

Prophets, Prophecies, and Inter-communal Conflict in Post-independence South Sudan

ERI HASHIMOTO

Japan Society for the Promotion of Science/ Hitotsubashi University

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1. INTRODUCTION

Devastating inter-communal conflicts⁽¹⁾ have been widely recognized as among the biggest problems facing post-independence South Sudan. In the context of these conflicts, a so-called prophet and “self-proclaimed spiritual leader”⁽²⁾ has emerged as an important figure among the Nuer, and this individual has been identified by external agencies as a contributor to the conflicts.

Recent studies of spiritual figures, especially prophets, have emphasized their role in modern society as community peace-makers (Johnson 1994; Hutchinson 1996). However, such figures are regarded as among the causes of conflict in the case of recent inter-communal clashes in South Sudan.

The purpose of this report was to examine how such a spiritual leader emerges and how prophecies influence people in the context of the current inter-communal conflict in South Sudan. This report also investigates how people cope with conflicts and understand their own experiences therein. It suggests the importance of revising the prophecies that have been shared by the Nuer people during the past century.

2. CONFLICTS AND PROPHETS IN SOUTH SUDAN

2.1. Current inter-communal conflict in Jonglei State

Jonglei State, with a population of 1,358,602,⁽³⁾ is located in the northeastern part of South Sudan. This state has six main ethnic groups: the Dinka, Nuer, Anyuak, Murle, Kathipo, and Jie. Although the exact population of each ethnic group is not known, the Dinka and the Nuer are regarded as the largest, and both consist of subgroups, including the Lou Nuer and Dinka Bor. With the exception of those living in urban areas, such as Bor, the capital city of Jonglei, most members of these groups rely on cattle-breeding for their livelihood. Most of the current inter-communal conflict and subsequent retaliatory attacks have involved fighting mainly between the Lou Nuer and the Murle.

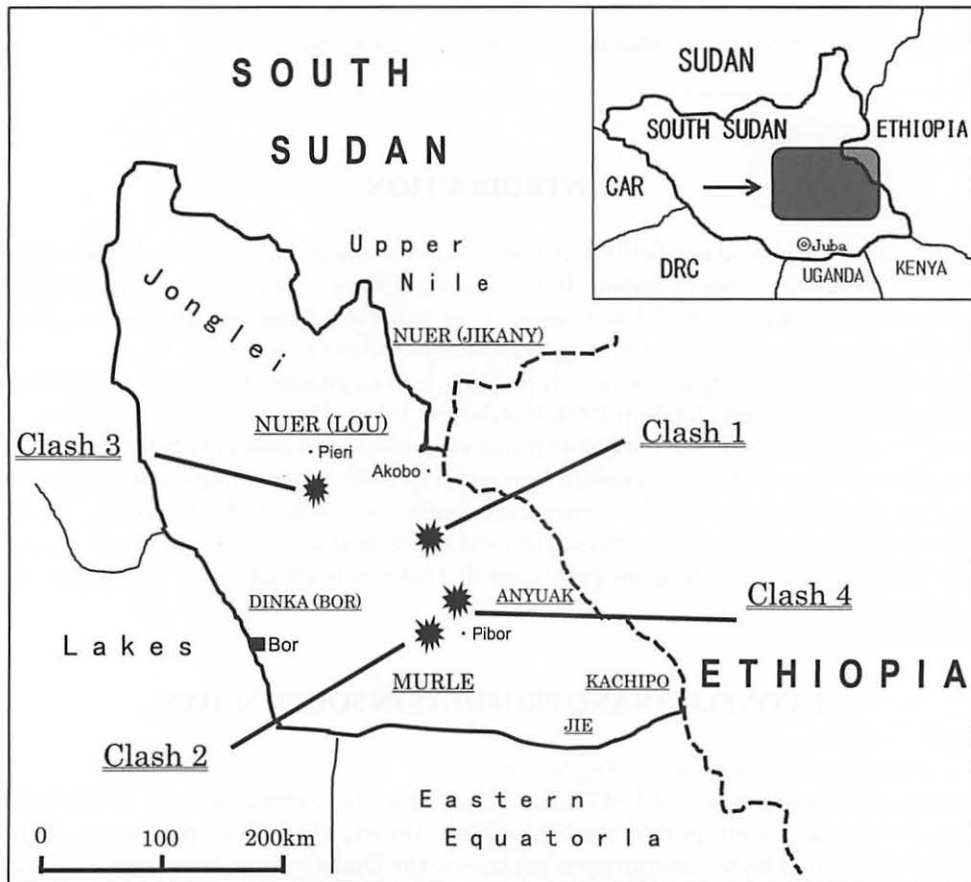
For more than a century, these communities have engaged in conflicts, which often escalated into armed struggles, over access to pasture. However, the nature of these conflicts has changed because of Sudan's two civil wars (1955–1972, 1983–2005), and they now involve a variety of external and local actors (e.g., international agencies, government troops, church groups, and youth groups).

