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Violence, legitimacy, and prophecy:

Nuer struggles with uncertainty in South Sudan

ABSTRACT

Contemporary South Sudanese Nuer prophets play powerful roles in interpreting the moral limits of lethal violence and weighing the legitimacy claims of rival government leaders. Their activities remain largely invisible to external observers investigating the making and unmaking of fragile states. Focusing on South Sudan's tumultuous 2005–14 period, we reveal these hidden dynamics through analysis of the two most-powerful living western Nuer prophets. Gatdeang Dit, a male prophet of the divinity *Deng*, rejects all forms of violent aggression and fosters relations of peace and intermarriage with Dinka neighbors. Nyachol, a female prophet of *Maani*, inspires thousands of armed Nuer youth to retaliate against Dinka cattle raiders and other external threats while insisting on purification for Nuer–Nuer homicides. Despite their differences, both prophets invoke God's superior powers to push back against the simplified, secularized, and objectified forms of violence glorified by rival government elites.

[*prophecy, government, violence, legitimacy, uncertainty, Nuer, South Sudan*]

International peacekeepers and negotiators currently struggling to hold together South Sudan, the world's most fragile state, remain largely unaware of the regional peace-making and peace-breaking potentials of two powerful western Nuer prophets, Gatdeang Dit and Nyachol. Despite their growing regional and national prominence, these prophets and their activities remain largely invisible to external observers and thus unrecognized by social scientists investigating the making and unmaking of fragile states. Focusing on South Sudan's tumultuous 2005–14 period and drawing on complementary research experiences spanning a wide range of places and times, we offer insight into the dynamics of this hidden world with an eye to revealing the “supragovernmental” roles Nyachol and Gatdeang play in setting the moral limits of lethal violence and weighing the legitimacy claims of rival government elites.¹

Over the past 120 years, Nuer practices and traditions of prophecy have evolved in tandem with state-based assertions of exclusive control over the legitimate use of force and, thus, over the lawful power to kill or protect. Douglas Johnson (1994) has described the atmosphere of political paranoia that eventually led British colonial officers of Sudan's Anglo-Egyptian Condominium Government (1899–1956) to capture or slaughter all major Nuer prophets by the late 1920s. Nuer prophets and prophetic traditions subsequently rebounded during Sudan's two lengthy civil wars (1955–72 and 1983–2005), as thousands of Nuer men and women sought refuge from unpredictable waves of violence generated by ever-growing numbers of rival southern military commanders and militia leaders (Hutchinson 1998, 2001, 2005; Jok and Hutchinson 1999). As competition among southern political and military elites intensified during these wars and into South Sudan's independence period in 2011, many high-ranking Nuer and non-Nuer government leaders also turned to powerful contemporary Nuer prophets and prophetic traditions in hope of bolstering their legitimacy claims.

[Correction: The copyright line for this article was changed on 7th December 2015 after original online publication.]

AMERICAN ETHNOLOGIST, Vol. 42, No. 3, pp. 415–430, ISSN 0094-0496, online
ISSN 1548-1425. © 2015 by the American Anthropological Association. All rights reserved.
DOI: 10.1111/amet.12138

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Rural South Sudanese Nuer communities have suffered the cumulative legacy of this wartime violence especially intensely, owing in part to the abundant oil wealth and strategic location of their traditional homelands straddling the White Nile basin and extending into Ethiopia. Nuer–Nuer killings have been proportionately much higher than homicides among other South Sudanese, if for no other reason than that Nuer men have fought on every side of every political schism that has radiated outward from Khartoum and Juba over the past 60 years.

This collective experience has generated its own insecurities and anxieties about the moral limits and spiritual consequences of lethal violence. When is recourse to lethal violence legitimate? And when does it risk angering God or Divinity (*Kuoth*), as the ultimate guardian of human morality? Do killings committed under the banner of “government war” (*koor kume*) differ in their social and spiritual consequences from homicides generated by more localized feuding and fighting, or “homeland wars” (*koor cieng*; Hutchinson 1996:109, 1998, 2001)? If commanded by one’s military superior to kill, what personal responsibility, if any, does one bear for that death? Are extreme levels of violence still susceptible to moral limits? If so, what ultimately determines the legitimacy of lethal violence: God (*Kuoth*), government (*kume*), or guns (*mac*)?

Seeking answers to these haunting questions, generations of Nuer men and women have looked to individual prophets (*guk*), also known as “owners–masters of divinity” (sing. *guan kuoth*, pl. *guaan kuthni*). Every *guk* claims the ability to channel divine powers over life and death, health and illness, fertility and infertility through his or her blessings and curses. Moreover, all prophets are embedded in a cultural infrastructure of legitimacy with a deep history that has been elaborated and transmitted across the generations since the first Nuer prophets emerged during the second half of the 19th century (Anderson and Johnson 1995; Evans-Pritchard 1940, 1956; Hutchinson 1996, 2001, 2005; Johnson 1994).

Here we explore these themes through a comparative analysis of the two most powerful living western Nuer prophets: Gatdeang Dit and Nyachol. Both operate within similar historical and cultural environments from noncontiguous areas of the Western Upper Nile, a region also known by the misnomer “Unity” State; our analysis focuses on this region.² Both are self-styled and regionally respected prophets of “peace” (*maar*), who strive to safeguard the physical security and enhance the spiritual well-being of their respective “moral communities” (cf. Anderson and Johnson 1995:18; Evans-Pritchard 1940, 1956). Both received their divinities during times of heightened insecurity and indeterminacy. Moreover, as of this writing (March 2015), both Nyachol and Gatdeang are struggling to contain a firestorm of military and political chaos blowing through their rural homelands since

mid-December 2013, when simmering power struggles between independent South Sudan’s president, Salva Kiir Mayendit, and its former vice president, Riek Machar Dhurgon, exploded in Juba, violently splitting the ruling political party and national army, still known as the Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA), into two warring factions.

While the 2005 signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) marked the formal conclusion to more than two decades of civil war between the government of Sudan in Khartoum and the SPLM–SPLA, it did not bring true peace. Instead, it ushered in a state of suspension between peace and war (Nordstrom 2004; Richards 2005) that ultimately culminated in late 2013 in the political and military implosion of the newly independent government of South Sudan. Despite the prophets’ shared reputations as agents of peace, Gatdeang and Nyachol have adopted very different strategies for crystallizing, uniting, and defending their respective communities. Lethal violence and the Nuer–Dinka identity distinction have played major roles in Nyachol’s divinely inspired strategies but not in Gatdeang’s.

Nyachol, a female prophet of the divinity *Maani*, emerged very recently among the Haak Nuer (also spelled Aak Nuer and pronounced with an aspirated vowel), who are commonly grouped together, ethnologically and politically, with the Dok Nuer of central Western Upper Nile. Nyachol has responded to the government’s abandonment of the local population to increased vulnerability to conflict by encouraging her followers to arm themselves and by sanctifying their protective stance through ritual. She also insists on the ritual purification of all Nuer who have killed fellow Nuer and on the formal resolution of local blood feuds before she admits the perpetrators of such violence into her moral community. Gatdeang is a more senior and more established male prophet of the divinity *Deng* and is based in Bul Nuer territories in northwestern Western Upper Nile. Gatdeang rejects the idea that regional peace and security can be restored through the barrel of the gun, but he is not a pacifist. His guiding moral vision accepts lethal violence as legitimate when used defensively. However, he seeks to obviate its need by fostering bonds of mutual respect, hospitality, kinship, and intermarriage between Dinka and Nuer communities. Whereas Gatdeang has urged his followers to remain neutral with respect to the national government’s mid-December 2013 schism, Nyachol has become a major regional player in unresolved leadership struggles between former vice president Riek Machar, a Dok Nuer from Western Upper Nile, and President Salva Kiir, an Awan Rek Dinka from neighboring Warrap State.

More generally, Nyachol and Gatdeang have pursued a common endeavor by seeking to provide accessible arenas for people to manage feelings of anxiety and uncertainty fostered by decades of political instability, social division, and wartime violence. Their abilities to inspire, guide, unite,

defend, and reassure their followers in troubled times have inspired tremendous loyalty and respect.

In a provocative book focusing on the Congo's interminable troubles, Sèverine Autesserre (2010) urges international peacekeepers to focus on the local underpinnings of regional conflicts or risk long-term failure. All too often, she argues, a failure to address smaller, more localized conflicts within the Congo has jeopardized larger national and international settlements. In a different but related register, both Sverker Finnström (2008) and Stephen Lubkhemann (2008) call for more locally and culturally sensitive studies of how ordinary people maintain balance and control in the midst of civil war. The national-state framework in which civil wars are conventionally referenced must be augmented and complemented by studies of the everyday practices and perspectives of people living with "bad surroundings" (Finnström 2008).

