divinity or *kuɔth*, which are always mentioned along with prophecies in order to justify them. It is difficult to find an equivalent word in the Nuer language for the English word "prophecy." It is expressed using terms such as "talk of *kuɔth* (prophets)" (*ruacni kuɔth/gok*) or "work of *kuɔth*" (*latdɛ kuɔth*). When it comes to describing "prophecy fulfillment," the Nuer simply say "talk of *kuɔth* has come" (*ruacni kuɔth cɛ kä bɛn*), or simply "it is *kuɔth*" (*ɛ kuɔth*).

In other words, prophecies are understood as *kuɔth* or signs of it. It is perhaps significant to understand the status of *kuɔth* that emerges in daily occurrences, which can be categorized as different levels of events, seemingly without any connection to each other.

E-P used the concept of "refraction" to understand this aspect of *kuɔth*, which corresponds "with different levels of social activity, but an interpretation in terms of social structure merely shows us how the idea of Spirit takes various forms corresponding to departments of social life" (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 121). *Kuɔth* is mentioned in specific dimensions of Nuer social life such as natural disasters, sickness, the birth of twins, and a vulture landing on someone's head in a certain moment. It is said that *kuɔth* is omnipresent; it is described as "both one and the many" (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 113). According to E-P, *kuɔth* refracts in relation to human affairs and interests as one of numerous figures through which it is made concretely known, in varying degrees of materialization, to human intelligence (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 121). E-P described *kuɔth* and other forms of religious thought that are inseparable from the styles of human experiences.

Yet as E-P pointed out, the word "refraction" indicates the structural features of *kuɔth*, but does not explain the concept of *kuɔth* itself. What he discussed as the dimension of refraction in *kuɔth* emerges in nature, society, materials, human relations, and historical experiences; it is also an aspect of human experiences that perhaps makes it possible to categorize those phenomena as separate issues. These categories used to be recognized as separate in Western society, and are *a priori* concepts used by people who want to analyze specific situations in different parts of the world by referring to the abovementioned categories and classifying them to make the world understandable.

In the Nuer's frame of reference, forms of *kuɔth* are sometimes differentiated by giving them certain names and characters, which can be connected by what E-P regarded as essential for "understanding from within their view":

> God is also experienced unrefracted at all levels, down to the individual; so that a structural interpretation explains only certain characteristics of the refractions and not the idea of Spirit in itself...If we wish to seize the essential nature of what we are inquiring into, we have to try to examine the matter from the inside also, to see it as Nuer see it, to examine how they differentiate at each level between one spirit and another (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 121–122).

His identification of the essential part of *kuɔth* – which can produce certain kinds of experiences or imagination through realizing the ontological status of *kuɔth* within the world or individual – could provide a clue to ascertaining from where the trustworthiness of prophecies is derived. He concludes his view on *kuɔth* and Nuer experiences as follows:

> We can, therefore, say no more than that Spirit is an intuitive apprehension, something experienced in response to certain situations but known directly only to the <u>imagination</u> and not to the senses. Nuer religious conceptions are properly speaking not concepts but <u>imaginative constructions</u>. Hence the response to them is imaginative too, a kind of miming. Words and gestures transport us to a <u>realm of experience</u> where what the eye sees and the ear hears is not the same as what the mind perceived. Hands are raised to the sky in supplication, but it is not the sky which is supplicated but what it represents to the imagination (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 321, underlining added).

We should not consider the word "imagination" simply as "fantasy" or "fairy tales," since the existence of *kuɔth* can be sensed by visible signs and performances and can affect human beings.

Lienhardt translated the word "Divinity" or "Power/powers" to express what E-P described as "God," "Spirit," and "spirits," which can imply a "supranatural" existence in English. In doing so, he tried to avoid the direct understanding of the Dinka faith through the filter of European ideas about religion. Lienhardt also pointed out that "these Powers are regarded as higher in the scale of being than men...but they are not imagined to form a separate 'spirit world' of the Dinka" (Lienhardt 1961: 28). In Dinka society, Powers intervene in human lives and emerge in the interpretation of events, which makes it possible for the Dinka to classify events into two kinds, "that which is of men" and "that which is of powers" (Lienhardt 1961: 28).

As E-P used the word "refraction" to express the character of omnipresent *kuɔth*, Lienhardt used the expression "configuration of experience" (Lienhardt 1961: 147, 161) to explain the status of the divinity that cannot be separated from physical, historical, and spiritual occasions.