Jonglei State is currently facing unprecedented difficulties as a result of widespread conflict. In

2011, these conflicts led to more than 1,000 deaths and more than 100,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) (United Nations, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [UN OCHA] South Sudan 2012). Figure 1 presents data on four devastating large-scale clashes in Jonglei State that occurred from 2011 to 2012.⁽⁴⁾

In early 2011, the Murle launched a series of attacks on Lou Nuer and Dinka areas. In April and June of that year, large-scale attacks were initiated by the Lou Nuer (Fig. 1, Clashes 1 and 2), and a retaliatory attack by the Murle against the Lou was subsequently reported (Fig. 1, Clash 3). At the end of 2011, an unprecedented large-scale retaliatory attack was mounted by a Nuer youth group known the White Army (*dey in bor*)⁽⁵⁾ (Fig. 1, Clash 4).

In March 2012, the government of South Sudan decided to implement disarmament throughout



Clash	Date	Location	Killed	Abducted	Displaced
1	April 18-23, 2011	akobo, etc.	200-300	91	4,400
2	June 15-23, 2011	pibor	430	147	7,000 to 10,000
3	August 18th, 2011	pieri, etc	340-750	258	26,800
4	December 23th to January 5th, 2012	pibor	6,000-8,000 armed Lou Nuer attacked. Unconfirmed number of people affected.		

Fig. 1. Major Clashes in Jonglei State 2011–2012

NUER(LOU): ethnic group (subgroup), Akobo: town name, Jonglei: state name * : large-scale clash,

— state border, - - - - : national border

Basic map: UN OCHA South Sudan 2012

Jonglei State. Outside actors have understood these conflicts to be results of the social problems of the region, such as food shortages, the widespread possession of guns, and the lack of education [Pact and South Sudan Law Society 2012].

However, in December 2011 when I visited Jonglei, I heard local people talking about a new prophet and his influence on the local people with respect to these conflicts.⁽⁶⁾ Shortly thereafter, the largest clash thus far occurred, on December 23 (Fig. 1, Clash 4). In this situation, the aforementioned spiritual figure, who was seen as a one of the causes of the conflict, attracted the attention of diverse groups, including local authorities, government officials, and the mass media.

2.2. Nuer prophets in historical context

The history of Nuer prophets will be reviewed before the new spiritual figure is discussed. Nuer prophets are said to be 'seized' (*kap*) by divinities (*kuoth*, pl. *kuuth*)⁽⁷⁾ and are called *gok kuoth* (vessels of *kuoth*) or *gwan kuoth* (owners of *kuoth*) in the Nuer language. However, in other contexts, they are known as *yoong* (fools, crazy men, sing. *yong*).

During the early colonial era in Sudan, Nuer prophets were seen as "witch doctors" or "magicians". They were also often called *kujur* in colloquial Arabic by the colonial government,⁽⁸⁾ who recognized them as being leaders who opposed colonial rule. Thus, many *kujurs* were harshly attacked by the colonial government.

During the time of Sudan's two civil wars, some Nuer prophets were considered to be "politically aware" of the modern situation (Johnson 1994: 309), and they tried to maintain peace in the community by forbidding inter-communal fighting and criticizing people for depending on UN food relief (e.g., Hutchinson 1996: 338–348). Prophets maintained their role as bringers of peace to the community despite external interference. Their peace-making power is thought to come from their ability to interpret the prophecies of the most prominent prophet, Ngundeng Bong, who died in 1906.