Following their leads, our argument in this article tracks back and forth between state-level historical analyses of South Sudan's post-2005 turmoil and more locally and culturally embedded, prophet-centered perspectives. After first discussing key concepts and introducing the founding moral visions of our two prophets, we take a step back to provide a state-level account of South Sudan's struggles from the signing of the CPA in 2005 to mid-December 2013. This historical summary is followed by a discussion of the contrasting peace-building strategies adopted by Nyachol and Gatdeang. We then examine these prophets' relations with some of the most highly ranked leaders within the South Sudanese political establishment, through the prism of two revealing encounters. In the final core section of this article, we examine post-December 2013 events and show how Nyachol and Gatdeang have responded to them.

Prophecy, government, and lethal violence

Nuer prophetic practices and traditions begin with Kuoth. Every prophet claims possession by one or more spiritual refractions of a single, overarching, universal, distant creator "Spirit" or Divinity—God, known as the Great Divinity (Kuoth in Dit), or as the Sky, or High, God (Kuoth Nhial), or simply as Kuoth (Evans-Pritchard 1956:1). Lesser manifestations of Kuoth (*kuoth*, pl. *kuuth*) may appear at any time and may fall from the sky (*nhial*) "like a shooting star" to possess literally anyone—man, woman, child, or even animal (Hutchinson 1996:307). A bout of abnormal behavior or an unusual illness may be the first sign of divinity's descent (Evans-Pritchard 1956:44). Just as suddenly, divinity may depart, returning its former host to a state of ordinariness. Owing to the unpredictable movements of kuoth, Nuer prophets must continuously demonstrate divinity's inner presence or risk losing legitimacy (Hutchinson 1996:306, 338–350). Once permanently established within a particular prophet, a specific divinity is often subsequently

inherited by one of the prophet's children or grandchildren after his or her death. This expectation is especially pronounced within contemporary Nuer communities living west of the White Nile River. Gatdeang, for example, inherited *Deng* through his father and paternal grandfather. Nyachol is related through her mother's line to the previous prophet of *Maani*, who died in 1973. Nyachol's lack of a patrilineal connection, however, has weakened her legitimacy claims in the eyes of the previous prophet's brothers, a challenge that she has worked to overcome. Among contemporary eastern Nuer, aspiring prophets more commonly seek to establish a personal connection with the famous 19th-century Lou Nuer prophet Ngundeang Bong (d. 1906), whether through pilgrimage, imitative practice, or self-identification with fragments of previously issued prophecies. The most successful Nuer prophets draw creatively on the collective memories, expectations, and contemporary concerns of their adherents. Nuer prophetic practices and traditions have evolved over time, but the underlying structures of belief and of ritual authority have endured.

For Nuer, *kume* (government) does not denote a static, unitary, or homogeneous entity. The term is derived from the Arabic word for "government," *hukūma*, and Nuer initially applied it to the colonial government. The term's field of reference subsequently expanded beyond "the state," as most conventionally understood. Multiple civil wars broadened its scope to include the state's military challengers, assorted militias, and related institutions. Previously tight associations between government authority claims and the use of guns loosened with the widespread dissemination of powerful automatic rifles during the war years (Hutchinson 1996:103–122, 1998). Boundaries formerly separating government from nongovernment, and *kume* from civilians, became more frayed, indeterminate, and contested (see also Leonardi 2007, 2013; Pendle in press). The prophets Nyachol and Gatdeang have become pivotal players in the continual renegotiation and situational resolution of these boundaries.

Although there are many forms of violence and many ways to conceptualize its power, including "structural" and direct and asymmetrical and balanced, we focus here on fatal or lethal violence. David Graeber has recently stressed the capacity of violence "to allow arbitrary decisions, and thus to avoid the kind of debate, clarification, and renegotiation typical of more egalitarian social relations" (2012:112). He views this arbitrariness as deeply troubling since "those relying on the fear of force are not obliged to engage in a lot of interpretative labor, and thus, generally speaking, do not" (Graeber 2012:115–116). While sharing Graeber's concern about the capacity of violence for sheer rawness, particularly when it is wielded asymmetrically, we think there is more to this story. As we argue in this article, even when a particular refraction of *kume* controls

the capacity for overwhelming force and uses it with impunity against the civilian population, government leaders must still take into account how such violence is interpreted by others. They do so because, in the eyes of Nuer, and of many other people around the world, lethal violence can have spiritual as well as judicial repercussions for perpetrators (Hutchinson 1998). Indeed, Nuer prophets embody and project this “truth” in multiple contexts. The idea that a person is ultimately answerable to Kuoth is powerful. Consequently, South Sudanese government leaders do not find it easy to dispense with Graeber’s “interpretive labor,” as he seems to suggest—even when they endeavor to convince their rank-and-file military troops that killings carried out under government orders are morally, socially, and spiritually “risk-free” (Hutchinson 1996:103–109, 1998, 2005).

Both President Salva Kiir and his former vice president and current military challenger, Riek Machar, must make the effort to stay abreast of competing moral perspectives on permissible violence advocated by powerful nongovernment actors such as Gatdeang and Nyachol. Otherwise, they risk losing legitimacy. From this vantage point, and others we develop more fully below, Gatdeang and Nyachol may be viewed, despite their philosophical differences, as aligned against the secularized, simplified, and objectified forms of violence routinely glorified by competing government elites and of concern to Graeber.

The guiding moral visions of Gatdeang and Nyachol

Gatdeang Dit (“Son of the Great [Divinity] *Deng*”), born Mut Turoah Nyaweah, is a third-generation prophet of *Deng*, the most powerful divinity in the Nuer spiritual pantheon. Both Gatdeang’s father and grandfather were prophets of *Deng*, a divinity honored by generations of Dinka and Nuer alike. Associated with the power of lightning and the fertilizing potential of rain, *Deng* brings coolness (*koc*), a condition that dispels more than heat and dryness. States of coolness are associated with people’s heartfelt wishes for “the good things of life”: health and fertility (a cool body); generosity and kindness (a cool heart); equanimity, patience, and persuasiveness (a cool tongue); and communal harmony, peace, and prosperity (a cool world; see Hutchinson 1996:78–79). Rain is the symbolic source and joyful expression of all these life-promoting states of coolness through *Deng*.

Deng first fell on Gatdeang after his father’s death in the 1960s, when he was a young man and when Sudan’s first civil war was in full blaze. By the 1980s, Gatdeang had matured into a regionally renowned spiritual leader and rainmaker. At that time, he was galvanizing local Bul Nuer youth to defend their communities against Baggara cattle and slave raiders, who were armed and directed by the Khartoum government to clear oil-rich regions in the

Western Upper Nile of their Nuer and Dinka inhabitants (Hutchinson 1996:1–20; 2005).

Gatdeang is known among neighboring western Dinka communities as *Deng Loth* or *Gader* (Jok and Hutchinson 1999:138). Over the decades, major delegations of Dinka chiefs have journeyed to Gatdeang’s homestead in the hope of curtailing drought.³ Water falling from Gatdeang’s hand is the primary symbolic means through which he conveys *Deng*’s blessings. Gatdeang’s blessings extend to the Christian Church. He actively encourages his family and followers to accept Christianity and to attend services in a small Catholic church he helped establish in his home village. Since 2000, Gatdeang has resided in Koani, a rural village located 20 kilometers south of the district market center at Mankien.⁴

Now in his sixties, Gatdeang is, unquestionably, the most senior and widely respected living western Nuer prophet. (See Figure 1.) His reputation now extends eastward across the Nile to Nuer communities as far away as Ethiopia. Gatdeang is also widely esteemed as a rainmaker and peacemaker in Dinka communities as far away as Rumbek, the capital of Lakes State, located 640 kilometers farther south. His messages from *Deng* move easily and transparently across this cultural and linguistic divide.

Nyachol, or Nyapada Chuol Labieth, who appears to be in her early forties, first gained regional prominence as a prophet of *Maani* in 2010 among the Haak Nuer, during a cycle of escalating cattle raiding with surrounding Dinka communities. Honored by generations of western Nuer and some western Dinka, *Maani* provides a powerful channel of communication and supplication with Kuoth Nhial. *Maani* also restores fertility and protects cattle and children, the twinned sources of wealth and security in Nuer eyes. As *Maani*’s prophet, Nyachol (“daughter of Chuol”) is sometimes addressed by the honorific Nyaguandong (“grandfather’s daughter”). She is only *Maani*’s third prophet since the divinity first manifested itself in a western Jagei Nuer prophet named Kolang Ket during the 19th century.

