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The Nuer Messianic Jewish Movement:

Authority and Authenticity in Ethiopia's Western Frontierlands

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Durham University

Department of History

Yotam Gidron

October 2020

Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic history of the evolution of Evangelical Zionism and Messianic Judaism among Nuer communities living in Ethiopia's Gambella region, along the border with South Sudan. It explores the emergence of these faiths, starting from the 1990s, out of older Evangelical Protestant groups, and examines how the truth claims, institutions, and practices associated with them have changed the ways in which local communities shape their collective existence and understand their place in the world. At its most particular level, this thesis traces the evolution of a religious movement that has until now not been the subject of any scholarly interrogation. By doing so, however, it also challenges previous studies of Christian conversion and revival in Nuer society and South Sudan more broadly, which primarily linked them to local experiences of violence and marginalisation. Instead, this study situates the evolution of Evangelical Christianity within a longer history of knowledge exchange and political and spiritual transformation in the frontierlands.

Earlier scholarship emphasised the centrality of spiritual authorities and institutions in the articulation of communities and social order in Nuer society. Over the past half-century, as a result of a range of interconnections made possible due to Gambella's position as an increasingly globally connected frontier zone, churches have assumed this role. This study focuses on one strand of Evangelical Zionist churches that emerged and proliferated through a process of schism, and whose theologies have been explicitly concerned with the critique of state power and the identification of those institutions, legal orders and practices understood to be authentic from the perspective of divine, biblical history. Contributing to recent debates in the anthropology of Christianity, the thesis investigates how the value of various media—in particular, words, blood, and cattle—transformed over time under the influence of Christianity, thus also transforming the ways in which people organised themselves and related to each other and to God.

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A note on languages and transliteration

Nuer is commonly categorised as a West Nilotic language. The first thing non-native speakers notice listening to it is its soft, flowing and breathy texture. In contrast to the Semitic languages spoken in the region (Arabic and Amharic), Nuer contains a large number of vowels and few consonants. Most Nuer words are formed out of a single root syllable, and nuanced transformations in vowel sounds (lowering or raising, lengthening, diphthongisation) play an important role in changing the meaning of words. There are nonetheless differences in pronunciation between different areas of Ethiopia and South Sudan, and while most Nuer texts today use a similar orthography—the one this thesis follows—there are still some variations. The issue is further complicated by the fact that many computer keyboards and smartphones do not have all the letters commonly used to write in Nuer, so alterations and replacements are often introduced.

There are twenty consonant letters commonly used in Nuer, representing twenty consonant phonemes. Listed below are only those that differ in their pronunciation from English. Note that 'ŋ' and 'ɣ' are replaced, in English spelling or by writers who have no access to keyboards with these letters, by 'ng' and 'h' respectively.[1]

dh	dental 'd' pronounced as 'th' (as in 'the') or 'z'
nh	dental 'n' produced with the tongue touching the upper teeth
th	dental 't' pronounced as 'th' (as in 'thin') or 's'
r	rolled 'r' pronounced as the Arabic 'ر'
c	palatal 'c' pronounced as 'ch' or 'sh' (or 'i', at the end of a word)
ny	palatal 'n' pronounced as the Spanish ñ
ŋ	velar 'n' pronounced as 'ng'
ɣ	glottal fricative usually pronounced as 'h'

[1] The descriptions here differ from those in earlier missionary dictionaries and anthropological accounts. I decided to rely on recent works in linguistics that, my experience in Gambella suggests, are more accurate. See T. Reid, *The Phonology and Morphology of the Nuer Verb*, PhD thesis (University of Surrey, 2019).

There is much less consensus with regard to the number of Nuer vowel letters. In the Nuer Bible, seventeen vowel letters are used. Early dictionaries by missionaries specified fewer. Other recent publications identify more. Linguists also seem to have reached slightly different conclusions with regard to the precise number of vowels in the Nuer language and their qualities.[2] In this thesis, I use the sixteen vowel letters commonly used in Gambella and in the Nuer Bible, and avoid rare ones.

Vowels can be distinguished by voice quality: most vowels are breathy, which means that they are produced with a soft sigh or whisper. Diacritics (underline or dieresis) indicate a breathy vowel, with the exception of 'u' that takes no diacritics but is sometimes breathy. In writing, a long vowel is usually indicated by a double letter. The following vowel letters are used in this thesis:[3]

i	as in 'free'	**i̲**	aspirated 'i'
e	as in 'may'	**e̲**	aspirated 'e'
a	as in 'far'	**a̲**	aspirated 'a'
o	as in 'boat'	**o̲**	aspirated 'o'
ɔ	as in 'law'	**ɔ̲**	aspirated 'ɔ'
ɛ	as in 'bed'		
ë	as in 'had' (close to 'ɛ' but more open), aspirated		
ä	as in 'nut', aspirated		
ë	as 'hit' (between 'e' and 'i'), aspirated		
ö	as in 'hook', aspirated		
u	as in 'boot', sometimes aspirated		

The symbol '/' is used to indicate high tone and negation. It can help distinguish between negative present-tense phrases and positive (lower-tone) past-tense ones that are spelled in the same way. Thus, for example, '*/cɛ wä*' ('he is not going') is distinguished from '*cɛ wä*' ('he went'). In practice, '/' is commonly used before negative particles in all tenses, and this is also how it is used in this thesis.

[2] For example, M. Yigezu, 'The Nuer Vowel System', *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics,* 16 (1995), 157-170; Reid, *The Phonology and Morphology*, 42-51.
[3] The Nuer Bible makes use of one additional aspirated version of 'ɛ' (ɛ̲) but it is rare.

Personal names appear in their English spelling, but some Nuer names also appear in Nuer the first time. When quoting other written texts in English, I retained their spelling of Nuer words. Quotes from the Bible are taken from the Nuer version published by The Bible Society in South Sudan in 1999. English quotes are taken from the New International Version (NIV).

A few words in Amharic, Hebrew and Arabic also appear in this thesis. They are transliterated into Latin script. For the transliteration of Arabic words, I follow the rules of *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Terms in spoken Sudanese or South Sudanese Arabic, which may differ from Modern Standard Arabic, are transliterated in a simplified manner, to reflect the way people pronounce them. Hebrew transliterations follow the guidelines of the *Association for Jewish Studies Review*. For Amharic, I use **e**, **u**, **í**, **a**, **é**, **i**, and **o** for the seven vowels, while the letters **q**, **t'**, **s'**, **ch'** and **p'** represent explosive consonants. The sixth-order vowel **i** is not written when not voiced. Arabic and Amharic words that have been 'Nuerised' appear in their Nuer form, where appropriate. English plural is added to Amharic terms used widely across languages (for example, *weredas*).

Illustrations

Unless mentioned otherwise, all images were taken by me during my main period of research (2018-2019) in Gambella. I used two cameras. One was the camera of my smartphone. I used this camera on a daily basis to take photographic (and sometimes video) notes. The other was a digital rangefinder style camera, with a 35mm equivalent fixed lens. Although it produced images of much higher quality (in terms of their resolution, not necessarily their ethnographic value), I did not carry this camera with me at all times. It was used only on more 'special' occasions like graduation ceremonies or church conferences, often upon the request of friends who asked me to bring it and document. Maps 1-2 were drawn by me based on data from Google Maps, OpenStreetMap, and UN publications.

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Glossary

Abbreviations

EC	Ethiopian calendar
EPRDF	Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front
GC	Gregorian calendar
GPLM	Gambella People's Liberation Movement
MJBI	Messianic Jewish Bible Institute
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NSCC	New Sudan Council of Churches
SAD	Sudan Archive Durham
SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Nuer terms

bath	lost
Bär	Anuak
buny	Ethiopian, 'highlander', to kneel down
buɔny	baptism
cäŋ-lɔ̱ŋä	the day of rest, Sabbath
ciaŋ	lifestyle, behaviour, culture
ciaŋ cuŋni	righteous lifestyle
ciaŋ cuɔp	developed lifestyle
ciaŋ Nuäärä	Nuer lifestyle
ciaŋ rɛk	urban lifestyle
cieŋ	territorial community, home
cuɔp	development
dil (pl. *diel*)	member of a dominant lineage
diit luak kuɔth	church songs
diit puɔnyä kuɔth	God-praising songs
dɔ̱r	nation

duer	fault, wrong, sin, mistake
gaar	male facial marking, 'scarification'
gat rɛk	son of the town, 'town boy', urbanite
gat tuɔt (pl. *gaat tut*)	sons of bulls (community elders)
jaŋ (pl. *jaaŋ*)	a non-Nuer immigrant, Dinka
jur	foreigner, to rent a room in town
kac	false
kadhɛ	salt
kaan	salvation
kuäär (pl. *kuaar*)	leader, chief
kuäär muɔn	'earth-master' (a spiritual medium responsible for conducting rituals of sacrifice)
Kuäärä Kuɔth	God's Kingdom
kuën	marriage
kumɛ	government
kuoth	spirit
Kuoth Nhial	God
lam	invocation, to invoke, to curse
luak kuɔth	church ('God's cattle byre')
maar	kinship, relationship
muc	present, gift, offering
naŋä Ruac Kuɔth raar	evangelism, ('to take the Word of God out')
nei ti naath	'people of people'
nueer	deadly bodily pollution
ŋäth	faith
pal	to pray, prayer
pël	wisdom
rɛk (pl. *rëk*)	town, fence, closure
rɛy ciëŋ	in the homeland or community, rural areas
riɛm Yecu	the blood of Jesus
röödl nhiaal	heaven
ruaal	incest, incest pollution
ruac	to talk, speech