The prophecies of Ngundeng have been reinterpreted in the current context. Ngundeng composed many songs, and these songs and his legendary behavior are now regarded as having prophetic value. Ngundeng's legacy has had a major influence on subsequent prophets, including the latest figure, Dak Kueth, who also draws his powers from Ngundeng's prophecies. It is said that Dak has been 'seized' by the divinity of Ngundeng.⁽⁹⁾

Dak is thought to have incited a number of White Army soldiers to attack the Murle (Fig. 1, Clash 4). Indeed, he rose to prominence just before the attack on the Murle in Pieri (Fig. 1, Clash 3). At that time, Dak is said to have performed a miracle. One young Nuer man living in the town described the miracle as follows:

What is remarkable is that the Pieri incident [Fig. 1, Clash 3] happened in reality. Before the incident happened, Dak told his community, "Something is coming, and that thing will be difficult for us to escape from." When he came to Pieri on his own and said, "Let us avoid fighting and collect the White Army!"... But one of the sub-chiefs said to Dak, "You are a liar! It is not true. We know that you are not the man who can tell the truth. Go away and take back what you said!" Dak replied to him, "Because you are a leader of this area, if you reject my statement, something will happen to you. But you will not die in that incident." Two days later, the Pieri incident happened. Nine members of the sub-chief's family were killed. But he [the sub-chief] was not killed in the fighting.

This is one of the reasons why people in this community started to believe that Dak was trustworthy.

After the clash in December 2011 (Fig. 1, Clash 4), many people in the town began to point out that Dak had influenced a number of young people with his spiritual power. It was also rumored that Dak had used his satellite phone to tell the White Army how to attack the Murle.⁽¹⁰⁾ On the other hand, other Nuer sectors claimed, "The White Army has another leader.⁽¹¹⁾ Dak is not the leader. The real leader is not like a magician, and those who believed in Dak were few in number." This suggests



Fig. 2. Dak Kueth in the video (provided by Char Chot) .
A still from a mobile phone movie recorded by a villager

that there is not necessarily a consensus in the Nuer community. Yet, Dak attracted the government's attention. As a result of the widespread use of social media and telecommunications, rumors about Dak spread to both villages and towns. The image of Dak presented in Figure 2, in which Dak is singing Ngundeng's songs in front of young people, is from a video taken by local villagers via a mobile phone.⁽¹²⁾ However, others regard Dak as a "self-proclaimed spiritual leader" who rejected disarmament and escaped to the borderland between South Sudan and Ethiopia. Eventually, Dak was arrested by government troops (Sudan Tribune [ST] 2012c).⁽¹³⁾

The question is, was Dak a charismatic spiritual leader who incited local people to engage in conflict? Or, is he just a "magician" or a "fool"? By focusing on the role of prophecy in explaining the present in terms of the past, we can identify Dak as a person who represents different experiences of the conflict.

3. HOW PROPHECIES WORK AMONG THE PEOPLE

3.1. Narratives of prophecies in the midst of conflict

For those Nuer people who evacuated during the clashes, Dak fulfills Ngundeng's prophecies, which are more powerful than Dak's miracle stories. According to my observations, people tended to concentrate on Ngundeng's songs and behavior rather than on Dak's miracle stories, particularly when focusing on the attack on the Murle.

Some Nuer individuals in Bor said, "Ngundeng is a true prophet [*gok*], but Dak cannot be a prophet. He is just a *yong*." The word *yong* means "fool," "madman," or "crazy man" in the Nuer language, and it is used to describe a person who has been 'seized' by certain divinities. Indeed, it is difficult for people to determine whether someone is a prophet or a *yong* unless they witness a miracle.

My interviews with survivors of the conflicts suggest that a number of people tried to discern a correspondence between Ngundeng's prophecies and the current conflicts. I identified four different prophecies that are used to explain the current clashes.

I encountered the prophecies noted below just before the attack in Pibor in December 2011 (Fig. 1, Clash 4). One informant, a displaced person from a rural area in Akobo who had lost her sisters in the clash, described one prophecy as follows:

Prophecy 1: Cattle for the Murle⁽¹⁴⁾ (related in Akobo by an elderly woman from a rural area of Akobo, December 21, 2011)

When Ngundeng was alive, people regarded him as a fool. People rejected his words. [But] Ngundeng was really talking about what the Murle are doing now. Ngundeng said, "You, Murle, believe me. All of the cattle are in your hands. Keep the cattle! Someday I will fight with you"... They [Murle] kill many people. They will kill even these small girls and babies [pointing to her daughter and grandchild]. They kill this mother and take her children. Then, they take our cattle... every day I pray to Ngundeng, "You [Ngundeng], prophet, why are you killing us?"