Nyachol’s immediate spiritual predecessor was Kolang’s daughter, Nyaruac Kolang (d. 1973), the only significant Nuer prophet to have eluded colonial suppression, which she accomplished by playing successfully on Victorian gender stereotypes equating femininity with passivity (Johnson 1994:283ff.)—a path Nyachol has not followed. The late prophetess’s byre (*luak*), near the contemporary town of Koch, remains a gathering place for western Nuer and Dinka seeking *Maani*’s protection. Even foreigners are remembered as having sought Nyaruac Kolang’s support. Nyachol’s *luak* stands in the village of Thor in Haak Nuer territory, near the border separating Unity State from Lakes and Warrap States. (See Figure 2.)

In the four years since *Maani* manifested in her, Nyachol has become a leading spiritual figure among the Jagei,



Figure 1. The prophet Gatdeang chatting on a satellite phone in his Koani, (South) Sudan, homestead, 2003. Photo credit: S. Hutchinson.

Dok, and Haak Nuer of central Western Upper Nile and has garnered increasing attention from national and state leaders. Compared with the prophet Gatdeang, however, Nyachol is still consolidating her spiritual credentials. *Maani* first possessed Nyachol after an illness that left her barren. As she has gained ritual authority, it has become common for adolescent girls to enter a trance that directs them to her. These trances confirm *Maani*'s powers through Nyachol and command allegiance. Local Presbyterian church leaders shun Nyachol, although this position has hardly affected her growing regional prominence. She has also antagonized several state government officials.

Nyachol strives to differentiate herself from kume and, indeed, from all manifestations of "modernity" she considers contrary to her deep roots in Nuer prophetic traditions. She forbids many "modern" imports, including imported clothing, photography, telephones, and motorbikes, from entering her homestead. Nyachol has nightmares about foreigners trying to photograph her. She interprets these nightmares as warnings from *Maani* to limit her interactions with the outside and with foreign things. Guns, while centrally

important to her protective aspirations through local youth, are not permitted inside her house or cattle byre.

Commonly dressed only in a grass skirt and a draped leopard skin, the prophet Nyachol usually insists that first-time supplicants remove their clothes before appearing before her. Although not universally enforced, her expectation for physically demonstrated transparency, humility, and deference has definitely discouraged some local government officials from meeting her. Nyachol has thus fashioned herself as outside and above government while also performing many of the tasks over which government claims to have exclusive right of action.

South Sudan's "postconflict" period, 2005–13

The signing of the 2005 CPA marked the official conclusion to 21 years of civil warfare stemming from the southern regions' resistance to the central government of Sudan. A tense, six-year interim period followed, during which the SPLM established a semiautonomous Government of Southern Sudan within a continuing united,

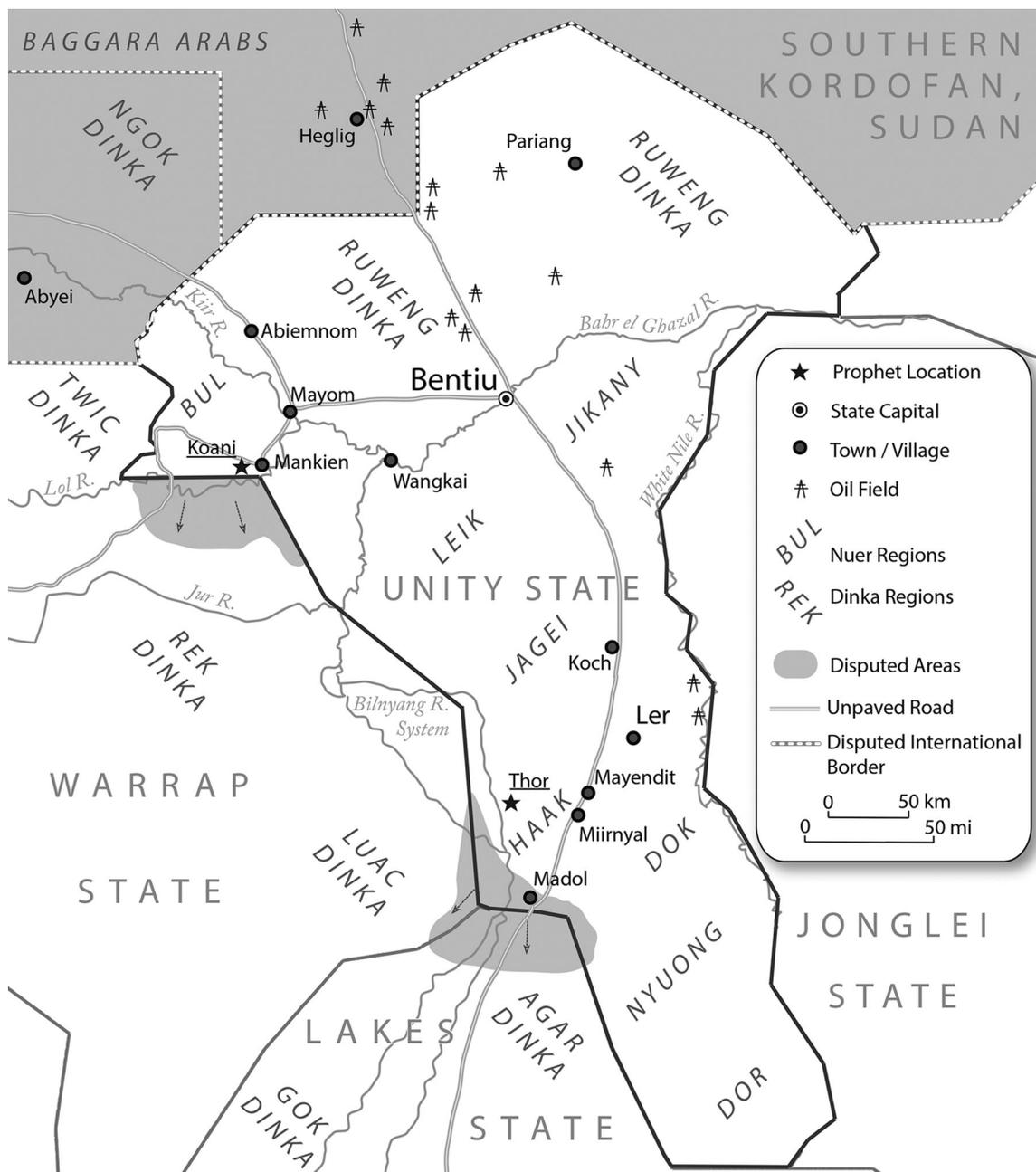


Figure 2. Map of contemporary Western Upper Nile (Unity State) showing the home areas of the prophets Gatdeang and Nyachol and disputed territories, including territories disputed between South Sudan and Sudan.

national Government of Sudan. The SPLM also gained control over half the revenues from southern oil fields and the rights to participate in a national census and to conduct regional state and parliamentary elections. Most importantly, southern Sudanese gained the right to hold a regional referendum in January 2011 to decide whether to remain part of Sudan or establish an independent state.

Although the “thorny” historical outcome of this process is now clear (Copnall 2014; Schomerus and Allen 2010),

SPLM leaders in Juba and millions of southern civilians initially feared Khartoum would not honor the CPA through the self-determination referendum. Consequently, the CPA was viewed initially as little more than a temporary truce. The SPLM’s first priority was to preserve and strengthen its military capacities by binding the loyalties of senior SPLA officers and rank-and-file troops through financial incentives and regular monthly salaries—something that was impossible before it received a cut of southern oil revenues.

These revenues also allowed “kleptocratic” SPLA and SPLM leaders to build personal patronage networks, held together primarily by incentives for financial gain, and to create their own bases of militarized political support (de Waal 2014). Oil revenues also facilitated covert purchases of advanced military hardware.

Various CPA provisions required a major restructuring of southern security arrangements. At war’s end, a plethora of “other armed [southern] groups” operated independently of the SPLA. Some had been armed and orchestrated by the Khartoum government during the war, and others had coalesced as localized defense groups. The CPA stipulated that, within one year of its signing, all members of these groups must either fuse into the ranks of the SPLA, join newly created, temporary Joint Integrated Units (JIUs) shared with Khartoum, or disband (Young 2010). Through these requirements, southern SPLM leaders hoped to differentiate the “legitimate” military might of the SPLA from other armed persons, who were deemed “civilians” to be forcibly disarmed, if necessary. This step marked a radical departure from wartime patterns in which Khartoum and the SPLA dispersed increasingly powerful automatic rifles among southerners, seriously blurring the civilian–military boundary.