> ...we should not expect to find them imagining them in Powers, and part of our difficulty in interpreting the Powers lies in the fact that the experiences they image are not correlated by the Dinka in alternative ways...they include what we should distinguish as physical and moral experience in an organic unity. (Lienhardt 1961: 160)

Further, he refers to the Latin word *passioness* to describe the complex status of experience or the self, which cannot be easily understood through the modern European premise of the subject/self. According to Lienhardt, *passioness* has "an opposite" meaning from the English word "action" in relation to the human self (Lienhardt 1961: 151). When he cited the concept of *passioness*, he suggested that the Dinka view themselves collectively, not as a subject to understand the world or to believe in Divinity, but as an object that is always affected by Divinity (Lienhardt 1961: 151–156). When some studies cited Lienhardt's use of *passioness*, they asserted that this *passioness* did not take the modern European style of the subject, but was a passive style in which divinities intervene in the self or experience (Kramer 1993; Mittermayer 2012). Yet it does not seem correct to define *passioness* merely as the passive style of the human self. Rather, according to Lienhardt's usage of the word, it contains aspects of the ontological status of self, passive/active sites, and the dynamic connection between these two kinds of sites in religious practices performed in Nuer society.

Lienhardt also insisted on the process by which people "dissociate" powers and objectify their experiences as being "always latent within them." Leinhardt was referring to the process by which people share objectified experiences in a certain community through practices or narratives on Powers [4].

Lienhardt analyzed the concept of *passioness* as that which is constituted to the "active subject" (i.e., Powers) and its "affective accompaniments" (i.e., the human being or self). By illuminating these two divisions, he shed light on how people discover the relationship between them within their everyday

lives or experiences.

For instance, a diviner is said to be "a man in whom the division (of experience) is permanently present." Lienhardt explained that when diviners try to explore the cause of misfortune or sickness, they try to dissociate the relationship between the "active subject" and its "affective accompaniments" within one's experience. During a Dinka sacrifice, "the power, which is the cause of suffering" is said to be "cut off" or "separated" from the man and his suffering, and guilt is placed "upon the back" of the sacrificial victim (Lienhardt 1961: 153). Through this performance, those who attend the ritual can access an individual's experience. With the death of the sacrificial victim, both the experience of suffering and the active subject are "carried away in its [the sacrificial victim's] death" (Lienhardt 1961: 153).

The concept of *passioness* is what makes people objectify the active subject within their experience. At the same time, it makes people understand the status of the *self* and grasp what always affects their experience, which is the power of the active subject. The reinterpreted experience is then transferred to a substance (i.e., the sacrificial victim/animal) through the practices of human beings. However, the effects on experiences are not so active as to control people's misfortune or the powers behind misfortune. It is enough to know the cause of suffering, accept it, and recollect this status of experience in the community. What E-P and Lienhardt discussed as experience is one aspect of the world or self that can only be sensed through *kuɔth* or powers. It seems significant that the concept of *passioness* reveals not only the status of the human self as passive existence, but also the process of objectifying one's experiences, and how these experiences have been shaped and shared. However, it would be incorrect to suggest that this implies that people live within a closed cosmology comprised of traditional ideas or spirits. Both E-P and Lienhardt discuss "the sign of *kuɔth*" or "the active subject" that is realized through new events, including social changes (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 106–122; Lienhardt 1961: 147–170). In their work, through case studies, they described these events and *kuɔth*/powers as being grounded in each other. Their approaches, which focus on the status of divinities and the process of sharing experiences, seem essential to clarifying the trustworthiness of prophecies.

III. THE ROOTS OF THE TRUSTWORTHINESS OF PROPHECIES

Nuer prophets and the omnipresence of kuɔth

Nuer prophets are called "*gok*" or "*gwan kuɔth*" in the Nuer language. *Gok* means a "sack" which is filled with *kuɔth*, and "*gwan kuɔth*" means a "master (owner) of *kuɔth*." A prophet has a specific type of *kuɔth* (*tɛɛ kuɔth*) that has its own name. Such people are recognized as those who have been seized by *kuɔth* (*kuɔth cɛ käp*). They are known as *gok* (*gwan kuɔth*) due to "miraculous" acts such as running inhumanly fast, eating what normal people do not eat, and making correct prognostications. A person having a certain type of *kuɔth* is not so rare, but those who perform multiple miracles that last a long time and affect many people's lives are recognized as great prophets.