Ruac Kuɔth	the Word (‘speech’) of God, preaching
tabacni	soldiers
tiim	church conference
toic	seasonally river-flooded pastures
turuk (pl. *turuɔk* / *turuɔni*)	educated foreigner
thuɔk	real, true
wäl-wäli	tithes
wän	to deceive
wän wän	deceiver
wut ɣɔɔk	man of cattle (spiritual medium)
yaŋ (pl. *ɣɔɔk*)	cow
Yiëë Kuɔth	The Holy Spirit
yiow	money
yiow nyiet	‘money of the girls’, paid by the man prior to bridewealth negotiations

Amharic terms

awraja	county
balambaras	‘Commander of the Fort’ (imperial title)
birr	the national currency of Ethiopia
dej-azmach	‘Commander of the Gate’ (imperial title)
Derg	Ethiopia’s military regime between 1974 and 1991, ‘committee’
fitawrarí	‘Commander of the Vanguard’ (imperial title)
gra-azmach	‘Commander of the Left’ (imperial title)
mahberawí firdi bét	social court (in a *qebellé*)
qebellé	local government office, the lowest administrative structure of the state
sefer shum	zone leader (in an urban *qebellé*)
qeñ-azmach	‘Commander of the Right’ (imperial title)
wereda	district

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Acknowledgements

At the centre of this thesis is the movement of people, ideas, hopes, and memories across frontiers—political, geographic, cultural, temporal—and the various ways in which such journeys prompt new interconnections and change the way people think about themselves, their communities, and history. This thesis is a product of similar passages and encounters across frontiers. I first met refugees from Southern Sudan (then an automounts region of Sudan, not an independent state) in Israel, in 2010, when I started volunteering in a community library in south Tel Aviv. Most of them came to Israel in the late 2000s, from Cairo or Khartoum. Some became close friends of mine. It was my (in retrospect, fantastically naïve) participation in a failed campaign against their deportation from Israel in 2012 that sparked my interest in South Sudanese history. That same year, shortly after the deportation was concluded, I boarded an Ethiopian Airlines flight to Juba for the first time. My ignorance about the place was greater than I could grasp at the time, but I was nonetheless excited by the new ways of being and knowing that it appeared to promise.

I returned to South Sudan, Uganda and Ethiopia repeatedly since then, to visit, study, research and work. This is what ultimately also brought me to Durham. Whatever I was able to learn over the last couple of years and throughout these passages—before and while working on this thesis—was thanks to the advice, companionship, support and hospitality of countless people. In particular, I would like to thank the following for shaping the path I have taken and for supporting me and my research in various ways: The Tombe, Wani and Chuol families, which each ended up split between different countries across the globe over the past decades, as well as all other South Sudanese who left Israel in 2012 and later welcomed me in East Africa; Inbal Ben-Yehuda, Rami Gudovitch, and Orit Marom, in Israel; Olivia Bueno, Lucy Hovil, David Kigozi, Andie Lambe, Thijs Van-Laer, and Tigranna Zakaryan (all of the International Refugee Rights Initiative, at some point or another), as well as Gatwal Gatkuoth, in Uganda.

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Tut Bidit not only patiently taught me the Nuer language and helped translate court cases and interviews but also introduced me to Gambella when I first visited it in 2015. I owe him a huge debt for his companionship and support. Pam Bayoch, Bidit Nuer, Gach Puoch, and all members of the Deng family, young and old, have taught me more than they ever intended or realised. I thank them for that, and for making sure I never felt alone in Newland. Members of the Church of God (Seventh Day) welcomed me to Zion District and allowed me to participate in their activities. I am grateful for their generosity, and for the cooperation and hospitality of all other individuals in Gambella who agreed to take part in this research by talking to me, teaching me about their lives and work or welcoming me to their homes or churches. I missed Newland's conviviality and liveliness every single minute I spent sitting alone, going over my notes and writing this thesis.

Gambella has never been a place that attracts many researchers. This is probably part of its charm. I was lucky to have been in conversation, however, with several brilliant researchers of this region and Ethiopia more broadly. While in Gambella, I benefitted greatly from working with Duol Ruach Guok, James Olok, Nyajal Pal and Freddie Carver on a research project, for the Rift Valley Institute, on migration and transnational Nuer networks. Freddie, Dereje Feyissa and Biruk Terrefe not only influenced my ideas about Gambella and its place in Ethiopia and the world but were invaluable sources of encouragement and guidance whenever I showed up in Addis. Throughout my time in Ethiopia, I was affiliated with the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa University. I thank Ahmed Hassen and the institute's staff for their assistance with arranging the necessary legal papers and for many pleasant hours spent in their library.

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Manoeli, Douglas Johnson, and Wendy James, in Oxford, was instrumental in bringing me to Durham in the first place. Sairah, Felipe, Greg and Melinda were indispensable company during the writing process of the thesis in London and Durham.

The love and support of my parents, Adi and Rafi, and my sisters, Moran, Inbar, Tehila and Naama, sustained me and provided stability and mooring when my life appeared to be split between a growing collection of distant sites. Sometimes they followed me to East Africa or the UK. Sometimes they successfully lured me back to the Middle East (my niece, Danielle, has unknowingly been the most efficient in achieving this). Several internet shutdowns aside, they were always around on WhatsApp. I thank them for all of that, and also for the passwords they gave me to various online databases of academic libraries in Israel. I could always count on my mother to comment or suggest readings on Jewish ritual and thought. Naama answered quite a few linguistic questions, which helped me formulate the brief introduction to Nuer orthography. All inaccuracies and mistakes, there and anywhere else in this thesis, are mine alone.

Introduction

> Look, the government of this world means the present world where we are living. And it is a form of government. So, their law and their doing and whatever are not in line with the doctrine of Jesus Christ. So, when we are living as Christians, we have to take care. Because even if you are trying to mix the two, you will end up in mess—spiritual mess. You can even go outside of the truth if you don't take care. But if you take care, you treat them separately. Even now, you see in our church, we don't involve in politics. We are neutral really. We don't involve in politics. We simply base [our teaching] on what the Bible said.
>
> - **Gatluak, Church of God (Seventh Day) member.**

> To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'
>
> - **John 8:31-2.**

At the eastern edge of Gambella town, a walk of about 30 minutes from the spot where the tarmac road ends and the town turns into a sprawling settlement of increasingly sparse huts and mud houses, there is a place called Zion District. This is, at least, how its residents call it. They are all members of the Church of God (Seventh Day), an Evangelical Zionist church that was first introduced to Nuer residents of the region in the late 1990s. Right next to Zion District is an enclosed settlement—a 'kibbutz' that was established by members of another Evangelical Zionist group called the Congregation of Yahweh. The Congregation of Yahweh split from the Church of God in 2009. If we walk back from Zion District towards the centre of town, we will soon come across a small branch of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, one of almost ten in Gambella town alone. Most leaders of the Church of God and the Congregation of Yahweh split about two decades ago from the Seventh-day Adventist Church. By the time we reach the centre of

Newland, Gambella town's Nuer dominated neighbourhood, we may come across other groups that split from the Church of God over the years, like Assembly of Yahweh and Ahavat Yashua Messianic Congregation, in addition to dozens of other Protestant churches.

The members of the Church of God refer to themselves as Messianic Jews. They are Protestant born-again Christians who worship on Sabbath, observe Mosaic Law and celebrate the major Jewish festivals. Members of the Congregation of Yahweh follow a similar (though not identical) Evangelical Zionist doctrine. Both groups have their international partners, in Kenya, Israel and the US, but otherwise they are not part of a strict global bureaucracy. Their operations in Gambella are largely unsupervised. The most important thing about these churches, their members tell anyone who is keen to learn about their faith, is that they each claim to be the 'true church', that is, the direct and natural outgrowth of the church established by the followers of Jesus Christ in New Testament days, which therefore also follows the 'true religion', that is, the exact same doctrine He preached. They view other churches—Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant—as deceptive human-made institutions that lead their members away from God and the truth and into the hands of Satan. This is also how they view world governments. Their government (*kumɛ*), they say, is the government of Jesus.

Figure 1. The Church of God (Seventh Day), Zion District.

Gambella town is the capital of Gambella state, located in Ethiopia's westernmost periphery. The state borders what became, in 2011, the independent country of South Sudan, and has long been one of the most marginalised and impoverished regions of Ethiopia. It is a place described, more often than not, by what it lacks: order, infrastructure and social services, a private sector, civil society, peace, effective governance, rule of law. Due to constant tensions and occasional outbreaks of violence between its two main 'ethnic' groups—Nuer and Anuak—and its role as a shelter for generations of South Sudanese refugees and rebels, Gambella came to be known primarily as a place of humanitarian interventions and instability. It is, in many ways, a paradigmatic African periphery. Part of the Ethiopian state, but not quite. Political scientists often think about paved roads and infrastructure as indexing the geographic outreach of state power in Africa. Gambella is where Ethiopia's roads, literally, end. Indeed, at the time of my research, there was not much in Gambella town that testified for Ethiopia's internationally celebrated economic growth since the mid-2000s and the developmentalist agenda of its leaders, beyond, perhaps, a new bare concrete stadium, a struggling university and several unfinished and mostly deserted government buildings.