Following John Garang’s tragic death in a helicopter crash shortly after he signed the CPA, Salva Kiir was appointed head of the SPLM and the fledgling southern regional government. Salva brought a new and more explicit vision of southern Sudanese independence to the party. Before Garang’s death, the declared political aim of the SPLM was to establish a united, democratic, secular Sudan. In another break from preceding SPLA policies, Salva Kiir made an offer of amnesty to the largest of the “other armed groups” in the south—the Southern Sudan Defense Force (SSDF), led by a notorious Bul Nuer commander, Paulino Matip, and based in the Western Upper Nile. This amnesty was formally accepted in the 2006 Juba Declaration. The SSDF had been constructed from a patchwork of local defense forces across South Sudan, making its membership fluid and uncertain. Many “other armed groups” and southerners soon joined the salaried ranks of the SPLA by asserting prior membership in the SSDF as it merged.

The SPLA’s pythonlike absorption of almost 100,000 members of “other armed groups”—an overwhelming majority of whom were Nuer—over the next several years left southern military forces internally divided and extremely unstable. Pre-CPA networks of power and patronage often proved stronger than newly revamped SPLA command structures, something that fostered deep suspicion and uncertainty among its ranks. Despite these tensions, the center held through the historic 2011 self-determination referendum in which more than 98 percent of southern Sudanese voted in favor of political secession and independence, which South Sudan acquired on July 9, 2011.

The post-CPA and independence periods also witnessed major civilian disarmament campaigns (Brewer 2009) aimed at sharpening the division between the government military and civilians by removing the power of the gun from the latter. In theory, disarmament could have promoted greater civilian security, provided it was conducted comprehensively, simultaneously, and evenly across all regions. In practice, it amplified local-level instability and violence for the simple reason that government officials failed to take subsequent responsibility for protecting communities that were disarmed (Saferworld 2012).

Guns collected from civilians, moreover, were not destroyed but placed in dispersed government stores, where local state officials could potentially redistribute them to civilian communities for reasons ranging from newly perceived national security threats to ethnic favoritism and individual officials’ desire to ensure the safety of their home communities and personal herds. The selective dissemination of previously collected guns was one of many ways individual officials could use their new, post-CPA authority to shape local community politics, often provoking intercommunal violence in the process (Pendle 2014). Not surprisingly, many southern Sudanese civilians hesitated to hand over their guns to government authorities that they had more experience fighting than trusting. Frustrated by the government’s seeming indifference to their security concerns, many Nuer and Dinka civilians sold cattle or other valued resources to rearm.

Major Dinka cattle raids deep into both Bul and Haak Nuer areas in recent years often served to confirm suspicions among many Nuer that the government’s disarmament campaigns had been lopsided and designed to disempower Nuer communities. This discourse built on long-established fears about the dangers of a “Dinka-dominated” government, which harken back to Khartoum’s wartime efforts to divide and conquer the south by fanning hostilities between Dinka and Nuer communities. Western Nuer and Dinka communities suffered greatly from this wartime dynamic. This was especially the case after SPLM–SPLA leadership struggles between John Garang (a Bor Dinka) and Riek Machar split the southern rebel movement in 1991, triggering a decade of Dinka–Nuer military violence from which the region has never fully recovered. Riek Machar’s signing of an ill-fated peace agreement with Khartoum in 1997 subsequently intensified vulnerabilities by opening the way for Khartoum to launch a massive military campaign to clear Nuer and Dinka inhabitants from oil-rich areas of the northern and western Unity State, often working in coordination with powerful Bul Nuer SSDF commanders, like Paulino Matip and Peter Gatdet. During this chaotic decade, Nuer political and military leaders frequently switched sides between Khartoum and a moving kaleidoscope of southern rebel military factions and militias, some of which periodically allied with Garang’s

SPLA mainstream forces.⁵ Caught between competing and unpredictable southern military commanders and militia leaders, ordinary Nuer and Dinka villagers found it impossible to determine where the next security threat would come from, and who, if anyone, could provide protection. The wartime legacy of this Nuer–Nuer and Nuer–Dinka violence was left unresolved after the CPA’s signing and resurfaced with a vengeance as a second rendering of the SPLM–SPLA developed in Juba in late 2013.

The contrasting peace-building strategies of prophets Gatdeang and Nyachol

Throughout this chaotic southern-against-southern military violence, the prophet Gatdeang succeeded in maintaining an inviolate sanctuary among the Bul Nuer. As noted, Gatdeang first established himself as a regional spiritual force during the mid-1980s, when the greatest local security threat was posed by Baggara Arab slave and cattle raiders.⁶ Periodically during the civil war, the prophet used his ritual authority to inspire local Bul Nuer men to defend their villages and herds from northern Baggara Arab raiders. Then, as now, Gatdeang urged armed local youth not to fight among themselves: “If you kill yourselves, the Arabs will be laughing and, when you are finished, they will come and take your lands!”⁷

Nevertheless, Gatdeang’s efforts to galvanize local Nuer men in defense of their home territories cannot be characterized as a form of identity politics that replaces the Nuer–Dinka identity axis, so central to Nyachol’s spiritual vision, with some variant of a Northerner, Baggara, or Arab (*jishamal/karegni/jalaba*) identity distinction as opposed to a Southerner, Nuer, or African (*jinub/nei ti naadh/nei ti caar*) one. None of these identity categories are determinative for Gatdeang. For him, the only relevant question pertaining to the morality or legitimacy of violence is whether it has been used defensively. No armed Nuer civilian would be foolhardy enough to try to mobilize a raiding party into Baggara homelands in distant southern Kordofan. All Bul Nuer confrontations with Baggara seasonal pastoralists and raiders occur in Bul Nuer territories. Even so, armed Nuer youth can, and sometimes do, mount offensive raids on Baggara herds grazing seasonally in Nuer territories. And it is precisely such violence that Gatdeang has consistently sought to discourage.⁸

The prophet tells everyone who will listen that *Deng* never supports the party that fires “the first shot.” Violent aggression provokes *Deng*’s anger, which in turn causes heavy loss of life on the offending side. Only defensive violence is morally legitimate and worthy of *Deng*’s protective attentions, even when engaging with Baggara Arab pastoralists. Nor does *Deng* tolerate the killing of wounded or captured opponents. In these and other ways, Gatdeang strives to support traditional Nuer ethical codes of

fighting and raiding frayed by decades of civil war (Hutchinson 1998; Hutchinson and Jok 2002). Gatdeang’s capacity to restrain Nuer youth from undertaking offensive raiding has been strongest in his home district of Ruath Nyibol. He has nonetheless succeeded on many occasions in dissuading other Bul Nuer youth from mounting retaliatory attacks on Dinka cattle camps.

Gatdeang’s core security strategy revolves not around the power of guns but around the power of traditional cultural norms of hospitality, marriage, kinship, and shared cattle rights and obligations. In many ways, his peace-building practices mirror those of earlier generations of Nuer *tut*, or “bulls of the cattle camp,” as originally described by E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1951:9). Gatdeang aims to gather around himself a united and loyal circle of supporters by providing them with security, hospitality, and gifts of cattle. In addition, Gatdeang is also a conduit for rain and all the other life-promoting gifts of health and fertility *Deng* can bestow.

Gatdeang himself has married 30 Dinka wives, and many of his sons have followed suit. However, it is Gatdeang’s daughters who continually attract marriage proposals from neighboring Dinka communities as well as from leading Nuer government official and military commanders from across the political spectrum. Many Nuer and Dinka members of the contemporary government elite continue to practice polygyny, whereby the number of wives a man may marry is limited solely by his cattle wealth. Moreover, each new marriage, as Evans-Pritchard (1951) has explained, endures across five generations, linking the bride’s and groom’s extended families through a complex system of shared bridewealth rights in the original couple’s daughters and granddaughters. Consequently, marriages forged by his father and grandfathers continue to bind Gatdeang to ever-growing numbers of people as “kin,” *mar* or *maar*—a word that also means “peace” in Nuer. And, arguably, the most fundamental reciprocal obligation binding kinsmen is “not to kill each other” (Hutchinson 1996:165).