She seems to have found in Ngundeng's words a kind of reason for the Murle having many cattle and killing people. She seems to be asking Ngundeng not to kill people.

The next informant is also one of the elders in Akobo. He used another of Ngundeng's legendary behaviors to explain the cause of the current clashes.

Prophecy 2: Climbing the mound (reported in Akobo by an elderly man from Akobo, December 21, 2011)

One day, Ngundeng was standing on the top of a mound [*bie*].⁽¹⁵⁾ All of the Nuer, including Gaajak and Bentiu and many other Nuer people were sitting together. Ngundeng placed ivories around the bottom of the mound and said, "You, bring the ivories up to the top of the mound." Many of the Nuer were afraid, but some Murle climbed up to the mound and put two pieces of ivory on the top. Ngundeng said, "You, Nuer! All of you refused to bring the ivory. I will curse you... All Nuer in Southern Sudan will get food from the Murle"... The Murle do not cultivate their land, they are always eating cattle meat. That's why the Murle are now the richest people. God [*kuoth*] gave them cattle and ropes for those cattle. They are going to have many children... This is why the Murle possess so many. Every year the Murle kill people and steal their cattle. Now is the time of doing so. [But] now, it is said, the Murle are going to be finished. This means, this year will be the time of finishing of the Murle.

Prophecy 2 tells a story from the past about the relationship between Ngundeng and the Murle. The informant insisted that the Murle were able to obtain cattle and children and to kill the Nuer people because they obeyed Ngundeng's orders in the past. This legendary relation is widely understood by the people in the village as a prophecy of current conflict with the Murle.

The following prophecies (prophecies 3 and 4) and their interpretations were related to me in Bor:

Prophecy 3: Problems after the Arabs (reported in Bor by a young man from Akobo, December 18, 2011)

In Ngundeng's song, there is one phrase, "Murle and Bor, just wait until I solve the problem with the Arabs [*maroal*]. Then I will return to you." That means, after independence is achieved, problems with the Murle and Bor will occur.

Prophecy 4: In the morning hours (reported in Bor by a young government official from Akobo, December 13, 2011)

A long time ago, Ngundeng sang, "I will launch the army in the morning hours [*bawwa*] and attack the Murle." The White Army waited until the season of *bawwa* had come. That is why the White Army launched the revenge attack in December.

Prophecy 3 comes from a song performed by Ngundeng. Problems with the “Arabs” (*maroal*), the Murle, and the Dinka Bor (based on another interpretation, the place called Bor depicted in Fig. 1) are mentioned in the prophecy. In this narrative, the problem with the Arabs is thought to refer to the independence of South Sudan, which was achieved in 2011. The problems that happened later are interpreted as referring to the current clashes with the Murle.

Prophecy 4 is related to the problem of the season; the time when the White Army launched their retaliatory attack against the Murle was the season called *jom*, which includes November, December, and January. Another term, *bauwa*, is mentioned in Ngundeng’s song and means “the morning hours,” but this is equivalent to the season of *jom*.

The narratives discussed above indicate that the historical relationship between Ngundeng and the Murle was mentioned in each prophecy. Thus, informants identified correspondences between the current conflict and Ngundeng’s prophecies, and these correspondences seem to suggest that the present situation was predicted. Some elements, such as “keeping the cattle” (Prophecy 1), the “courage of the Murle” (Prophecy 2), “after the problem with the Arabs” (Prophecy 3), and “in the morning hours” (Prophecy 4) are “miraculously” connected to the present to justify the appropriateness and inevitability of the reality they have to endure and to legitimize the prophecies themselves. The informants insisted that these are “true” or “correct” (*thuok*) explanations of aspects of the conflict.

3.2. Prophecy and experiences of the conflict

Recent historical research on prophets has argued that prophets should be distinguished from their prophecies in that the latter are subject to “continual rediscovery” or reinterpretation not only with regard to their meaning in the past but with regard to their use as “explanations of the present” or “visions of the future” (Anderson and Johnson 1995: 1).