In his work *The Nuer* (1940), E-P emphasized the structural importance of prophets who unify allies during times of war. Particularly during the Second Sudanese Civil War, commanders used Nuer prophets and some prophetic powers to incite locals toward violence (Jok and Hutchinson 1999). At the same time, they were known beyond certain regions as wartime peacemakers (Johnson 1994; James 1997). Yet not all locals believe in those prophets; sometimes they were said to be magicians (*kujur*), evildoers (*sheitan*), or witchdoctors (*gwan wal*).

How do prophecies obtain popular authenticity? Next, I will describe the narrative features of prophecies or prophecy fulfillment by examining a local "church" (*luak kuɔth / dwil kuɔth*) that worships the prophet Ngundeng or the *kuɔth* that seized him, called Deng.

Luak kuɔth Ngundeng/Ngundeng Church

I conducted fieldwork at Ngundeng Church in Bor, where I stayed at the home of a "pastor" of the so-called "Ngundeng Church" (*luak kuɔth Ngundeng*). Although most citizens in Bor are Dinka,

there was a small settlement in the town where the majority of residents are Nuer. The Nuer people call the settlement "*ci nuer bɛn*" which means "the Nuer came."

Ngundeng is recognized as a gift from Deng; *ngun* means gift. *Deng* is a name given to certain type of *kuɔth* that can be related to elements such as rain or fertility. It is difficult to consider Deng, Ngundeng, and *kuɔth* as having individual existences since these three figures are rarely differentiated in prayer at Ngundeng Church. They are interrelated and cannot be considered separately.

Ngundeng was known as a crazy person (*yoŋ*) early on in life. He exhibited several "abnormal" behaviors (Evans-Pritchard 1935; also see Johnson 1994: 73–125) that were later interpreted as acts of a person who was seized by *kuɔth*. The word "*luak(dwil) kuɔth*," which I translated as "church," means "cowshed of a *kuɔth*," and can also indicate a Christian church. As seen in the next section, Ngundeng Church was initially established by borrowing some ideas and practices from Christianity during the Second Sudanese Civil War. The members of Ngundeng Church pray every Wednesday. I observed around twenty to thirty people there [5]. Most church members in Bor are elderly women. As described below, Ngundeng Church is one of the places where the words and behaviors of Ngundeng are (re)discovered, fermented, and shaped as "prophecies."

Prophecies revived: Media and practices

Ngundeng's prophecies are currently recognized based on songs he composed and his behaviors during his lifetime; they are handed down via oral tradition. Songs of Ngundeng (*diit Ngundeng* or *maari*) that contain a specific type of vocal action like shouting/yelling require special skills and are mainly sung by elders. These songs or lyrics are said to include a certain aspect of "truth" (*thuok*) such as historical events, visions of the future, or causes of daily suffering.

Multiple media emerged during social changes, which made it possible for the songs to be handed down across generations. One of the most influential media could be Ngundeng Church and its products related to Ngundeng's songs.

Ngundeng Church was established by some Nuer refugees who fled to Ethiopia from Southern Sudan in the 1990s (Falge 2008). Some members composed new songs of Ngundeng, which include interpretations of his original songs (*maari*); their melodies are similar to the tunes of Christian hymns. When the refugees who were members of Ngundeng Church in Ethiopia came back to Southern Sudan, the songs were reimported. Members continue to compose new songs of Ngundeng and discover new predictions based on events they have faced. Thus, it is not possible to grasp "all" of Ngundeng's prophecies.

Table 1 shows the process of weekly prayers (*pal*) in Ngundeng Church. It is quite similar to the process of Christian church prayers, except for No. 5 "*reportni*" (*lääri*), which comes from the English word "report," and No. 6 "*com*," which means encouragement.

In the *reportni*, some members told the priest their problems (*riɛk*) to inform Deng/Ngundeng of their problems. After that, they prayed for the problems to be gone [6]. They uttered some words of prayer along with the words of Ngundeng.

There seemed to be no remarkable tension between Christians and Ngundeng Church members, except for some Christians who tended to be critical of "Ngundeng believers" who pray to *kuɔth* of the earth or below (*kuɔth piny*), which they sometimes refer to as evil spirits (Hutchinson 1996: 306; see also Evans-Pritchard 1956: 63–105). Many Christians whom I met told me there was no difference in whether they prayed to Ngundeng or Jesus (*Yecu*) since *kuɔth* is one (*kuɔth ɛ kɛl*). During my fieldwork, some Christians and "educated" people, so-called "intellectuals," gradually came to visit Ngundeng Church. One of the reasons was that in 2012 Ngundeng Church was a reformed like a Christian church. Educated young people especially came to be interested in the "Ngundeng Bible" (*bok Ɖundɛŋ*), as will be discussed later. In addition, electrical devices such as mobile phones, computers, and the Internet helped people in town to gain knowledge of the prophecies (Hashimoto 2013). An "intellectual" told me, "I have had opportunities to learn about Ngundeng twice: once through village elders, the other time through ring tones of songs of Ngundeng that I bought in town."