Like previous generations of Nuer “bulls of the cattle camp,” Gatdeang can also forge asymmetrical bonds of hierarchy and obligation with an unrelated man by giving him a cow or two for marriage. Cattle gifts can also be used to create relationships of social symmetry and equality. For example, General Paulino Matip, the (now late) Bul Nuer commander who consistently represented Khartoum’s military interests during the civil war, maintained a formal bond of “friendship” (*maar*) with the prophet Gatdeang, in which each man committed to giving his “friend” a cow received as bridewealth on the marriage of each of his daughters. The fathers of Matip and Gatdeang also maintained this (usually single-generation) formal friendship. When one considers all of the ties created through marriage and cattle exchange by Gatdeang’s extended family over the generations, plus the kinship rhizomes uniting him with other

residents of Koani, this network binds together an extraordinarily diverse and extensive “moral community.”

Gatdeang also fosters regional peace and security by maintaining an inviolate sanctuary under *Deng's* protection, accessible to everyone, without prejudice or with no regard for social distinction. “Everyone is a child of *Deng*,” Gatdeang maintains, and thus, everyone must be welcomed at *Deng's* “homestead.” Baggara Arab adulterers dodging vengeful husbands, Dinka chiefs praying for rain, war captives and war criminals, women seeking enhanced fertility, parents of sick children hoping for a miraculous cure, urban residents and rural villagers fleeing “government” military violence, and even President Salva Kiir himself have all come to Koani seeking Gatdeang’s divinely inspired guidance and support. The prophet’s homestead thus serves as a neutral gathering place for defusing and renegotiating negative social relationships of various kinds. Gatdeang has in many ways created a respected sanctuary similar to those maintained during pre-“government” times by *kuaar muon* (translated as “leopard-skin chief” by Evans-Pritchard [1940:5] and as “earth priest” by Hutchinson [1996:106ff.]).

Gatdeang reinforces *Deng's* egalitarian and nondiscriminatory ethos in his home village by distinguishing cattle offered as gifts to *Deng* from those of his personal herd. “Everyone” shares milk rights in heifers given to *Deng*. Moreover, *Deng's* cows are often redistributed spontaneously, upon arrival, among Koani’s residents. While Gatdeang accepts gifts of money, *Deng* rejects them. Lacking blood, breath, and procreative capacities, money makes a poor substitute for a sacrificial cow (Hutchinson 1996:56ff.).

Gatdeang’s “tut”-like and “kuaar muon”-like method for building a community of followers and supporters can also create land pressures. Significantly, Gatdeang has always chosen to situate himself on the southern edge of Bul Nuer territories. In the 1990s, he based himself in Ruath Nyibol, then a seasonal cattle-camp area with few year-round inhabitants. Over time, his presence attracted many other settlers, and Ruath Nyibol gradually developed into a small market center with limited grazing capabilities. Gatdeang then shifted his homestead farther south to establish Koani, originally a seasonal cattle-camp area as well. Nearby swamplands provided excellent cattle forage during the dry season.

Before the SPLA’s 1991 schism, Dinka herds also grazed these valued swamplands. After John Garang and Riek Machar turned their forces’ guns against each other’s civilian populations, however, many Dinka villagers pulled away from grazing grounds and settlements previously shared with or close to Nuer villagers, as a security precaution. Some Dinka communities shifted tens of kilometers farther west, creating a vast swath of unoccupied land.

Gatdeang’s founding of Koani in 2000 represented a move back into these war-emptied lands. He then worked

to stabilize and integrate his new permanent, wet-season “homestead” in ways beneficial to surrounding Dinka communities. Backed by the power of *Deng*, the prophet sought to restrain Bul Nuer men from raiding Dinka cattle camps. He also encouraged Nuer–Dinka intermarriages, partly with the aim of creating opportunities for the peaceful sharing of critical resources across this cultural and linguistic divide during periods of drought, hunger, and insecurity. Moreover, Gatdeang successfully accomplished this aim in Koani without loss of human life.

The founding moral vision of Nyachol’s peace-building strategy revolves around very different idioms and premises than those advocated by Gatdeang. Despite such differences, Nyachol is also recognized locally as a prophet of peace, and she constructs her ritual authority around its promise. The peace she builds, however, focuses more narrowly on strengthening her immediate home region and moral community from within.

Significantly, *Maani* returned to the Western Upper Nile after many decades of absence, during a post-CPA season of civilian disarmament and rising vulnerability. *Maani* first descended on the prophetess Nyachol in 2010, after a large group of Dinka raiders attacked her home village at Thor. The return of *Maani* after nearly 40 years was remarkable. Nyachol interpreted its sudden reappearance as signaling the need for a revenge attack on neighboring Dinka communities, placing at the heart of Nyachol’s imagining of peace and violence the Nuer–Dinka identity distinction. *Maani's* return provided both the prophetess and her home community with hope of divine support for their offensive and defensive security strategy. Metaphorically, the regional “peace” Nyachol forged was much “hotter” than the regional “peace” fostered by Gatdeang.

Nyachol constructed her ritual authority through an assemblage of local youth. Commonly armed, Nuer youth remain the area’s main agents of defense and retaliatory violence. They often guard the herds not only of local communities but also of government elites. The physical control these youth exercise over local areas can restrain and challenge resident elders and government officials. High-ranking politicians from Juba must ask permission from local cattle guards before visiting dry-season camps to view their herds. Nyachol’s popularity and authority over regional youth has thus rattled many levels within the state and national government. The prophetess sympathizes with their challenging mission and embraces their militarized subculture. She also praises their bravery and fighting prowess. As the channel for *Maani's* spiritual protections, Nyachol promises to help the youth build a strong local security apparatus, something not offered by a largely distant and indifferent government.

To achieve this, she endeavors to contain and reduce violent aggression and interclan fighting within her extended rural community by reinforcing the pollution risks of

Nuer–Nuer homicide in *Maani's* name. The prophetess can sense ritual pollution lingering on people who visit her, especially a highly contagious and lethal form of pollution known as *nueer*, associated first and foremost with acts of Nuer–Nuer homicide and with the institution of blood feuds, more generally.⁹ Those Nuer who know that they are polluted by such bloody activity but still want to gain access to Nyachol's moral community and the protection and certainty *Maani* provides can do so. However, they must first ritually purify themselves and reconcile with the families of those they have slain through payments of bloodwealth cattle. After state officials failed to adequately support existing institutions responsible for suppressing and resolving local feuds and fights, Nyachol stepped into this political vacuum to enforce compliance on threat of *Maani's* punishment. Chiefs began referring difficult cases to Nyachol, who operated as an informal appeals judge on the margins of an otherwise dysfunctional government court system. Following South Sudan's independence, the new national government has prohibited all such referrals to “nongovernment” leaders, and regional state authorities have opposed local chiefs sending any cases to Nyachol. Many chiefs and families, however, continue to seek out her judicial and purification services. Nuer–Nuer conflicts in Nyachol's home region have plummeted since 2010 under the combined influence of *Maani* and the prophetess.

At the same time, Nyachol provides local youth with added spiritual protections when they seek to guard cattle or acquire cattle from their Dinka counterparts. Nyachol ceremonially blesses offensive Nuer raids in advance by providing mustered youth with ashes taken from the central cattle-dung fire (*gol*) of *Maani's* sacred byre. Nyachol's blessings allegedly protect her followers from bullets during cross-border cattle raids. Cattle successfully captured during retaliatory raids thus constitute “gifts” from *Maani* and, in a sense, Nyachol. Captured cattle further bind the loyalties of her followers to Nyachol, reinforcing relations of mutual dependence as well as of hierarchy between them.

In brief, Nyachol offers the kind of protective and judicial services that government in Western Upper Nile jealously claims to be within its own exclusive purview but that it has failed to provide, a failure that extends across South Sudan (Pendle et. al. 2012). Nyachol's popularity can pressure local chiefs and community elders to recognize her spiritual authority and defer to her, if only for fear of alienating many thousands of armed Nuer youth. They demonstrate acquiescence by stripping naked before appearing before her and by presenting *Maani* with honorary gifts of cattle. Nyachol has pronounced cattle purchased with money in the marketplace unacceptable gifts for *Maani*, since there is no certainty of their morally legitimate origin.

Like Gatdeang, Nyachol has also encouraged forward movements into areas less accessible before the wartime

Dinka pullback by formally blessing newly established Nuer villages and by actively mobilizing armed local men to defend them when necessary. These “unoccupied” borderlands have also attracted the interests of powerful state elites. For example, Riek Machar established a military base at Madhol (on the border of the Agar Dinka and Haak Nuer) in the late 1990s. After the CPA, he converted it into a large, mechanized farm. Machar used his “Dok Nuer” identity to lay claim to the legitimate use of this land. Through this discourse, he could potentially mobilize Nuer youth to counter any aggression against his farm from Dinka groups farther south, by portraying it as a generalized attack against “the Nuer.”