But there is more to the region than what it lacks, of course. This may emerge once we approach it, as this study aims to do, not as a marginal space that makes sense only in relation to a modern sovereign state, but as a centre of social and political change with its own history and dynamics.[1] The end of the road for some, after all, is its beginning for others. At the very least, it is the point where one is confronted with a dilemma: Take the road, or retreat? To what new goods or knowledge may this road facilitate access? Does it represent a threat? It is also a meeting point: a place of unexpected encounters and open-ended negotiations. This is, for instance, where the local cattle trader, a government official from the capital, a foreign missionary or mercenary, a passing merchant or a fleeing rebel, may cross each other's paths, or perhaps, where someone coming from a distant village may finally find cellular reception, a money transfer agency, or an internet café. Newland, the Nuer neighbourhood of Gambella town of which Zion District was essentially an extension, testified to the creative power of such contingent frontier

[1] A. Mbembe, 'At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa', *Public culture,* 12 (2000), 259-284; L. Lombard, *Hunting Game: Raiding Politics in the Central African Republic* (Cambridge, 2020).

encounters—to the stimulating 'friction' they produce and their founding potentiality—with its name.[2]

It is in this sense that this thesis approaches Gambella as a frontier zone: not simply a border area whose population and resources were swollen by an expanding state or a periphery in which state power and authority remain eroded and partial, but a place in which all sorts of actors, epistemologies, political visions, styles and temporalities have been 'drawn together in new ways' over the past century.[3] The following chapters demonstrate how this process significantly transformed the ways in which local communities shaped their collective existence and understood their place in the world, giving rise to places like Zion District and the Congregation of Yahweh's kibbutz. This is not, therefore, a study of the articulation of state power in the borderlands,[4] or of the significance of frontiers in the process of Ethiopian state formation,[5] even if the state is very much part of the story this thesis tells. The focus here, instead, is on the new institutions and forms of political action that emerge in the frontierlands—at that point of encounter where new and often unexpected linkages are forged.

Over the past half-century, as a result of a range of frontier encounters, churches have emerged as important—for many people, *the* most important—arenas of political action and community making in Ethiopia's western frontierlands. Earlier scholarship emphasised the centrality of spiritual authorities and institutions in the articulation of communities and social order in Nuer society before, during, and in the first decades following, the colonial period. This thesis traces the more recent process through which Christianity has assumed this role. It focuses, in particular, on one strand of Protestant Christianity that, as a result of a combination of factors, flourished in Gambella and has been explicitly concerned with the critique of state power and the identification of divine authenticity. By doing so, this study speaks to wider scholarly debates on Christianity, religious mediation and political life in Africa. The extraordinary rise of born-again

[2] A. L. Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton and Oxford, 2005).
[3] W. James, *War and Survival in Sudan's Frontierlands: Voices from the Blue Nile* (Oxford; New York, 2007), xii.
[4] V. Das and D. Poole, eds. *Anthropology in the Margins of the State* (Oxford, 2004); P. Nugent, *Boundaries, Communities and State-Making in West Africa: The Centrality of the Margins* (Cambridge, 2019).
[5] R. J. Reid, *Frontiers of Violence in North-East Africa: Genealogies of Conflict Since C. 1800* (Oxford, 2011); J. Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers* (Woodbridge, 2011).

Christianity in recent decades has transformed the continent's political landscape in ways that scholars are only starting to address. Shifting the lens from urban Pentecostal mega-churches to more obscure groups in the distant frontierlands, this thesis shows how the circulation of Christian knowledge and the argumentation and debates surrounding divine truth have been central to the configuration of communities, subjectivities, authority and shared spaces.

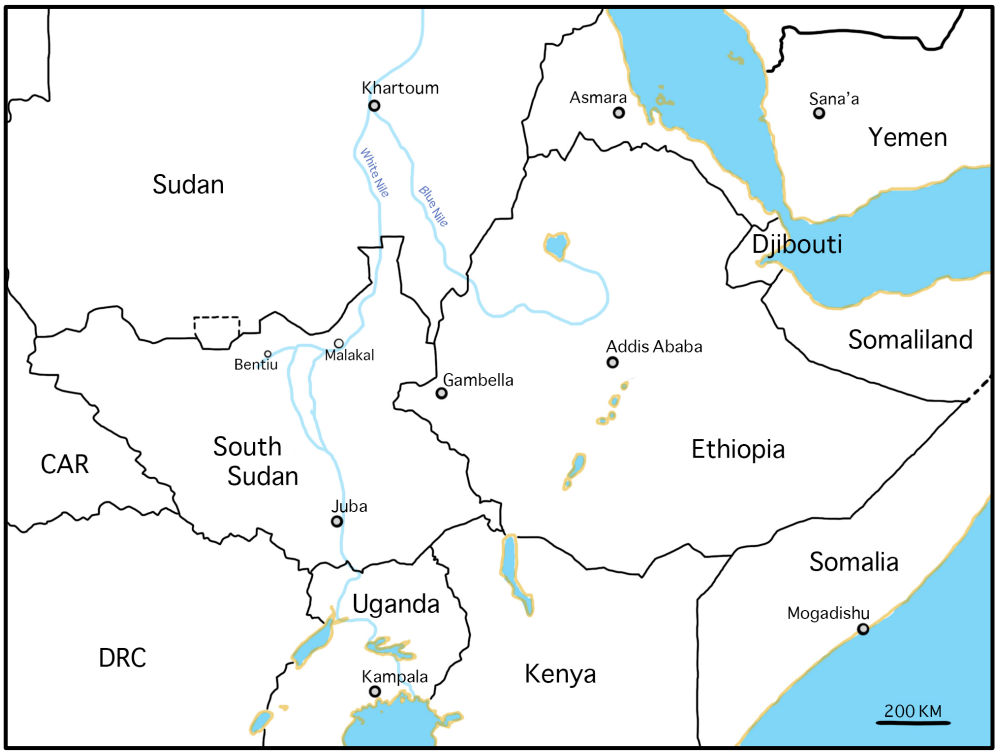
As the label 'Nuer Messianic Jewish movement' suggests, this is not a study of a specific church, but of a set of ideas, practices and debates that evolved among Nuer communities over the past several decades. Multiple distinct churches have emerged out of these debates over the years, but they have all been tied to one another in a sphere of 'Christian critique',[6] which this thesis seeks to explore and historicise. That said, while these groups communicated with 'brethren' abroad and drew on various external sources of inspiration, the churches described here were formed almost exclusively of Nuer speakers, operated in the Nuer language, and had branches among Nuer communities across the Ethiopian-South Sudanese borderlands and East Africa. This theme is further explored in Chapter 5. Hence the use of the otherwise problematic ethnonym 'Nuer'. The categorisation of Messianic Judaism as a form of Protestant Evangelical Zionism and the difference between this faith and other forms of born-again Christianity are discussed later in this introduction. But first, let us start with situating this study more firmly within the frontierlands of Gambella and their historiography.

Ethiopian history from the margins

Viewed from Gambella, as one travels east up the Baro River, Ethiopia is the distant land beyond the mountains. Until not so long ago, reaching its centre required several days of trekking through unpaved paths up the hills. Addis Ababa is more than 700km from the point where the Baro becomes unnavigable. But even today, the Ethiopian state is rarely approached from this direction by foreigners. Introductions to the country usually start at its political centre, in the highlands. The Ethiopian highlands are divided by the Rift Valley into a larger northern region which is a mosaic of imposing mountains and sharp peaks (some exceeding 4,000m), and a smaller, and much flatter, southern plateau. The

[6] C. Handman, *Critical Christianity: Translation and Denominational Conflict in Papua New Guinea* (Berkeley, 2014).

highlands are surrounded by equally large lowlands, however, which form Ethiopia's periphery, where most of its modern borders are drawn. In contrast to the highlands, these are flat, mostly dry, and warm regions. Ethiopia's highly diverse population, speaking a range of Semitic, Cushitic, Omotic and Nilo-Saharan languages, is distributed over the country's extensive territories, making it, as Herbst identifies, a country whose political geography makes it 'exceptionally difficult to consolidate power.'[7]



Map 1. North-eastern Africa.

The states and kingdoms that ruled Ethiopia's northern highlands, whose roots are often traced to the Aksumite Empire that flourished roughly from the first to the seventh centuries, maintained a tradition of history writing, mainly in the form of chronicles, at least since the fourteenth century.[8] For centuries, Ethiopian leaders legitimised their rule by propagating a historical narrative that positioned them as the descendants of the Queen of Sheba of Aksum and King Solomon of Israel.[9] Christianity was already introduced in Aksum during the fourth century, ultimately developing into the Ethiopian Orthodox

[7] J. I. Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton, 2000), 145-52. See also the reflections on Ethiopian state-building and geography in Markakis, *Ethiopia*; C. Clapham, *The Horn of Africa: State Formation and Decay* (London, 2017).
[8] Z. Bahru, 'A Century of Ethiopian Historiography', *Journal of Ethiopian Studies,* 33 (2000), 5.
[9] H. G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia* (Berkeley; London, 2002), 17-19.

Church, and played an important role in the formation of a distinctive Ethiopian identity that came to characterise the states and societies that flourished in the highlands. Maintaining its independence when all of its neighbours came under European colonial rule in the nineteenth century, Ethiopia itself emerged as a mighty imperial power in the region, fending off threats of foreign occupation by Egypt (1875-6), Sudan (1889) and Italy (1896), while also gradually expanding into the surrounding lowland regions.[10] It was through this process that Gambella came to be part of the modern Ethiopian state.