Thus, the prophecies of Ngundeng spread via diverse media [7] and were known (i.e., made acces-

Table 1. The Process of Prayer in Ngundeng Church

Procedure	Actor	Behavior
1 Prayer (*pal*)	All members	To pray to Deng, all members stand up and raise their arms up to the level of their chests, flipping their hands over. The priest says "Blessing of *kuɔth*," and attendants reply "Blessing of the creator of Deng" and repeat those phrases several times.
2 Singing songs of Ngundeng (*maari*)	An old man (*daiyiöm*)	An old man or singer sings the original song, composed by Ngundeng himself (*maari*).
3 Reading the "Ngundeng Bible" (*jic nyääl*)	Priest	The priest picks some chapters from the "Ngundeng Bible" and reads them.
4 Singing songs of Ngundeng (*diit nyawec liey*)	Elderly women	Elderly women (*nyawec liey*) sing some songs of Ngundeng, which were composed after his death.
5 Report (*reportni/lääri*)	Specific attendant	Some members who have problems (*riɛk*) report them to the priest to offer prayers for Deng or Ngundeng.
6 Encouragement (*com*)	Specific attendee	Selected members say some words in front of the people, especially those who are having problems, in order to encourage them.
7 Preacher (*ruac ni gokä*)	Priest	The priest reads the "Ngundeng Bible" again and explains its meaning in relation to events in the past, present, or problems told before.
8 Reading the "Ngundeng Bible" (*jic nyääl*)	Priest	The priest picks one or two chapters from the "Ngundeng Bible" and reads them.
9 Prayer (*pal*)	All members	All members stand up and pray to Deng.
10 Contribution/sacrifice of money (*kok, yiouni piny*)	All members	Some money or crops are put on the table of Deng. Attendants say "*maale*," a common greeting in the Nuer language that means "peace" and shake each other's hands.

sible) to people from different backgrounds across regions and generations. However, it is not enough to suggest that these new media support the power of prophecies; the roots of their trustworthiness can be found in certain forms of logic involved in prophecies and their interpretations. By looking at utterances and narratives in Ngundeng Church, we will find that the acts of people's ancestors against *kuɔth*/Ngundeng – which used to be described with the word *duer*, meaning a "mistake" or "fault" – account for their experiences of *kuɔth*.

As a prayer by a priest of Ngundeng Church below shows, the oneness among ancestors, *kuɔth*, and present-day people is frequently stressed in prayer:

> Our father is together with us...You (Deng) are together with (*ɛ kɛl*) us, as we are together with you. Your words were once ignored, and now they've come back...you are together with our grandfather (*gwandong*), if our grandfather ignored you, you are together with our father...as you gave bad things (*duer*) to them, you will give us truth (*thuok*)...then you are together with yourself, the name of Ngundeng, amen.

In this prayer, the word "you" indicates Deng. *Gwandong* literally means "grandfather," which also refers to ancestors. Although E-P explains that a very common way of addressing the Deity (*kuɔth*) is *gwandong* (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 7), when it comes to praying at Ngundeng Church, it seems more likely to indicate ancestors who were "stupid" and "ignorant" of Ngundeng's words or behaviors. Yet, as suggested earlier, the two meanings of the term are not often differentiated. We also found that the phrase "*ɛ kɛl*," literally means "it is one" or in other words "together." This phrase shows oneness between ancestors and present-day human beings (*naath*), as well as oneness between *kuɔth*/

Deng and ancestors. By emphasizing this phrase, members talk about their current predicaments brought about by *kuɔth*/Deng, as if their circumstances were the fault of their ancestors.

Thus, at Ngundeng Church, the prophecies of Ngundeng are rediscovered and shaped through members' experiences. How do they explore their ancestors' faults and see their fate? As we discuss in the next section, this cannot simply be explained using the cause-and-effect style.