The four prophecies discussed above show that the present situation was reinterpreted within the context of prophecies made many years ago. Indeed, people connected the past and the present through prophecies, which then ensured the “correctness” of their experience of the current conflict. However, this suggests that such revised interpretations of prophecies can also shape the reality of conflicts.

One question emerges from the varying views on the influence of Dak Kueth. Most of the external actors in the conflicts regard him as a magician or *kujur* who incited local people. On the other hand, the local people who believe in the fulfillment of the prophecies do not seem follow Dak; indeed, they seem to follow Ngundeng’s prophecies. For them, Dak is simply a person who represents the prophecies of Ngundeng.

These different views of Dak seem to reflect different experiences of the conflict. One experience involves viewing Dak as a part of the history of *kujur*, which dates to the colonial period; the other involves seeing him as a part of the story inspired by Ngundeng’s prophecies and shared by the people.

4. CONCLUSION

This report describes the current situation of inter-communal conflict in South Sudan and examines how one spiritual leader gained influence over the people through references to prophecies. Although spiritual figures have been recognized as contributors to these conflicts, people have not been interested in the new prophet himself. External and internal actors in the conflicts differ with regard to their understanding of the new prophet, and these differences reflect the actors’ different degrees of involvement in the current conflict. Further research is needed to clarify how these different views contribute to both the interpretation and the reality of the conflict in modern East African societies.

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NOTES

- (1) In this report, “inter-communal conflict” is used to describe the situation in South Sudan. Although these clashes are generally described as conflicts between “tribes”, the use of “inter-tribal” to describe the conflicts in South Sudan is questionable because they began among certain small communities in Jonglei State and now involve diverse actors such as international agencies, government police, organized armies, and Christian missionaries. Although the use of the terms “tribe” and “inter-tribal” are not discussed in this report owing to space limitations, it should be noted that they present problems that require further consideration.
- (2) This depiction has been commonly used in the mass media (ST 2012a, 2012b, 2012c).
- (3) From the 5th Sudan Population and Housing Census, 2008.
- (4) In fact, several other large-scale clashes occurred in 2012 after Clash 4 (Fig. 1). However, I was unable to obtain information about those clashes. In addition to the incidents presented in Figure 1, dozens of other small-scale clashes were witnessed during this period.
- (5) The White Army plays an important role for these villagers. Their original role was to protect women, children, and livestock from outsiders and predators. They wear white shirts and are armed with white metal spears. According to Hutchinson, the White Army was organized by a Nuer prophet known as Wutnyang as his personal army (Hutchinson 1996; 338). There is also another army, the Black Army (*dey in car*), which consists of soldiers who belong to the government troops.
- (6) I conducted short-term research in Bor and Akobo in Jonglei State from December 2011 to March 2012.
- (7) The Nuer word *kuoth* can be translated as either “God” or “spirit” according to the context. Features of the Nuer conception of *kuoth* (*kuuth*) are discussed by Evans-Pritchard (1956).
- (8) *Kujur* is “the pejorative term” applied to “prophets” or other “spiritual” and “religious” figures (Johnson 1994: 6).
- (9) There are several different opinions about the name of the spirit that possesses Dak Kueth.
- (10) Some people insisted that Dak knew the place at which the Murle people would escape even though he was not there. With this information, members of the White Army were able to attack the Murle. Satellite and mobile phones made it possible to contact family members in the village, get security information, and organize large numbers of young people for attacks; thus, they play an important role in modern conflicts. Some youth groups in the town donated satellite phones to the villagers.
- (11) Some representatives of the White Army sent a statement about their attacks to the President and Vice President of South Sudan, UN agencies, and other organizations via e-mail (Lou Nuer Youth 2012).
- (12) This movie is widely shared among people in the town.
- (13) After the large-scale attack in Pibor (Fig. 1, Clash 4), a peace conference was held in Bor. People presented a number of approaches to resolving inter-communal conflicts. Issues related to Dak and his followers were also discussed.
- (14) The titles of the prophecies were written by the author as summaries.
- (15) This mound was built by Ngundeng and is a kind of political and religious center for many Nuer people (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1956, Johnson 1994: 88–94).

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