The state-building efforts of the imperial regime in the first decades of the twentieth century led to the establishment of Ethiopian education institutions and to a new trend of national history-writing under the auspices of the state. This process accelerated in the years following the Italian occupation (1936-1941), with the opening of the University College of Addis Ababa. By the 1960s, Addis Ababa emerged as an important academic centre for a new generation of historians of Ethiopia.[11] The scholarship they produced, however, focused on the history of the Orthodox Christian state of the highlands and its development. It was largely 'indifferent, or at best, patronizing,' towards the societies of the peripheries, which gained their place in the national epic of 'Greater Ethiopia' merely as those communities passively incorporated into an expanding state with ancient roots.[12] Scholarship on Gambella and the western frontierlands written during the period focuses exclusively on the diplomatic and economic aspects of the region's incorporation into the Ethiopian state, with local communities hardly performing the role of bystanders.[13]

Political turmoil and economic decline meant that the University of Addis Ababa, much like other African universities that spearheaded the development of Africanist history in the 1960s, lost its centrality as a centre of academic knowledge production. Simultaneously, however, several threads of revisionist historiographies emerged,

[10] Z. Bahru, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1991* (Oxford, 2001), 27-80.
[11] D. Crummey, 'The Horn of Africa: Between History and Politics', *Northeast African Studies,* 10 (2003), 120; H. Aklilou, 'A Brief History of the University College of Addis Ababa', *University College Review,* 1 (1961), 25-33; Bahru, 'A Century of Ethiopian Historiography'.
[12] A. Triulzi, 'Battling With the Past: New Frameworks for Ethiopian Historiography', in *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism & After*, ed. by W. James, D. L. Donham *et al.* (Oxford, 2002), 277.
[13] H. G. Marcus, 'Ethio-British Negotiations Concerning the Western Border With the Sudan, 1896-1902', *Journal of African History,* 4 (1963), 81-94; Z. Bahru, *Relations Between Ethiopia and the Sudan on the Western Ethiopian Frontier (1898-1935)*, PhD thesis (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1976). See also, on the northern areas of this frontier: M. Abir, 'The Origins of the Ethiopian-Egyptian Border Problem in the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of African History,* 8 (1967), 443-461.

challenging the state-centred and hegemonic paradigm of the 'Great Tradition' by focusing on the people of the country's peripheries. In a country where struggles over land, resources, and political legitimacy were also struggles over identities and historical narratives, the emergence of these new histories was very much entangled in political developments. The predatory nature of the centralist Derg regime (1974-1991) and the multiple rebel groups that emerged against it in the peripheries led to a proliferation of ethno-nationalist discourses. By the 1990s, Eritrean Studies, Oromo Studies, and Somali Studies all emerged as fields that compete with the older and more established Ethiopian Studies.[14] Sorenson, inspired by the Eritrean national struggle and the writing of Foucault and Said, suggested that 'Ethiopia' is best understood as a 'discursive construction' based on 'mythologies created by the Amhara elite to maintain their power over other peoples.'[15]

The emergence of 'counter-histories' from the periphery was an important development in Ethiopian historiography, but these were not always able, or even tried, to escape the teleologies of nation-building.[16] However, other works have taken a more flexible approach to understanding the dynamics of Ethiopia's peripheries, one that does not predetermine the historical trajectory of either certain 'nations' or 'the state', be these a set of institutions or discursive constructions. The collections *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia* (1986) and *Remapping Ethiopia* (2002) represent this trend most clearly.[17] Other important contributions include Wendy James' historical ethnographies of the Uduk of Sudan's Blue Nile State and their tribulations, including their period of refuge in Gambella,[18] as well as Dereje Feyissa's work on the construction of Nuer and

[14] C. Clapham, 'Rewriting Ethiopian History', *Annales d'Ethiopie,* 18 (2002), 42. Notable early examples, from the Oromo perspective, include: H. Mohammed, *The Oromo of Ethiopia: A History, 1570-1860* (Cambridge, 1990); J. Asafa, *Oromia and Ethiopia: State Formation and Ethnonational Conflict, 1868-1992* (Boulder & London, 1993).
[15] J. Sorenson, *Imagining Ethiopia: Struggles for History and Identity in the Horn of Africa* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1993), 14.
[16] Clapham, 'Rewriting Ethiopian History', 42-5; S. Marzagora, 'History in Twentieth-Century Ethiopia: The 'Great Tradition'and the Counter-Histories of National Failure', *The Journal of African History,* 58 (2017), 438-40.
[17] D. L. Donham and W. James, eds. *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology* (Cambridge, 1986); W. James, D. L. Donham *et al.*, eds. *Remapping Ethiopia: Socialism & After* (Oxford, 2002).
[18] W. James, *The Listening Ebony: Moral Knowledge, Religion, and Power Among the Uduk of Sudan* (Oxford, 1999 [1988]); James, *War and Survival* Another good example though covering the highland periphery rather than Gambella, is D. L. Donham, *Marxist Modern: An Ethnographic History of the Ethiopian Revolution* (Berkeley, 1999).

Anuak identities in relation to the Ethiopian state.[19] Although written from very different vantage points, by turning their lens to the frontierlands, such works demonstrate that life at the margins never simply evolved according to the prescriptions of the distant centre. It is from this conceptual (and geographic) position that this study seeks to speak to Ethiopian historiography—examining the margins as meaningful political arenas in their own right rather than solely in relation to those projects imposed on them from the outside.

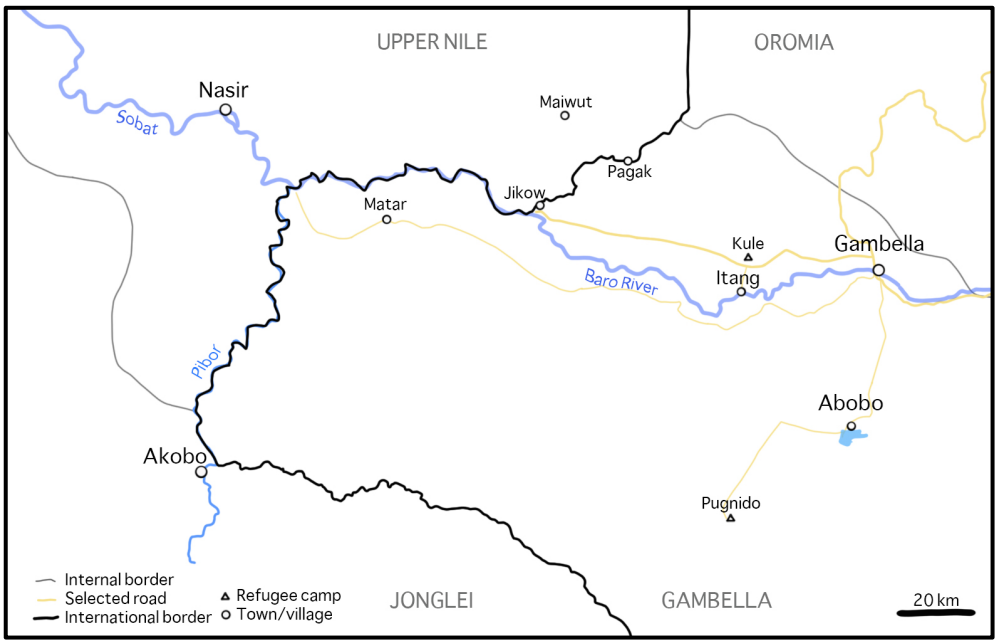
Nuer history from the frontier

As we stand by the Baro, let us now turn our gaze to the other direction. Not east, towards the hills, but west, towards the point where the muddy waters of the river disappear into the horizon. If Gambella represents the western fringes of the modern Ethiopian state, it is also the easternmost edge of what Nuer today often describe as 'Nuerland' (*rööl Nuärä*). Communities of the people referring to themselves today as 'Nuer' (*Nuäär*), and previously as *nei ti naath* ('the people of the people'), reached the borderlands of Gambella not long before the first emissaries of the Ethiopian state did. Until today, the original Nuer 'homeland' is considered to be near the town of Bentiu, along the western banks of the Nile in modern-day South Sudan. It was from there that in the early nineteenth century groups of *nei ti naath* migrated east, crossing the Nile, assimilating or dispersing other communities (predominantly Dinka), and gradually expanding towards what formally became, at the turn of the century, the international border between Ethiopia and Sudan.

This famous 'expansion' (often misrepresented in earlier accounts as a 'conquest') has been the subject of a considerable body of scholarship over the years, which sought to explain why and how it took place.[20] It was through this process that Nuer society came

[19] F. Dereje, *Playing Different Games: The Paradox of Anywaa and Nuer Identification Strategies in the Gambella Region, Ethiopia* (New York, 2011).
[20] See the accounts and reviews of this topic in: R. C. Kelly, *The Nuer Conquest: The Structure and Development of an Expansionist System* (Ann Arbor, 1985); G. G. Jal, *The History of the Jikany Nuer Before 1920*, PhD thesis (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1987); D. H. Johnson, *Nuer Prophets: A History of Prophecy From the Upper Nile in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Oxford, 1994), 44-55; S. E. Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping With Money, War, and the State* (Berkeley, 1996), 31-2; Dereje, *Playing Different Games*, 78-80; N. Stringham, *Marking Nuer Histories: Gender, Gerontocracy, and the Politics of Inclusion in the Upper Nile From 1400 – 1931*, PhD thesis (University of Virginia, 2016).

to be divided into several major territorial groupings, around which it is still more or less structured today. By the late nineteenth century, the Eastern Jikäny became the easternmost of these groups. Attracted by the precious seasonally river-flooded pastures (*toic*) of the region, its members settled along the Sobat River in South Sudan's Upper Nile and around the Baro in Gambella. This group's major sub-sections—the Gaa-jiok, Gaa-guaŋ, and above all the easternmost Gaa-jak—were gradually integrated into the Ethiopian state in a process that is further explored in the following chapters. Slightly further south, members of the Mor sub-section of the Lɔu Nuer (whose homelands are in South Sudan's Jonglei State) also moved towards the Sobat and the Pibor rivers, and some of them ultimately made Gambella their home too.