IV. THE ACTIVE SUBJECT AND THE DISSOCIATION OF EXPERIENCE

Case 1: Bearing the faults of ancestors – Rejecting "books" and an absence of "education"
One of the most important activities during prayer at Ngundeng Church is to read the "Ngundeng Bible" which contains many songs composed by Ngundeng. In addition, the importance of education (*goar*, which literally means "writing") is frequently mentioned [8]. The reading of the "Ngundeng Bible" is called *jich nyāāl*, which means "the same color as white cattle with black dots." It is said that this expression derived from the locals' first contact with books, which consisted of black letters on white paper.

When I started my fieldwork at Ngundeng Church, I wondered whether some members who had memorized all the songs in the "Ngundeng Bible" would require me to give them photocopies. During prayer, they traced letters with their fingers and sometimes shook the Ngundeng Bible and made noises while praying. I noticed a contrast in the use of the "Ngundeng Bible" between illiterate elders and some educated youths. While it seems that elders were not "reading" it, young people occasionally visited Ngundeng Church to "read" the prophecies. A conversation between the priest and the church members revealed a discussion on illiteracy and the importance of education:

> **Pastor:** What Ngundeng was telling us in the book [the Ngundeng Bible], we were once told through his songs, since our ancestors [*guandong*] disliked something like books (A). At that time, he was telling us something about people who know about those who have black hair [*dhor mi wic char*]. Who are those who have black hair?

> **A church member:** It indicates us! Because in the past, there were no people with yellow hair [*lany wic*] (B)!

> **Pastor:** Ngundeng was also telling us about the coming of people who believe in Jesus (C). He also said, "When Arabs [*rol mac*] come to you, the one to protect you will be Deng (D). I am asking you about cattle that you don't give me (E). [...] I will save you when you are about to die. I will give you fire [*mac*]; that means a gun [*mac*] will appear (F), and we are going to kill each other" [9].

In Ngundeng Church, the words of Ngundeng are recognized as the will of Deng. The abovementioned words and behaviors of Ngundeng are more likely understood as indicating the arrival of "education."

As we can see from the above conversation, prophecies of Ngundeng are not expressed as simple correspondence between what was said (i.e., acted) and actual events. When we hear the words "prophecy" or "prophecy fulfillment," we might imagine the relationship between cause and effect, events in the past and present, or a prophecy and its "meaning."

According to the priest, "the lack of education" was the "fault of ancestors." Ngundeng once said, "When people are about to die, something like books will be given to the people." At that time, they were surprised since no one had seen something like "books" before. The ancestors were divided into two groups: those who believed in the story and those who did not. The latter did not think such a thin staff (a metaphor for a book) could be better than cattle and laughed at Ngundeng. Due to this "fault" (i.e., rejecting Ngundeng and books), even contemporary Nuer people lament their lack of

education; accordingly, they cannot get well-paying jobs.

The contrast between "those who have yellow hair (decolored by cattle's urine)," which signifies "ancestor," and "those who have black hair" (A) which indicates present-day Nuer people, is used by members of Ngundeng Church to find links between the past faults of ancestors and current circumstances.

In the abovementioned conversation, events that "black-haired" people were going to face are interpreted as the arrival of Christianity (*Yecu*) or conflicts against "Arab people" in northern Sudan (*rol mac, jallaba*). The rejection of "books" and not giving the cattle to Ngundeng correspond to these faults. Although it is possible to understand the latter part through the framework of cause and effect, events such as Jesus, Arabs, cattle, and guns are not simply explained within that framework. Yet when we consider what Lienhardt described as images evoked by the "configuration of experience" (Lienhardt 1961: 147, 161), it might be easier to understand how these events are experienced by the Nuer people by viewing them as being grounded in *kuɔth*/Powers.

The arrival of books or paper (*waragak*) as the will of *kuɔth* used to be associated with colonial power, the monetary economy, and the spread of schools (*dwil goora*). For some Nuer, especially those who live in villages, to earn money through jobs after completing education is a means of obtaining lots of cattle and consequently finding wives. This way of thinking also supports fertility, which is one of the most important life goals for many of the Nuer. The "active subject," *kuɔth*, gives people experiences and sometimes derives from experiences.