Nyachol has assisted in perpetuating this interpretation by ritually blessing Machar's farm and the forward movement of other Nuer settlements. She justifies these actions by citing *Maani's* concern with the protection of children, the new villages being the rightful homes of Nuer children. Faced with the continuing failure of the government to assert clarity over conflicting claims to land, *Maani* fills this void with a promise of shielding, solidifying, and legitimizing advancing Nuer settlements and land claims.

Nyachol's border politics are clearly much “hotter” and less peaceful than Gatdeang's. In ritually supporting Machar's attempt to lay claim to a large chunk of contested borderland for a private mechanized farm, Nyachol has certainly aggravated Nuer–Dinka hostilities and intercommunal violence, not calmed them. Her control of youth and her calls for unified Nuer opposition against negatively portrayed Dinka have long held strategic appeal for Machar. The simplified clarity of this rigidified and reified identity opposition readily masks differences in education, wealth, privilege, and power separating the onetime vice president from the everyday experience and lifelong opportunities of rural Nuer and Dinka youth. By papering over such differences, Machar opens up room for future mobilization of Nuer youth around whatever shared vision serves his political ambitions. For all of these reasons, Nyachol found herself an assumed ally of Machar following the December 2013 outbreak of renewed civil war.

Long before the late 2013 eruption of targeted ethnic violence in Juba, however, Nyachol and Gatdeang had established direct relations with high-ranking government elites. In the next two sections, we analyze two exemplary encounters that reveal the fluidity and complexities of these prophets' ties to kume.

President Salva Kiir visits Gatdeang

In 2008, immediately following another round of civilian disarmament in Bul Nuer country, a party of heavily armed Dinka youth from Warrap State staged a raid on the dry-season cattle camp where Gatdeang kept his personal herd. Outgunned and outnumbered, the youth protecting his

cattle were soon overwhelmed. The Dinka raiders escaped with some 2,000–3,000 head, most belonging to Gatdeang himself.

Members of Gatdeang's home community as well as thousands of other Bul Nuer throughout Mayom County were especially angry because they considered this raid an intolerable affront against the prophet himself. Some of them immediately began planning a counterraid to recapture the prophet's stolen herd. But Gatdeang adamantly refused to condone their plans. He challenged them, saying, "Let them have the cows. If they take the cows, they will be the ones to bring them back another day."¹⁰ With these remarks, Gatdeang was alluding to the fact that he, personally, had received many gifts of cattle from visiting Dinka dignitaries, government leaders, and other supplicants from neighboring Warrap State over the years. He went on to explain, "I don't care about the cattle. My mind is on the independence [referendum]." People deferred to him, abandoning the idea of a retaliatory raid.

News of Gatdeang's losses soon reached Juba, however, alarming President Salva Kiir. National and state elections were scheduled for early 2010, to be followed by the self-determination referendum in early 2011. Interethnic hostilities among southerners could delay or scuttle these events. Consequently, the prospect of a major cycle of Nuer and Dinka cattle raiding across the Warrap–Unity state border was worrisome. President Salva Kiir's original home, moreover, is located in Rek Dinka country in Warrap State. Dinka cattle herds from that region often graze the borderlands adjacent to the Bul Nuer during the height of the dry season.

A few months after the Dinka raid, Salva Kiir journeyed from Juba to Koani to visit Gatdeang at his homestead. Perhaps the president felt he needed to assuage the prophet for his losses. But Gatdeang received him calmly and showed no anger. In fact, Gatdeang expressly reassured the president that he was not troubled about the stolen cows. He then drove home his point by telling Salva Kiir, "Do you see those [starving and motherless] calves over there? They are all yours! Take them to their mothers in Warrap."

This poignant offer no doubt startled the president, for it indirectly challenged the entire system of hierarchically nested regional and ethnic distinctions through which government officials rule. From Gatdeang's spiritually inspired vantage point, personal greed and narrow ethnic divisions of any kind are nonexistent within the moral universe symbolized by *Deng*.

With these twin gestures—namely, the offer to give Salva Kiir his remaining calves and his refusal to request the return of his stolen cattle—Gatdeang adeptly reoriented hierarchical relations between himself and the president, between his locality and the government, and among various Nuer and Dinka communities. In essence, Gatdeang reframed his cattle losses as "gifts." Within both Nuer and

Dinka social norms, this sort of giving creates and sustains hierarchical relations between cattle givers and cattle takers, although in this instance the obligation owed would seem to be "peace."

By provoking a reaction from the president in these ways, Gatdeang ultimately succeeded in providing his home community with enhanced security by shaming the government, as it were, to do more. After President Salva Kiir returned to Juba, he dispatched ten armed policemen to serve as Gatdeang's personal guard, together with two SPLA army battalions to safeguard the prophet's extended rural community. Although the SPLA soldiers were later withdrawn, the policemen stayed.

This incident reveals the prophet as significantly more than a mediator between the highest levels of the state and smallest units of civil society. President Salva Kiir himself appeared to defer to Gatdeang. Perhaps the fact that both Gatdeang and Salva work to solve problems beyond their home communities facilitated greater communication and mutual understanding. Gatdeang's eagle-eyed focus on the independence referendum was significant in this regard.

Finally, the president's decision to visit Gatdeang reveals how rapidly cattle connections can scale up or down the multilayer hierarchy of power networks and institutions that constitute the South Sudanese state. In various ways, then, Gatdeang's relationship with kume was more diversified, diffuse, and nonconfrontational than was Nyachol's militarized youth approach. And Gatdeang managed to secure his home area—as far as possible—without sacrificing any lives. Rather than glorifying the raw power of guns, Gatdeang's moral vision for managing uncertainty, instability, and violence rested firmly on ideals of nonaggression, nondiscrimination, egalitarianism, and tolerance.

Nyachol eludes government arrest

By late December 2012, Nyachol had acquired a large, loyal following among Haak and Dok Nuer youth. Her loyalists at that time also included more than 100 Bul Nuer youth and disparate Nuer recruits hailing from the east bank of the Nile. She ceremoniously sanctioned and blessed the incursion of a large raiding party deep into Luac Dinka territories in Warrap State. This raid was explicitly justified as retaliation for an earlier Dinka raid on her home village of Thor. As Nyachol explained, "Over 40 women and children were killed by the Luac Dinka in 2011, so we had to return and take revenge. I am a prophetess of peace, but this raid was necessary."¹¹

A series of counter raids followed through January 2013, attracting the media's attention as well as that of UN and NGO personnel stationed in South Sudan. Nyachol's activities also provoked a government response. The then Unity State governor, Taban Deng, ordered Nyachol's immediate arrest. He viewed himself and, more generally, the state

government as responsible for enforcing peace across the Unity–Warrap state border. Nyachol's action represented an unacceptable usurpation of that responsibility.

The commissioner of Mayendit County (where Thor is located), however, failed to implement Nyachol's arrest warrant, for fear of provoking violent resistance from her armed followers. The commissioner considered himself a devout Christian and did not believe in *Maani's* powers. He had been educated in the United States and had built his political authority on his modern education. His refusal to accept the authority of Nyachol and the reality of *Maani's* powers was an extension of his rejection of her attempt to create a sphere of influence detached from modernity and government. For this commissioner, the force protecting Nyachol was not *Maani* but, rather, the propensity for violence from her followers. He later remarked, "The government of the state and in Juba now also fear her." Nyachol's widespread support in her home village, however, made it impossible for the commissioner "to separate her from what people believe" and, thus, to differentiate between Nyachol and *Maani*.

Later, a higher-ranking state minister from the state capital invited Nyachol to visit him in Bentiu. However, throughout the night before she was meant to travel, *Maani's* sacred drum beat spontaneously outside Nyachol's luak, instructing her not to go. Nyachol's supporters composed new songs explicitly criticizing Governor Taban. In the end, *Maani's* divine intervention, together with threat of physical violence from her youthful defenders, combined to prevent Nyachol's arrest. Nyachol also made it clear to the government that she was unable to travel to Bentiu using a car because cars were part of the "modernity" she rejected.