Map 2. Gambella and the Ethiopian-South Sudanese borderlands.

'The Nuer', of course, gained their fame in the discipline of anthropology through Evans-Pritchard's studies.[21] Though based on research conducted mainly among eastern Nuer in the early 1930s, at a time when they were very much part of a colonial state, Evans-Pritchard's books remain among the most famous accounts of a 'stateless' African society, and epitomise the interest of colonial anthropology in producing timeless

[21] The three main studies, supplemented by a host of shorter publications, were: E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People* (Oxford, 1940); E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Kinship and Marriage Among the Nuer* (Oxford, 1951); E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford, 1956).

portraits of 'pure' cultural groups. But if the state was invisible in the work of colonial anthropologists, much of the historiography of post-colonial southern Sudan in the following decades has been concerned, to some extent like that of Ethiopia, with state institutions, national politics and wars.[22] It was only the period of relative peace between Sudan's two civil wars (1963-1972, 1983-2005) that enabled access to the country and thus the production of some histories 'from below' that put earlier ethnographies in a historical context. Two pieces of scholarship from this period have been particularly influential in the eastern Nuer context.[23] One is Johnson's *Nuer Prophets*: a history of the politics of Nuer spiritual leadership from the late nineteenth to the twentieth century.[24] Hutchinson's *Nuer Dilemmas* is the other: a historical ethnography interrogating the ways in which violent conflicts, modern markets and the state impacted, and were locally interpreted by, rural Nuer communities.[25]

What these two works illustrate in a way that Evans-Pritchard's static ethnographies could not is that the eastern fringes of Nuerland have long been places of social change and political innovation. Johnson shows how the eastward migration of Nuer communities in the nineteenth century led to both political fragmentation and the emergence of new forms of spiritual and political leadership and organisation. The point is further emphasised by Stringham's recent study of the history of initiation into 'marriageability-sets' among eastern Nuer communities before the 1920s.[26] In the following decades, throughout the colonial and early post-colonial period, as Hutchinson shows, the incorporation of eastern Nuer communities 'into the wider political economy of Sudan was more rapid and traumatic than that of Nuer communities living west of the White Nile.'[27] They had greater interaction with government institutions, and were much more affected by the devastation of Sudan's first civil war. These diverging historical circumstances resulted in significant cultural differences between eastern and western Nuer, with the latter becoming known for their cultural adaptability and the former being associated with the

[22] For a recent critique of the state of the historiography of South Sudan, see D. H. Johnson, *South Sudan: A New History for a New Nation* (2016), 17-8.
[23] Another notable contribution from the 1980s is Gabriel Giet Jal's history of the Jikäny migration: Jal, *The History.*
[24] Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*.
[25] Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*.
[26] Stringham, *Marking Nuer Histories.*
[27] Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 38.

'original' Nuer culture. As we shall see, this is not merely a scholarly observation but a very real experience to which Nuer in Gambella relate.

For international humanitarians, as for most Ethiopians who have never visited the region, Gambella is a place of violence and lawlessness, where mapped roads end and chaos beings. The limited scholarship on its people and history in recent decades has been almost exclusively concerned with either its conflicts or its troubled incorporation into the Ethiopian state and economy.[28] From this perspective, Gambella remains a place where, Markakis writes, the state is 'still very thin on the ground, and unable to perform any of its functions meaningfully.'[29] The use of the word 'still' in this context is telling, hinting at a modernist teleological assumption that history proceeds in a predetermined direction. And thus, the frontierlands seem to lie in between one imagined reflection of what their dwellers supposedly no longer are, and another, of what 'modernity' and the state claim they will one day become. But as Africanists have observed long ago, frontiers are never simply spaces of 'expansion through scalability' and duplication.[30] They are interstitial spaces of encounter, innovation, creolisation and change.[31] In between the mutually constitutive reflections of what is no longer and what is not yet, new things emerge. This thesis is about these things.

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[28] Notable publications, in addition to the earlier scholarship and Dereje Feyissa's work mentioned above, are: J. Young, 'Along Ethiopia's Western Frontier: Gambella and Benishangul in Transition', *The Journal of Modern African Studies,* 37 (1999), 321-346; S. Abraham, 'Breaking the Cycle of Conflict in Gambella Region', in *People, Space and the State: Migration, Resettlement and Displacement in Ethiopia*, ed. by A. Pankhurst and F. Piguet (Addis Ababa, 2004), 534-540; F. Dereje, 'The Experience of Gambella Regional State', in *Ethnic Federalism: The Ethiopian Experience in Comparative Perspective*, ed. by D. Turton (Oxford, 2006), 208-230; B. S. Regassa, *War and Peace in the Sudan and Its Impact on Ethiopia: The Case of Gambella, 1955-2008*, PhD thesis (Addis Ababa University, 2010); J. H. S. Lie and A. Borchgrevink, 'Layer Upon Layer: Understanding the Gambella Conflict Formation', *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies,* (2012), 135-159; G. E. Fana, *The Political Economy of Land Investments: Dispossession, Resistance and Territory-Making in Gambella, Western Ethiopia*, PhD thesis (Addis Ababa University, 2016); W. M. Seide, *The Nuer Pastoralists: Between Large Scale Agriculture and Villagization: A Case Study of the Lare District in the Gambella Region of Ethiopia* (Uppsala, 2017). I am not citing here a host of recent master's theses written by students in Ethiopian universities on Gambella's conflicts as well as a small number of reports written by or for NGOs on refugee policies or violence in the region.

[29] Markakis, *Ethiopia*, 16.

[30] The term is borrowed from A. L. Tsing, *The Mushroom At the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, 2015), 37-43.

[31] F. B. Nyamnjoh, 'Incompleteness: Frontier Africa and the Currency of Conviviality', *Journal of Asian and African Studies,* 52 (2017), 253-270. And see also: I. Kopytoff, 'The Internal African Frontier: The Making of an African Political Culture', in *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies*, ed. by I. Kopytoff (Bloomington, 1987), 3-84.

Christianity beyond 'crisis' and 'civilisation'

The spread of Christian Zionism and Messianic Judaism among Nuer communities in the Ethiopian-South Sudanese frontierlands was part of a broader process of born-again Christian revival in the region. Daily life in Newland testified to this revival. At the time of my research, there were more than 40 Protestant churches operating in Newland alone. Active church members—whether they held a voluntary administrative position or participated in any of the study or worshipping groups their church ran for children, youths, students, or women—could easily spend several hours in church every day. Church conferences were where people from the neighbourhood and the entire region gathered, and it was in church services that communal matters were discussed, and announcements made. Churches played a central role in shaping Newland's infrastructure, and given the Ethiopian state's limited investment in the region, were also important service providers. The largest buildings in the neighbourhood were churches, and the largest compounds belonged to them, thus often influencing how and where people settled. Some churches ran primary schools. Many were equipped with useful water pumps. Others offered occasional medical services.

This thesis interrogates the historical process through which churches assumed such a central role in local life, thereby offering a new perspective on the nature of Christian conversion in this region. Eastern Nuer first encountered Christianity when American Presbyterian missionaries started operating in Sudan's Upper Nile, in the early twentieth century. As opposed to western Nuer, whose homelands fell under the responsibility of Catholic missionaries, eastern Nuer were from the beginning influenced by Evangelical Protestantism. The limited scholarship on Christian missions in southern Sudan and Ethiopia's western borderlands largely focuses on the entanglement of these in the imperial projects of state-building and 'civilisation', particularly in the fields of education and health.[32] By 1964, when the Sudanese government expelled foreign missionaries from the country, their achievements, in terms of conversion rates, were unimpressive.[33]

[32] R. O. Collins, *Land Beyond the Rivers: The Southern Sudan, 1898-1918* (New Haven; London, 1971); L. P. Sanderson and N. Sanderson, *Education, Religion and Politics in Southern Sudan 1899-1964* (London, 1981); T. Eshete, 'The Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) in Ethiopia (1928-1970)', *Northeast African Studies,* 6 (1999), 27-57.
[33] J. W. Burton, 'Christians, Colonists, and Conversion: A View From the Nilotic Sudan', *The Journal of Modern African Studies,* 23 (1985), 349-369.

Few Presbyterian missionaries continued to work among Nuer communities in Gambella until they, too, were expelled in the mid-1970s by the Derg. Mass conversion to Christianity among eastern Nuer communities began in the 1970s, while the spread of born-again Christianity and proliferation of churches, including the Messianic groups explored in this thesis, gained momentum since the late 1990s.