The word *mac*, which originally meant "fire," also means "gun," and has features such as light and a sound like thunder. Nowadays, *mac* is also used to refer to electricity, the source of which came from the above (*nhial*) or in the air. There is another prophecy that indicates the coming of electrical power (such as mobile phones) in the form of a voice from the above (*nhial*). Although it can be recognized as an active subject that brings the Nuer the experience of a certain event, the existence of an active subject cannot be realized through the emergence of a certain phenomenon. In Case 1, what constitutes active prophecies can be divided into the following categories, based on how we usually divide (and recognize) the world: (1) Natural phenomena (sky, thunder); (2) Norms and values (fertility); (3) Materials (books, guns, telephones); (4) Historical events (civil wars); and (5) Physical appearances (hair). However, in the narratives on prophecies, these elements are combined with each other; that is to say, not differentiated, but rather understood as a configuration of experiences that was given by *kuɔth*. The emergence/appearance of "books" or "the inaccessibility of books" – which signals the existence of *kuɔth* – evoked these hidden aspects/relationships between each event.

This case can be understood as an articulation between varieties of "traditional" thought and modern elements, which used to be framed in oral traditions on prophecies. However, we can see that the next case was not only interpreted within oral tradition, but also through certain kinds of "miraculous" practices that support the trustworthiness of Ngundeng.

Case 2: Transformed experience and realizing the active subject
Some members of Ngundeng Church converted from Christianity. The main reasons were their encounters with "miracles" (*nyuuth*) that seemed to be caused by Deng or Ngundeng. The following is a case of a Dinka woman who recovered from "infertility" by praying to Ngundeng:

> A Dinka woman did not get pregnant for six years after giving birth for the first time in 2004. She married a Dinka man who did not take her to the hospital and did not even pay her a dowry, so she got divorced. Then she met a Nuer man and married again in 2009. The new husband was Christian, but when he learned of her problem with "infertility," he joined the Ngundeng Church. Then she converted as well and started to visit Ngundeng Church in 2010. Soon after saying a prayer to Deng, she got pregnant that same year. They realized this was due to the power of Deng or Ngundeng. They named the child "Ngundeng," which means "gift from Deng" [10].

This case can be understood through what Lienhardt described as *passioness*, a way of realizing and recognizing the hidden subject inside one's experience, rather than something interpreted as a so-called "prophecy."

In this case, first the subject, Ngundeng (which can be either Deng or *kuɔth*), was revealed through her experience of getting pregnant after six years of "infertility." At the same time, she realized her body itself was the object that was affected by these subjects. Then, the active subject, which made her body temporarily "infertile," was transferred to another substance – her son. In this situation, the newborn boy, who was named "Ngundeng," is an example of *passioness*.

She realized double otherness in her experience, both through her body as an object and the power of Ngundeng/Deng, which worked on her body as an active subject. In Nuer society, descendants memorize the names of their ancestors, especially those of paternal ancestors. In this case, the woman's temporary experience converted into a semi-permanent one that can be shared by many people beyond her generation through naming. Her objectified experience in this act not only represents an exploration of the cause of her problem, but through her recovery, it becomes accessible to other people and to her descendants.

Passioness, which can be seen in this practice, is not only channeled by showing the ontological status of the human being, which can be divided, transferred, and distributed to the world outside of one's body; in addition, the processes of those divided parts are distributed to the world across regions and generations. This style of objectification (i.e., the division of experiences) and semi-permanent collective memory of experience support the trustworthiness of prophecies, apart from what constitutes oral traditions or other religious knowledge shared by specific people. Next, we will explore how people involved in current conflicts trust or mistrust a "prophet" who is suspected of being a sign of *kuɔth*.

Case 3: People's trust (and mistrust) in signs of kuɔth
In late 2011, the Lou Nuer, a sub-group of the Nuer, and the Murle ethnic group engaged in devastating armed clashes. A person called Dak was recognized as a "prophet" and drew people's interest, especially those who lived in town, who were at first suspicious of his superhuman powers. When the situation got worse and the government became involved, people in town started to talk about Dak's "miraculous" powers. At that time, they were not sure if he was a prophet seized by *kuɔth* or just a *shaitan*, a kind of evildoer possessing the *kuɔth* of the earth (*kuɔth piny*). Although there were several types of miraculous episodes surrounding Dak, people's discussions focused on whether they could find elements of *kuɔth* around him.

The reason why Dak come to be recognized as a prophet was the emergence of a little *kuɔth* (*kuɔth mi tot*) around him. For instance, he recovered from a fatal illness after his maternal uncle (*näär*) sacrificed a cow. He also saved the life of a person struck by thunder, again via the sacrifice of a cow. The *kuɔth* that "caught" him was said to be Deng or Ngundeng. He then joined the fighting against the Murle since his works with *kuɔth* were evaluated by the people around him. However, he did not participate in direct combat. His role was to direct armed youth on where to go to get water and how to avoid the enemy through satellite phones (Hashimoto 2013). Since these powers from *kuɔth* were continuous, he came to be recognized as a minor prophet. Yet his role was only that of an advisor, not a leader. According to those who joined the struggle, his predictions became true during the fighting.