Governor Taban and other state government officials responded by trying to paint Nyachol as the main regional deterrent to peace. Yet their effort to limit Nyachol's influence had little impact because the government still failed to address people's underlying needs for improved security and certainty—making the alternative "peace-building" strategies promoted by the prophetess all the more appealing locally. Youth in Mayendit County at this time refused to meet with the commissioner, even at his explicit request. A strong defense against stigmatized Dinka raiders by a divinely inspired prophetess capable of assembling thousands of armed Nuer youth by beating *Maani's* sacred drums easily trumped empty government promises.

This incident reveals Nyachol's position between the government and the civilian grassroots and her ability to explicitly challenge authority both by eluding government orders and by fulfilling governmental responsibilities more successfully than the government. Her refusal to obey the government while retaining popularity highlighted the power of the legitimacy she demanded. Although Nyachol

ostensibly works within a "nonpolitical" idiom, her ritual powers are precisely what make her a political force to be reckoned with for officials at all levels of kume.

Postindependence South Sudan's implosion

During 2013, long-simmering leadership struggles in South Sudan reached a boiling point with President Salva Kiir seeking to rearrange the personalities and conditions of power at the top. In early 2013, he retired various leaders of the SPLA. In July, he summarily dismissed almost his entire cabinet, including Vice President Machar; weeks before, he had suspended the secretary general of the SPLM, Pagan Amum. Salva Kiir also offered a new phase of amnesty to armed groups that had rebelled against his government since the CPA. Among them were forces of the South Sudan Liberation Army (SSLA), which contained many Bul Nuer recruits and had gained prominence since 2011 under the leadership of Peter Gadet (Small Arms Survey 2011, 2013). In 2013, the SSLA leadership accepted Salva's amnesty offer, creating what was to become a foothold for the president in Bul Nuer regions of the Western Upper Nile, when the young country dissolved into civil warfare a few months later. In 2013, Salva Kiir had also deployed a force near Juba known in Dinka as the Dut ku Beny (Protector of the Leader), which was composed entirely of western Dinka from his home region. Suspicions generated by these events seriously rattled the balance of power within the SPLM and SPLA by greatly expanding the reach of Salva's personal power and patronage networks at the state's center.

On December 15, military violence erupted in Juba between Nuer and Dinka soldiers within the elite presidential guard. By the next day, the violence had spilled out of the barracks into surrounding neighborhoods, where hundreds of Nuer civilians were rounded up and killed during house-to-house searches by unidentified military officers. Tens of thousands of terrified civilian residents took refuge behind the walls of the UN camps in Juba, eventually including the vast majority of all Nuer men, women, and children living in the national capital.

This violence quickly assumed cataclysmic proportions, after Salva Kiir accused his former vice president, Machar, together with other former members of his cabinet, of staging an attempted military coup, a charge everyone adamantly denied. Machar and the previously dismissed Unity State governor Taban Deng ran for their lives from Juba. After escaping, Machar assumed leadership of a major military insurgency already gaining traction in parts of Western Upper Nile and Jonglei State, following the defections of two Nuer SPLA generals. General Peter Gadet, the mercurial Bul Nuer commander, then stationed near Bor in Jonglei State, and General James Koang, an eastern Jikany Nuer SPLA commander then stationed at Bentiu in Unity State, announced their defections immediately after

hearing that close relatives had been slain in Juba. In essence, they declared a blood feud against the government. Previously, these two Nuer generals had almost consistently fought on opposite sides of South Sudan's civil wars, including the SPLA war with Khartoum and the SSLA rebellion against the post-CPA Juba government. But they immediately united and rallied around reports that Nuer civilians were being intentionally targeted and killed in Juba in mid-December 2013. Former SSDF commanders also joined Riek Machar's nascent rebel movement and became the backbone of a growing military rebellion.

Within weeks, war had engulfed three of South Sudan's ten states, with heavy fighting concentrated in Nuer territories on both banks of the Nile as well as in mixed urban centers in the Unity, Jonglei, and Upper Nile States. Conflict quickly led to the shutdown of the oilfields in Western Upper Nile and to local villages experiencing severe water and grazing land pollution as a result of oil spills from these fields. While most Nuer men and women found themselves in opposition to Salva Kiir's government and sympathetic with Machar's SPLA-In-Opposition movement (SPLA-IO), Nuer communities in the Western Upper Nile remained politically divided. Prominent Bul Nuer commanders fought on both sides of the emerging civil war, with Gadet's opposition forces confronting SSLA troops now aligned with Salva Kiir's SPLA forces. SSLA forces proved key allies, facilitating the government's recapture of Mayom and Bentiu towns before marching farther south to destroy the town of Ler and attack Nyachol's home area in February 2014. At the time of writing, SPLA-IO forces currently control most rural Nuer regions on both banks of the Nile, with the noteworthy exception of some Bul Nuer areas. Bentiu and Mayom towns—or their deserted and destroyed carcasses—remain under the control of Salva's government.¹²

In response to South Sudan's December 2013 implosion, Nyachol has continued to mobilize local youth to defend their homelands, this time against government forces. Her ability to inspire and organize thousands of armed Nuer youth has proven a boon to SPLA-IO forces. Government forces had initially used the road stretching south from Bentiu to move troops and vehicle-mounted weapons, before pushing east and west along unmade tracks into more rural settlements. Nyachol successfully mustered and coordinated several thousand armed Nuer youth to defend their home communities, preventing government forces from moving west from the road at Miirnyal into villages such as Dablual and Thor. These Nuer youth, who sometimes refer to themselves as "white soldiers" (*dec in bor*), much like their counterparts among Nuer communities on the Nile's east bank, operate independently of the formal SPLA-IO command structures, although they coordinate with them on an ad hoc basis. Nyachol's promise of *Maani's* protection, conveyed through the conferring of blessed ashes, has emboldened her loyal followers on the battlefield, enabling

them at one point to capture a government tank near her home village.

Nyachol's ties with the opposition movement strengthened further after she announced a month into the conflict that in a dream she foresaw Machar's forces marching on Juba. General James Koang also tried to rebuild bridges with the prophetess, after having earlier crossed her by approving her arrest warrant. After defecting from Salva Kiir's SPLA forces in late December 2013 and being pushed out of Bentiu, the general brought Nyachol cattle as a sign of his support and allegiance. Koang was impressed by the ease with which his gift of a few cattle facilitated Nyachol's mobilization of large numbers of local Nuer youth to support his armed insurgency. Despite having command over a militarized force, Koang realized the benefits of Nyachol's interpretative authority to add legitimacy to his cause.

Gatdeang, in contrast, has refused to take sides in the present conflict. He has offered, instead, a rare refuge of peace and security for thousands of Nuer and non-Nuer civilians fleeing intensifying military confrontations. Gatdeang has urged Bul Nuer civilians, including armed youth, to remain politically and militarily neutral. The prophet has also worked hard to maintain a grassroots peace agreement forged between leading Bul Nuer chiefs and their Western Twic Dinka counterparts less than a week before violence erupted in Juba. As late as January 2015, most civilian Bul Nuer area youth appear to have heeded Gatdeang's calls for nonalignment and nonengagement. Consequently, fighting in Bul Nuer regions remained largely confined at that time to the market town of Mayom and villages along the road running from Mayom to the state capital at Bentiu.

The space for political neutrality in this conflict, however, may be disappearing, as vectors of violence increasingly follow narrowly defined ethnic and subethnic divisions. Although Gatdeang has long advocated against the significance of such identity distinctions, his moral vision remains under pressure from those wielding guns on both sides. Because most Bul Nuer civilians stood back and did not immediately rally to support Machar's SPLA-IO rebel forces, Bul Nuer have sometimes found themselves accused by other Nuer of taking bribes or otherwise acting as mercenaries for Salva Kiir's "Dinka government." Their presumed alliance with Salva's SPLA forces—despite the presence of many prominent Bul Nuer commanders fighting in alliance with Machar—has prompted questions about whether Bul Nuer should be considered "Nuer" at all. There are reliable reports that some unarmed Nuer youth were targeted and killed in Bentiu simply for being Bul Nuer. They were deemed nonsupporters of Machar and, hence, "enemies" of forces loyal to him. In the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) civilian protection site in Bentiu, many young Bul Nuer men were forced to live in a separate camp, away from other Nuer, many of whom equated nonalignment with de facto support for Salva Kiir's

government. The possibility that any civilian could remain impartial in the conflict was thus violently denied by some Nuer fighters.