By the 1990s, when studies of the 'missionary encounter' and its legacies elsewhere in Africa began to emerge,[34] scholarly interest in southern Sudan was focused on its violent conflicts. The literature on southern Christianity in recent decades has therefore been almost exclusively concerned, much like the literature on South Sudan in general, with the 'role' of churches or Christianity in the context of civil war and nation-building.[35] Thus, with very few exceptions, even when focusing on local communities rather than elites, the main prism through which Christianity in the region was examined was still that of wars, national politics and the state.[36] Two functionalist lines of argument were particularly prominent in this context, in the scholarship on Christianity in South Sudan in general but also on Nuer Christianity in Gambella. First, scholars emphasised the power South Sudanese increasingly came to associate with Christian education, and thus highlighted the link drawn between Christianity and local notions of 'progress' and 'modernity', modelled upon Euro-American images.[37] Second, scholars portrayed Christianity as an empowering new identity that became attractive as a result of the deprivation of war and the marginalisation of southern Sudanese by the Islamist

[34] For a review of these trends, see D. Maxwell, 'Writing the History of African Christianity: Reflections of an Editor', *Journal of religion in Africa,* 36 (2006), 379-399.
[35] J. Ashworth, *The Voice of the Voiceless: The Role of the Church in the Sudanese Civil War, 1983-2005* (Nairobi, 2014); N. Salomon, 'Religion After the State: Secular Soteriologies At the Birth of South Sudan', *Journal of Law and Religion,* 29 (2014), 447-469; C. Tounsel, *'God Will Crown Us': The Construction of Religious Nationalism in Southern Sudan, 1898-2011*, PhD thesis (University of Michigan, 2015).
[36] Important exceptions to this trend are the essays by Johnson and James in D. H. Johnson and W. James, eds. *Vernacular Christianity: Essays in Anthropology of Religion* (Oxford, 1988), as well as James' treatment of Uduk conversion in James, *The Listening Ebony*, 207-52, and Hutchinson's analysis of Christianity and cattle sacrifice in Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*.
[37] Ibid.; C. Falge, 'The Ethiopianisation of the Eastern Jikany Nuer From a Religious Perspective', in *Ethiopia and the Missions: Historical and Anthropological Insights*, ed. by V. Böll, S. Kaplan *et al.* (Münster, 2005), 171-194; C. Falge, 'The Cultural Resilience in Nuer Conversion and a 'Capitalist Missionary'', in *Changing Identifications and Alliances in North-East Africa: Sudan, Uganda, and the Ethiopia-Sudan Borderlands*, ed. by G. Schlee and E. E. Watson (New York, 2009), 205-217. On Dinka Christianity, see also: G. Lienhardt, 'The Dinka and Catholicism', in *Religious Organization and Religious Experience*, ed. by J. Davis (London, 1982), 81–95; F. M. Deng, 'Dinka Response to Christianity: The Pursuit of Well Being in a Developing Society', in *Vernacular Christianity: Essays in Anthropology of Religion*, ed. by D. H. Johnson and W. James (Oxford, 1988), 157-169.

government in Khartoum.[38] Christianity was repeatedly explained as a way of becoming 'developed', coping with insecurity, and expressing opposition to northern domination.

Neither argument, this thesis suggests, is helpful in capturing the political implications and historicity of Christianity in the frontierlands. From a historical perspective, understanding 'crisis' as the cause for religious revival or as the context in which it should be analysed is suspicious. Life in the Ethiopian-Sudanese frontierlands have long been precarious. But why did certain responses to precariousness emerge and not others? And how did they change over time? Studies that frame wars, insecurity and political instability as the cause for the emergence of new Christian movements in and around South Sudan are perpetuating an ahistorical proposition that was prevalent in earlier scholarship and popular discourse on (non-Christian) spiritual revivals in East Africa. As Johnson and Anderson have warned, the emphasis on crises in the study of prophets and prophesy in the region was problematic precisely because it ignored the social context in which prophets operated, and the ways in which 'social perceptions of prophets and prophetic actions changed over time.'[39] In his history of Nuer prophets, Johnson persuasively demonstrates that the functionalist theory that these were 'crisis leaders' who emerged at times of radical instability is circular and flawed.[40]

But framing Christianity as a reaction to crisis, a form of political resistance or a means of pursuing a particular 'modern' lifestyle, is not only ahistorical. As Marshall writes, critiquing similar approaches to born-again Christianity in other parts of Africa, such arguments also mistake religion to be 'a medium for a message that is about something else, something nonreligious.'[41] To be sure, crises, political turmoil, suffering, marginalisation and precariousness are all things spiritual movements address and seek to explain. But if the researcher thinks of religious movements as emerging out of crises

[38] S. E. Hutchinson, 'A Curse From God? Religious and Political Dimensions of the Post-1991 Rise of Ethnic Violence in South Sudan', *The Journal of Modern African Studies,* 39 (2001), 307-331; S. E. Hutchinson, 'Spiritual Fragments of an Unfinished War', in *Religion and Conflict in Sudan: Papers From an International Conference At Yale, May 1999*, ed. by Y. F. Hassan and R. Gray (Nairobi, 2002), 136-161; C. Falge, 'Countering Rupture: Young Nuer in New Religious Movements', *Sociologus,* (2008), 169-195; C. Falge, *The Global Nuer: Transnational Life-Worlds, Religious Movements and War* (Köln, 2015); J. Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe in South Sudan: Civil War, Migration, and the Rise of Dinka Anglicanism* (Waco, 2018).
[39] D. M. Anderson and D. H. Johnson, 'Revealing Prophets', in *Revealing Prophets: Prophecy in Eastern African History*, ed. by D. M. Anderson and D. H. Johnson (London, 1995), 13.
[40] Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, ix.
[41] R. Marshall, *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria* (Chicago, 2009), 18.

and understands them as an antidote—a 'strategy' or a local 'coping mechanism' of confused but 'resilient' communities—he is already approaching the subject with a set of assumptions about the nature of religious action and truth that the people he studies clearly do not share. The point is lucidly brought home by Barber's reminder that the notion 'that gods are made by men, not men by gods, is a sociological truism. It belongs very obviously to a detached and critical tradition of thought incompatible with faith in these gods.'[42] The implication of this observation, as Marshall adds, is that 'religious change is not merely the sign or the effect of change in other domains of human practice, but constitutes rather, in and of itself, a mode of historical and political transformation.'[43]

Building both on Marshall's critique and Johnson's approach to the historiography of Nuer religion, this thesis aims to situate the Nuer Messianic Jewish movement in a historical context and examine it as a meaningful political arena in and of itself. Understanding a movement that has from its very beginning been engaged in a critique of secular power, 'government' and the modern state as a means through which people sought to access state power, 'modernity' or urban lifestyles is obviously a non-starter. Understanding it as a response to 'crisis' tells us very little of its historicity and internal logic. The movement has to be understood on its own terms. As a product of the frontier and the opportunities it offered to engage with new resources and ideas, this thesis argues, Messianism emerged as an avenue for political action and community making that is not immediately associated with either the practices, institutions or moral sphere of 'government' and 'the state', or the imagined sphere of 'Nuer tradition' and rural life. As such, in this thesis I hope to contribute not only to the study of Christianity in South Sudan and Gambella but also to the wider scholarship on the role of faith in political life in post-colonial Africa.

Divine authenticity and the making of communities

As the above suggests, this thesis is primarily concerned not with religion and state power or 'development'—fields of study that have attracted considerable attention in recent years—but with religion *as politics*, or better, religious practices, materials and

[42] K. Barber, 'How Man Makes God in West Africa: Yoruba Attitudes Towards the "orisa"', *Africa,* 51 (1981), 724.
[43] Marshall, *Political Spiritualities*, 34.

argumentation as the producers of new publics and communities. The state and 'development' are certainly part of the story the following chapters tell, but it is not from their perspective that the story is approached or told, nor could it be. The concern here is with the emergence of 'religious imagined communities,' as Meyer refers to them,[44] drawing on Anderson's work on nationalism.[45] Like Hirschkind, who shows how the circulation of cassette sermons produces Islamic 'counter-publics' in Egypt, I am interested in the way religious practices and argumentation produce spaces 'of communal reflexivity and action' that are not primarily geared toward engagement with the state but rather often centre on its critique.[46] These spaces are therefore 'political' in the sense Arendt ascribes to this term, referring to the interaction between human beings in the public realm: the 'web of human relationships which exists wherever men live together.'[47] It is through these interactions that communities and subjectivities are negotiated and shaped, and thus history—'the storybook of mankind, with many actors and speakers and yet without any tangible authors'—is created.[48]

Central to the evolution and proliferation of Messianic groups in Gambella, to their position as authoritative institutions and to their critique of both the modern state and 'traditional' Nuer life, were the debates they generated concerning the 'truth'. As the following chapters explore in greater detail, Messianic groups promised believers to live their lives according to the 'true religion' and as part of the 'true church', where those 'true' rituals and laws sanctioned by God were followed. While Nuer Messianics, like many other Protestants, were certainly preoccupied with the individual believer as an active agent who seeks a personal and sincere relationship with God,[49] they were less concerned with pursuing immateriality or purging any form of mediation or ritual.[50] The

[44] B. Meyer, 'Going and Making Public: Pentecostalism as Public Religion in Ghana', in *Christianity and Public Culture in Africa*, ed. by H. Englund (Athens, 2011), 149-166; B. Meyer and A. Moors, 'Introduction', in *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*, ed. by B. Meyer and A. Moors (Bloomington, 2006), 1-25.
[45] B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 2006).
[46] C. Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York, 2006), 8.
[47] H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1958), 184.
[48] Ibid.
[49] W. Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley, 2007). As opposed, for example, to Ethiopian Orthodox Christians who embrace hierarchical mediation. T. Boylston, *The Stranger at the Feast: Prohibition and Mediation in an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Community* (Oakland, 2018).
[50] M. Engelke, *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church* (Berkeley, 2007).

main drive of their faith was identifying those practices, institutions, and aesthetics that had an indexical (natural and causal) relationship with divine history and intent. What rendered these *authentic* was 'their perceived fidelity to the pristine Jewish form of Christianity practiced in biblical times,'[51] and therefore their loyalty to God's plan for humanity. This is what set them apart, from the Messianic point of view, from various other institutions and practices that only purported to represent God or His truth but were, in fact, artificial creations of humans.