When rumors of him spread to the town, people started to talk about his power and speculate on whether he was a real prophet by scrutinizing his acts for a sign of the emergence of *kuɔth*. At first, so-called "intellectual" people, Christians, and the priest of Ngundeng Church considered him to be merely a *shaitan*. Rather than relating the conflict to Dak's works, they related it to the past works of Ngundeng.

Gradually, the attack by the Murle came close to Bor, and members of Ngundeng Church started to collect money as donations for Dak's work. Then, they contacted the person called the "secretary" who was said to have been teaching Dak how to read and write. They decided to follow Dak's advice and sacrifice a cow. The area in town with a high Nuer population was not attacked.

After disarmament by the government had "failed" and his hometown was simultaneously attacked by the Murle, the priest of Ngundeng Church, who was initially skeptical that Dak was a prophet, started to talk about Dak's power of *kuɔth*. At the time, Dak was reported to be a person who incited people to join the violence and resisted disarmament by leading armed youth. Commenting on his activity, the pastor said that he would not be caught since he knew where the government troops came from through the power of *kuɔth*. Those who had initially recognized Dak as a prophet started to insist that if these conflicts were predicted by Ngundeng, then Ngundeng must have sent him.

This episode shows that the appearance of *kuɔth* around Dak and the process of *kuɔth* emerging (as confirmed by people around him) were important in terms of recognizing him as a prophet. He did not try to actively work on an event to perform a miracle. According to Nuer people's discussions, to be recognized as a "real" prophet, one should not claim to be a prophet. People that I met during fieldwork who thought they themselves were prophets were used to hanging around in the village to ask others whether incidents around a certain person were signs of *kuɔth* emerging. For instance, they consulted with the priest of a Christian church about their dreams or "miraculous" events and confirmed whether those events were due to the emergence of small *kuɔth* (*kuɔth mi tot*), which they usually witnessed in their daily lives, or the will of *kuɔth* to work through a prophet. In other words, even prophets cannot know whether they are real prophets who have *kuɔth*.

As the latter part of the abovementioned case shows, those who tried to judge Dak based on whether he was a real prophet were examining their own experience of *kuɔth* in the conflict. They were trying to find some elements that they could accept as works of *kuɔth* within what were once recognized as the works of *shaitan*. In this sense, the trustworthiness of *kuɔth* was merely tentative. However, we can see that Dak was hesitantly viewed as a prophet among people discovering the hidden active subject, which makes it possible for them to frame and accept their experiences.

V. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I discussed how the perspectives of E-P and Lienhardt are essential to understanding the impacts of current Nuer prophets and the dynamics of prophecies by describing how predictions and the power of *kuɔth* behind them are interrelated at the level of narratives and practices.

In the first case, I showed how the details of the new circumstances that people faced were explained by Ngundeng's past prophetic behavior. People who gathered at Ngundeng Church were exploring the relationship between the faults (*duer*) of their ancestors and their current predicaments. Based on the narratives, people spoke of ancestors/*kuɔth* as if they were the active subjects of their experiences; the fact that narrators were objects affected by *kuɔth* was revealed. With the emergence of *kuɔth*, people discussed not only the relationship between the present and the past prophecies of Ngundeng; they also talked about the style of experience that they placed/confirmed or (re)discovered within the relationship between the divinities and their new situation, which represents the configuration of their experience. In Case 2, I described a process in which a Dinka woman's temporary experience of "infertility" was transferred to her son, Ngundeng, turning it into a collective experience that was passed on to her descendant. I referred to the concepts of *passioness* (that is, a division of one's experiences), and the objectification of the self's status as *passioness* via the transfer of an experience.

We can see how personal experience becomes accessible to and shared by other people who did not witness the original occurrence of a "miracle" that people discuss long after it happens. In Case 3, I showed how people examined the existence of *kuɔth* when they encountered it as it emerged around a person (i.e., a potential prophet). Whether Dak was a *shaitan* or a prophet was judged through the search for an active subject within him or other events surrounding Dak.