Despite this worrying development, Gatdeang's sanctuary at Koani has not yet experienced any violence, in large part because leading military and political figures on both sides of the conflict share a personal interest in safeguarding the prophet. SPLA-IO commander Gatdet, for example, now attributes his personal longevity on the battlefield to *Deng's* spiritual protection. In 2006, Gatdet sent a delegation to Gatdeang's homestead, bearing a new drum for *Deng* as a gesture of his gratitude. Former governor Taban Deng, who has become the lead SPLA-IO negotiator at continuing international peace talks, is one of Gatdeang's sons-in-law. His Salva Kiir-appointed replacement, Joseph Monyuel, a Bul Nuer, is reportedly seeking to marry one of Gatdeang's daughters. Furthermore, Gatdeang's sons, nephews, sons-in-law, and other close relatives and personal supporters currently pepper the military ranks of both armies as well as surrounding Dinka communities. The commanding general of Salva Kiir's SPLA troops in Bentiu, Matthew Puljang, for example, is a close nephew of Gatdeang's. All these political and military leaders want to protect the prophet and his homestead.

And as of this writing, Gatdeang's sanctuary at Koani has held firm, despite continuing spasms of military violence in the Western Upper Nile and despite continuing frustration on the part of international negotiators trying to forge a durable peace agreement between Machar and Salva Kiir (Small Arms Survey 2015:4–7). At the height of the violence of 2014, when all Western Upper Nile schools were closed, secondary school children from around the state were sent to Gatdeang's sanctuary at Koani so they could continue studying for their exams without fear of violent interruption. During the first months of 2014, Gatdeang's home community also provided temporary sanctuary for urban Nuer, Dinka, and other families fleeing the military destruction of the state capital at Bentiu and a major regional market center at Mayom. *Deng's* sacred sanctuary has offered safety to them all.

Conclusions

We have shown how the prophets Gatdeang and Nyachol have played powerful “supra-kume” roles in setting the moral limits of lethal violence and weighing the legitimacy claims of rival political leaders. They have also provided valued arenas for people to manage feelings of anxiety and uncertainty generated by decades of political instability and civil warfare. The guiding moral strategies they have developed for safeguarding their respective moral communities from government instability, neglect, and military abuse differ dramatically, however. Nyachol, a female prophet of *Maani*, encourages and directs a loyal following of several

thousand armed civilian Nuer men, whose keenness to organize retaliatory attacks against Dinka cattle raiders and forcefully defend against other external threats, including recent government military attacks, she inspires. She has simultaneously sought to strengthen her moral community from within by insisting on the ritual purification of all cases of Nuer–Nuer homicide and by resolving and suppressing internal blood feuds. Gatdeang Dit, a male prophet of *Deng*, has striven to foster relations of peace, hospitality, and intermarriage with neighboring Dinka communities and has rejected both social identity distinctions and offensive violence as incompatible with the moral universe governed by *Deng*. Both Nyachol and Gatdeang have also endeavored to solidify and expand grazing rights and settlement areas of their respective communities into previously Dinka-controlled lands abandoned during the civil war: one backed by the threat of force, the other through more peaceful means. Both have also taken moral positions with respect to South Sudan's current quagmire: one as judgment against kume, or the government, one irrespective of it. Their contrasting moral visions and security-promoting strategies are in many ways structural variations of one another—alternative possibilities from within a spiritual pantheon encompassing both.

Despite striking differences in their spiritual perspectives, Gatdeang and Nyachol have also pursued a common endeavor by looking to manage feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, especially with respect to people's unmet security needs. Each, in his or her own manner, has also worked to rein in the amoral, secularized, and objectified forms of violence that all too often lie at the heart of government legitimacy claims, whether in the former Sudan or today's South Sudan. Their contrasting moral narratives help to remind people that the powers of guns and of the government are always secondary to those of God. Gatdeang and Nyachol have, thus, provided a crucial check on “violence's capacity to allow arbitrary decisions” (Graeber 2012:112) by forcing ambitious state leaders to take account of alternative, popular frameworks for interpreting the moral limits of lethal violence or to risk losing legitimacy.

Perhaps one of the lessons offered by the divergent efforts of these two prophets to create local enclaves of civilian security and peace in the midst of South Sudan's recurrent crises is that there is no “silver bullet” in situations like these. Their peace-building strategies have nothing to do with the cookie-cutter solutions toward which international human rights and state bodies tend. Consequently, political discourses and perspectives that ignore local, ostensibly “nonpolitical” actors also overlook, and perhaps intentionally narrow, the diversity of possible solutions available. The international community's reluctance to engage these prophets and other leading local actors in current discussions about how best to “cool” South Sudan's

intensifying violence represents a mistake that needs correction.

Notes

Acknowledgments. Hutchinson gratefully acknowledges the intellectual stimulation of former department colleagues at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) and funding support from a Norwegian Research Council ISP Grant, directed by Liv Haram (NTNU), on inequality and uncertainty. Hutchinson presented earlier versions of this article at the 2014 Satterthwaite Colloquium on African Ritual and Religion held in the UK and at the University of Michigan, where she received many helpful suggestions. Special thanks go to Joseph Hellweg and Tom Boylston for brilliant comments made on an early draft as well as to anonymous *AE* reviewers. Hutchinson also thanks the prophet Gatdeang Dit and Michael Malual Bol for their deep knowledge of prophecy's power. Pendle thanks the prophetess Nyachol and Gatkuoth Mut and his family for hosting her among the Haak Nuer. Pendle also thanks Machien and other South Sudanese for helpful inputs made during the difficult months of early 2014. The London School of Economics (LSE) financially supported Pendle's research. Fellow South Sudan researchers at the LSE and the University of Durham also gave generously of their time and ideas. Finally, gratitude goes to Monica, Audrey, and Josh, who enriched Pendle's preliminary research findings, and to Hickory Hurie, who lovingly sustained Hutchinson throughout this project.

1. Hutchinson began documenting Gatdeang's prophetic activities in 1981, during her second full year of pre-civil war research (1980–83). Her wartime field research included seven return trips between 1990 and 2003 for periods ranging from three weeks to six months, including an extended stay with Gatdeang in 2003. She speaks Nuer and has collected and translated all Nuer-language quotations attributed to Gatdeang in this article. Pendle's field research with the Western Nuer extended over 16 months during 2012 and 2013 and built on research among the Western Dinka conducted in 2010. She first met Nyachol in January 2013. She conducted all interviews with the prophetess with the aid of a Nuer translator.

2. Eastern Nuer communities in present-day Jonglei and Upper Nile States have also witnessed the rise of several powerful contemporary prophets in recent decades, most notably, a controversial Lou Nuer prophet named Dak Kueth (Hutchinson n.d.). The regionalized legacies of multiple civil wars and of Nuer prophetic traditions are sufficiently distinctive on the west and east banks of the White Nile River to preclude a more comprehensive regional analysis in a single article.

3. On one tragic occasion in 1997, rival southern military commanders failed to respect the "usual protocol regarding spiritual matters," much to the embarrassment of Gatdeang (for details, see Jok and Hutchinson 1999:139–140).

4. Bul Nuer territories border diverse communities. To their north lie Dinka Ruweng territories, which diverse "Baggara" or "cattle" Arab pastoralists from (north) Sudan seasonally enter. To their west and southwest reside Dinka Twic and various Dinka Rek communities and to their east, Leik and Jagei Nuer.

5. For regionally focused details, see especially Gagnon and Ryle 2001; Hutchinson 1998, 2000, 2005; Hutchinson and Jok 2002; Human Right Watch 2003; Johnson 2011; Jok and Hutchinson 1999; and Nyaba 1997.

6. The same raiding methods were subsequently used in Darfur after 2003, where the term *janjawiid* was first coined to refer to Baggara raiders mobilized, armed, and orchestrated by the Khartoum government.

7. Hutchinson originally collected these statements attributed to Gatdeang from eyewitnesses, and later verified their accuracy with the prophet himself during her 2003 field stay in Koani.

8. Neither Gatdeang Dit nor Nyachol plays any special role with regard to traditional Nuer male initiation rites, since these rites, when carried out at all today, are usually timed and organized by the families and local communities concerned. Nuer men have never organized their fighting strength around age-set divisions. People prefer to fight in coordination with their kinsmen and fellow villagers.

9. Detailed discussions of this complex pollution concept may be found in Evans-Pritchard 1956 and Hutchinson 1992.

10. Hutchinson collected statements preceding and relating to Gatdeang's encounter with Salva Kiir from eyewitnesses to these events and subsequently verified them with the prophet via satellite phone.

11. Direct discussion between Pendle and Nyachol, February 2013, Thor Village (Unity State), with the assistance of a Nuer translator.

12. For further information about post-December 2013 events, see International Crisis Group 2014 and Johnson 2014.

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