This study traces the evolution of the Messianic pursuit of divine authenticity in the particular context of the frontierlands' shifting landscape of contingent encounters and knowledge exchange. However, the history it narrates chimes with the observation of several scholars that the recent emergence of born-again Christianity in Africa took place not only in a context in which post-colonial states failed to provide citizens with social services and security, but also one in which the role of the modern state as the producer of authoritative historical narratives, identities and epistemologies, has been hollowed. Post-colonial states, the Comaroffs write, 'are quite literally associated with a counterfeit modernity, a modernity of counterfeit. With fictitious documents, fake brand names, pirated drugs and movies, and a range of other sorts of appropriated intellectual property.'[52] But if the state in Africa has turned into an empty shell, a spectacle or a mere façade,[53] and 'modernity', into an eroded promise or a game of mimicry in which value is chronically uncertain,[54] 'the impetus of born-again faiths is to reverse the impact of relativism and the loss of authoritative meaning.'[55] Thus the centrality of divine truth in born-again discourse and practice: truth promises to fix meaning and signification and

[51] J. Dulin, 'Messianic Judaism as a Mode of Christian Authenticity: Exploring the Grammar of Authenticity Through Ethnography of a Contested Identity', *Anthropos,* 108 (2013), 36.
[52] J. Comaroff and J. L. Comaroff, 'Law and Disorder in the Postcolony: An Introduction', in *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*, ed. by J. Comaroff and J. L. Comaroff (Chicago, 2006), 13.
[53] A. H. Apter, *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria* (Chicago, 2005). See also, P. Chabal and J.-P. Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* (Oxford, 1999).
[54] J. Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley, 1999); J. Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham, 2006); S. Newell, *The Modernity Bluff: Crime, Consumption, and Citizenship in Côte D'ivoire* (Chicago, 2012).
[55] J. Comaroff, 'Pentecostalism, "Post-Secularism," and the Politics of Affect: In Africa and Beyond', in *Pentecostalism in Africa: Presence and Impact of Pneumatic Christianity in Postcolonial Societies*, ed. by M. Lindhardt (Leiden, 2015), 235.

restore a sense of epistemological certainty and moral coherence,[56] even if this promise, in fact, never fully materialises.[57]

Tracing such a quest for truth in the frontierlands and identifying how it transformed social dynamics and local notions of authority, necessitates rethinking what 'religion' is in the first place. Asad famously argued that the notion of 'religion' being a discernible 'transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon' that is primarily concerned with one's 'inner belief' is a product of European Christian thought.[58] We cannot assume that we know what 'religion' or 'Christianity' are but need to interrogate their manifestations in any particular context and the practices and materials through which they are articulated. As Meyer suggests, there is a need to both historicise the emergence of born-again Christianity as 'public religion' in Africa, and 'approach the public sphere from a praxis-oriented, rather than normative, perspective that explores how religious publics actually come into being through shared images, texts, sounds, and styles of binding.'[59] This proposition reflects a broader 'material turn' in the study of religion, which stresses the value of thinking about religious life through its physical manifestations.[60] While the scholarly interest in the materiality of religion has largely been the domain of anthropologists, this thesis draws on this literature in its effort to analyse the changing social and political role of faith through the prism of people's engagement with various media.

In this regard, although this is the first study of Nuer Messianic Judaism, by looking at the role of religious authorities, media and institutions in shaping the nature of communal

[56] R. Blunt, '"Satan is an Imitator": Kenya's Recent Cosmology of Corruption', in *Producing African Futures: Ritual and Reproduction in a Neoliberal Age*, ed. by B. Weiss (Leiden, 2004), 294-328; F. De Boeck and M. F. Plissart, *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City* (Ludion, 2004), 75-113; Marshall, *Political Spiritualities*; A. Eriksen, R. L. Blanes, and M. MacCarthy, *Going to Pentecost: An Experimental Approach to Studies in Pentecostalism* (New York, 2019), 157-75. In a non-African setting, see also: J. S. Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity* (New York, 2011).
[57] M. Engelke and M. Tomlinson, eds. *The Limits of Meaning: Case Studies in the Anthropology of Christianity* (New York, 2007)
[58] T. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore and London, 1993), 28.
[59] Meyer, 'Going and Making Public'.
[60] For example, W. Keane, 'On the Materiality of Religion', *Material Religion,* 4 (2008), 230-232; M. Engelke, 'Material Religion', in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. by R. A. Orsi (Cambridge, 2011), 209-229; B. Meyer, 'Mediation and Immediacy: Sensational Forms, Semiotic Ideologies and the Question of the Medium', *Social Anthropology,* 19 (2011), 23-39. See also the discussions in chapters 3-4.

life, it builds on and complements earlier works on Nuer society in significant ways. Johnson's history of Nuer prophets emphasises the central role these figures played in creating and maintaining what he calls a 'moral community'. Through their relationship with spirits, prophets articulated shared histories and political agendas, curbed the hazardous influence of evil spirits and offered peace, protection, fertility and life. They brought people together, and it was precisely this claim for political authority that led the colonial government to violently suppress them.[61] Particularly since the 1970s, however, prophets have gradually (but never entirely) lost this role to Christianity. As we shall see, for a growing number of Nuer, churches came to serve as the centre of communal life, important providers of authoritative historical narratives and moral guidance, and the ultimate avenues for personal and communal communication with God. Ironically, even those Nuer who continued to follow the teachings of prophets did so in ways that increasingly drew on Protestant practices and aesthetics.

At the same time, this thesis also draws on Hutchinson's work in its concern with the religious media through which social relationships are forged and communities are sustained. Underlying Hutchinson's historical ethnography is the idea of a community as 'a set of mediated relationships that combine complex symbolic and material concerns.' Her analysis focuses on the main 'social media Nuer have used over the years in developing interpersonal relations among themselves as well as with the broader social world of which they formed part.'[62] Drawing on Evans-Pritchard's work, Hutchinson argues that the most important media used to articulate social bonds were blood (*riɛm*), cattle (*ɣɔɔk*), and food (*mi̱eth*). All three had some spiritual significance, as we shall see, in the sense that they also shaped people's relationship with God. However, over the years and under the influence of encounters with the state, the value of these media was transformed, especially due to the impact of new media such as money (*yi̱o̱w*), guns (*maac*), and paper (*waragak*). This thesis draws on Hutchinson's observations and evaluates how born-again Christianity has influenced the way relationships and communal identities were configured, by redefining the value of human blood, cattle, food, as well as other things people used to relate to one another and to God, including written, invoked, sung or spoken words.

[61] Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 329.
[62] Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 54.

From born-again Christianity to Messianic Judaism

To better understand the Messianic concern with authenticity, we need to consider what Messianic Judaism is, and what sets it apart from other forms of born-again Christianity. Over the past two decades, African Pentecostal-charismatic churches (PCCs) have attracted considerable scholarly attention—more than any other form of Christianity in Africa. However, the common position, implicit or explicit in much of the scholarship, that in Africa, these churches should be regarded as 'synonymous with born-again Christianity' is highly problematic.[63] It disregards a great number of churches that do not fall neatly within the Pentecostal category but also do not belong to the alternative categories Africanists often deploy, such as 'African independent churches' (AICs) or 'mainline mission churches'. Consequently, it obscures various inner-Christian dynamics between groups that may all too easily be mistaken as representing more or less the same thing. The genealogy of Gambella's Messianic groups is discussed in detail in the following chapters, and different debates between them and other Protestant churches feature throughout this thesis. What I want to do here is situate them within the broader landscape of born-again Christianity and Judaising movements in Africa.

The label 'born-again' refers very broadly to Christian movements that emphasise the importance of conversion and the acceptance of Jesus as a personal saviour. This is a common theme in Evangelical Protestant churches, along with the emphasis on spreading the gospel and encouraging the conversion of others.[64] More than a strict theological category, in everyday language 'born-again' is a designation members of such movements use to describe themselves, indicating that they started a new life in Christ and aspire to live a life of devotion. Many new African movements whose members identify as 'born-again' are indeed Pentecostal, in the sense that they subscribe to renewalist theologies that emphasise experiential spirituality, healing and the power of

[63] M. Lindhardt, 'Introduction: Presence and Impact of Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity in Africa', in *Pentecostalism in Africa: Presence and Impact of Pneumatic Christianity in Postcolonial Societies*, ed. by M. Lindhardt (Leiden, 2015), 1.
[64] On the definition of 'Evangelical', see: P. Freston, *Evangelicals and Politics in Asia, Africa and Latin America* (Cambridge, 2001), 2; J. Robbins, 'The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity', *Annual Review of Anthropology,* 33 (2004), 120; M. Hutchinson and J. Wolffe, *A Short History of Global Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, 2012), 1-24.

the Holy Spirit.[65] Some, the Seventh-day Adventist Church and Gambella's Messianic groups among them, are not. While these groups, too, are Evangelical Protestant and put a great emphasis on conversion, their roots can be traced not to early twentieth century American Pentecostalism (which grew out of the Holiness movement and Methodism), but to the American Adventist movement of the nineteenth century.[66]

Although, as we shall see, Adventists and Messianics in Gambella (as perhaps elsewhere) have been influenced by the theologies and practices of Pentecostal churches, their orientation can be described as more fundamentalist: they tend to be concerned with 'doctrinal purity', reject the ecstatic worshipping style of Pentecostals, and pay closer attention to the study of the Scriptures and the observance of biblical laws.[67] While Pentecostals tend to focus on spiritual healing and (not always) prosperity in this world, the theologies of Adventists and Messianics, while not dismissive of the benevolent power of the Holy Spirit, tend to put greater emphasis on the apocalypse, the Second Coming of Christ , salvation, and the Millennial Kingdom. Much of the scholarship on Christian mediation in Africa has focused on Pentecostalism, where the ultimate barometer for divine truth is often a certain experience of sensory 'heat' and spontaneity associated with the presence of the Holy Spirit. One way this thesis aims to contribute to the literature in this field is by focusing on Evangelical Protestants who are not Pentecostal and reject the emphasis on experiential spirituality, and by asking how they evaluate different experiences and materials and seek divine authenticity. The way Messianics relate to the Word of God plays an important role in this context, a theme further explored in the following chapters.