Through these cases, this paper sheds light on how people open a new "realm of experience" by realizing a certain (i.e., hidden) aspect of their experience with *kuɔth*, combining it with several events. Steps in practices and narratives on prophecies – such as realizing the active subject, grasping the relationship together with other events through the emergence of *kuɔth*, and sharing these experi-

ences with others – can provide the framework for a certain system in which people continue to confirm the trustworthiness of the existence of human beings as objects, affected by the subject *kuɔth*. The new "realm of experiences" provided by *kuɔth* are not limited to certain groups, but those who witness an incident are always welcome to experience it; this allows them to feel compassion or to reject the event in question.

This paper described a process through which prophecies come to be accessible to others when they encounter an event that is expressed as "ɛ *kuɔth*," even by those who were not originally interested in or suspicious of the power of prophecy/prophets.

Given the power structure in Greater Sudan, it is difficult to explain the power of prophets without a historical perspective, which many other studies on Nuer prophets have insisted is necessary (see Johnson 1994). For instance, the British colonial government tried to capture prophets, viewing them as people who directed locals to resist or ignore British orders. While these prophets had power in a certain way, the colonial government justified its attacks on them via its image of "African religious/ spiritual leaders" which the government based on its experiences ruling local communities.

We can find parallel movements during disarmament, which occurred in 2012 when the government tried to capture Dak, the abovementioned prophet. In the process of peace-building, the international community and the South Sudanese government paid attention to "traditional" elements/ figures who were assumed to have power over locals. However, even though Dak – who seemed to be a "traditional figure" – was arrested, the fighting continued. In this case, the imagination held by external actors (aside from the Nuer people) of a "traditional" figure shaped one aspect of the conflict. As discussed in the previous case, people were motivated to recognize Dak as a prophet when a government force tried to capture him as a witch doctor or *shaitan*.

If the powers that made people recognize Dak as a witch doctor stem from a certain form of imagination about "African spiritual leaders" shared by international society, the government, or Nuer "intellectuals," it would not be an exaggeration to say that E-P and Lienhardt tried to discuss not only the unique style of Nilotic religious thought, but also how human beings recognize the world in general. Several perspectives that emerge when actors around Dak have certain types of imagination (which were evoked through the configuration of experience) about prophets can shape a new aspect of *kuɔth* or other issues talked about using the word *kuɔth*. *Kuɔth* and prophets could become "trustworthy" based on several perspectives, or a style of imagination (not) shared by multiple human beings, together with their awareness of the hidden subject in their experiences.

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NOTES

(1) In this paper "conflicts" not only denotes the war that broke out in December 2013, but also inter-communal clashes that have been happening since 2011 in Jonglei State.

(2) As a word or concept, "experience" does not have a clear definition, even for those who use it as an analytical notion, and anthropological studies on experience insist on the difficulty of both defining and objectifying it (cf. Turner & Bruner 1986: 3–30). This paper uses "experience" by referring to the works of E-P and Lienhardt, though the word should always be used with quotation marks.

(3) Data is also based on 19 months of fieldwork I engaged in from 2010–2013 in Bor, Nasir, Akobo, Ayod, and Juba in South Sudan.

(4) At the same time, his emphasis on this Latin word shows that we can even find this style (character) of

experience within the modern European modes of thought concerning the notion of the subject. Hence, these kinds of experiences are not unique to the Nuer or Dinka society.

(5) Aside from this weekly prayer, there is another end-of-year prayer called *buk mandeng* where a cow is sacrificed in the presence of a hundred people who celebrate by dancing, drinking, and singing. Some Dinka people sometimes attend.

(6) From January to March 2012, 69 problems were discussed that can be categorized as: prayers for sickness (33), safe travel (20), political issues in South Sudan (5), announcements of contributions (3), statements of marriage (3), and restoration of peace (2). The average age of respondents was 53 among males and 44 among females.

(7) There are some other media that constitute Ngundeng's trustworthiness. For instance, there is a photo on the wall of Ngundeng Church; it is also in the book "Nuer Religion" by E-P (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 306–307), which was downloaded from the Internet. The photo, titled "Prophet," is not of Ngundeng, yet church members came to recognize the figure in it as Ngundeng due to the influence of the priest.

(8) Regarding the increasing importance of education or "writing" in Nuer society, see Hutchinson (1996: 270–298).

(9) This conversation was recorded on September 26, 2010 in Nasir county, Upper Nile State.

(10) This episode was collected on January 16, 2012 in the town of Bor, Jonglei State. The Dinka woman and her husband told it.

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