Another thing that makes Gambella's Messianics unique is that they are 'Zionists'. This is a label whose use is fraught with confusion, not only when it comes to Christianity in Africa. There is no single definition for the term. Any attempt to tie it down to a specific theological tradition risks obscuring its multiple histories and meanings. In this study, it is used to refer to Evangelical movements whose theology requires unhindered support

[65] On defining Pentecostalism, see A. Anderson, 'Varieties, Taxonomies, and Definitions', in *Studying Global Pentecostalism: Theories and Methods*, ed. by A. Anderson, M. Bergunder *et al.* (Berkeley, 2010).
[66] See the discussion in Chapter 2.
[67] On the distinction between fundamentalism and Pentecostalism, which are often confused, see V. Crapanzano, *Serving the Word: Literalism in America From the Pulpit to the Bench* (New York, 2000), 41-4.

and love for the Jewish people and the modern state of Israel, as a Jewish state. In other words: groups that support the modern Zionist national and political movement (itself, of course, not formed of a single unified voice), but do so for spiritual reasons. Some of the African independent churches that emerged in southern Africa in the early twentieth century are known as 'Zionist' as well, the largest and most famous being the Zion Christian Church. The label in this context comes from a restorationist American movement founded in the late nineteenth century.[68] This is not the same brand of Christian Zionism with which this thesis is concerned.[69]

The Christian Zionism this thesis deals with is often associated with the American eschatological tradition of premillennial dispensationalism that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century.[70] Key theologians of this movement understood the Jewish people to be the subject of biblical prophesies, thus implying that the return of the Jews to the Land of Israel is a prerequisite for Christ's return.[71] This association of Christian Zionism with dispensationalism can be problematic, because some dispensationalists were not Zionists, while many Christian Zionists were or are not dispensationalist.[72] In any case, salient in Evangelical Zionist thought, regardless of its roots, is its rejection of what Zionists call 'replacement theology': the Christian notion that the Jews have lost their significance as God's chosen after rejecting the messiahship of Jesus. Close reading of the Bible, Zionists claim, indicates that God's covenant with the people of Israel is still very much valid. Therefore, the Jews have a special role to play in bringing about the Millennial Kingdom and whoever 'blesses' them shall be rewarded with divine blessings (Genesis 12:3). One reason that this theology is significant for questions of materiality and authenticity is that it distinguishes certain biological genealogies from others—upholding a clear distinction

[68] B. G. M. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (London, 2018 [1961]), 47-50. And see also: J. Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago, 1985).
[69] However, on the place of John Alexander Dowie (founder of the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church in Zion, US, out of which emerged the South African churches) in American Pentecostal Zionism, see J. Williams, 'The Pentecostalization of Christian Zionism', *Church History,* 84 (2015), 159-194. It should nonetheless be noted that some of the South African Zionist churches also came to adopt Zionist beliefs in the sense the term is used here. See Y. Gidron, *Israel in Africa: Security, Migration, Interstate Politics* (London, 2020), 106-8.
[70] On dispensationalism, see the discussion of premillennialism in Chapter 5.
[71] S. Spector, *Evangelicals and Israel: The Story of American Christian Zionism* (2009); Y. Ariel, *An Unusual Relationship: Evangelical Christians and Jews* (New York, 2013).
[72] M. C. Westbrook, *The International Christian Embassy, Jerusalem and Renewalist Zionism: Emerging Jewish-Christian Ethnonationalism*, PhD thesis (Drew University, 2014).

between Jews and gentiles—and thus extends the quest for divine truth to the realms of human blood, bodies, race and descent.

This brings us to another controversial movement: Messianic Judaism. What is commonly known today as 'Messianic Judaism' emerged in the US in the 1970s, as a movement comprising of individuals of Jewish origin ('ethnic Jews') who accepted the messiahship of Jesus and sought to evangelise others.[73] Since then, this movement has evolved into a diffuse confederation of congregations and organisations, mainly but not only operating in the US. Messianic Jews commonly adhere to Evangelical Zionist doctrines, but they also follow a range of Jewish practices and customs, thus allowing their members to retain their Jewish identity. While they are primarily interested in evangelising Jews, Messianic Jewish congregations in the US have attracted considerable numbers of curious Evangelical Zionist 'gentiles' in recent decades.[74] These are often called 'Messianic gentiles'.[75] Thus, because the fascination of Evangelical Zionists with the Jewish people often draws them close to Messianics, the border between Messianic Judaism and Evangelical Zionism can be rather murky. In Africa, the term 'Messianic Jews' (or simply, 'Messianics') is often applied rather liberally and refers to Christian groups, whose members do not necessarily have any Jewish background, but 'have adopted elements of the Jewish religion while maintaining the worship of Jesus Christ.'[76]

The religious groups explored in this thesis emerged out of an Evangelical Zionist church but increasingly came to associate themselves with the Messianic Jewish movement. Another frontier this thesis explores, therefore, is that between African Evangelical Christianity and African Judaising movements. Scholars have documented a proliferation in Judaising identities in Africa in recent decades. In the past, African Judaism was almost exclusively associated with the Beta Israel of Ethiopia, a community that has been the subject of an immense body of scholarship.[77] Since the immigration of this community

[73] C. Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism: A Rabbi's Journey Through Religious Change in America* (Boston, 1999). On the evolution of the movement and its deeper roots in nineteenth century missions to the Jews in Europe and the US, see: Y. Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People: Missions to the Jews in America, 1880-2000* (Chapel Hill, 2000).
[74] H. Kaell, 'Born-Again Seeking: Explaining the Gentile Majority in Messianic Judaism', *Religion,* 45 (2015), 42-65; P. A. Power, 'Blurring the Boundaries: American Messianic Jews and Gentiles', *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions,* 15 (2011), 69-91.
[75] Dulin, 'Messianic Judaism'.
[76] W. F. S. Miles, 'Who is a Jew (in Africa)? Definitional and Ethical Considerations in the Study of Sub-Saharan Jewry and Judaism', *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa,* 10 (2019), 9.
[77] See the overview in Gidron, *Israel in Africa*, 125-30.

to Israel during the 1980s and 1990s, however, numerous other groups claiming Jewish or Israelite identity of some sort or another have emerged across the African continent, from Lemba groups in Zimbabwe and various Igbo ones in Nigeria, to smaller communities in Cameroon, Ghana, Mali, Kenya, Uganda and Côte d'Ivoire.[78] Despite the fact that this trend took place in parallel with the rise of born-again Christianity, the scholarship on African Judaising groups has so far remained entirely divorced from the growing body of historical and ethnographic literature on Christianity in Africa. Partly, this appears to be because the recent interest in this topic came almost exclusively from students of Judaism, rather than Africanists.[79]

While Miles has rightfully argued that the 'phenomenon of Black African Jews and sub-Saharan Judaism ought to be considered through a comparative religious studies lens as New Religious Movements,'[80] beyond his own brief comment on the issue, there is little work that does that. This is particularly striking given the fact that it is widely acknowledged that many African Judaising groups have emerged out of born-again Christian ones. It is not only the comparative approach that is missing, therefore, but the recognition that the emergence of African Judaising movements and the spread of born-again Christianity are interlinked. By tracing the history of the emergence of Messianic movements and claims of Israelite ancestry among eastern Nuer communities, this thesis aims to demonstrate that at least in the Nuer case, Judaising groups have been one natural outgrowth of the spread of born-again Christianity. As further discussed in Chapter 3, in Gambella, it was the quest for biblical authenticity set in motion by Protestant Christianity in general and Seventh-day Adventism in particular that gradually drew believers to Evangelical Zionism and Messianic Judaism.

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[78] The main monographs and edited collections in this field include: E. Bruder, *The Black Jews of Africa: History, Religion, Identity* (Oxford, 2008); E. Bruder and T. Parfitt, *African Zion: Studies in Black Judaism* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2012); T. Parfitt, *Black Jews in Africa and the Americas* (Cambridge, 2013); W. F. S. Miles, *Afro-Jewish Encounters: From Timbuktu to the Indian Ocean and Beyond* (Princeton, 2014); D. Lis, W. F. S. Miles, and T. Parfitt, eds. *In the Shadow of Moses: New Jewish Movements in Africa and the Diaspora* (Los Angeles, 2016); N. P. Devir, *New Children of Israel: Emerging Jewish Communities in an Era of Globalization* (Salt Lake City, 2017).

[79] The literature on the Beta Israel of Ethiopia is an exception. Known historians of Ethiopia wrote about them. For example: R. Pankhurst, 'The Falashas, or Judaic Ethiopians, in Their Christian Ethiopian Setting', *African Affairs,* 91 (1992), 567-582.

[80] W. F. S. Miles, 'African Judaism and New Religious Movements: Repainting the "White House" of Judaism', in *In the Shadow of Moses: New Jewish Movements in Africa and the Diaspora*, ed. by D. Lis, W. F. S. Miles, and T. Parfitt (Los Angeles, 2016), 11.

Studying Newland

The region this study deals with has long stimulated a productive dialogue between anthropologists and historians. The methodology and sources of this thesis, too, straddle the borderlands between these disciplines. This thesis draws primarily on ethnographic research conducted in Newland between November 2018 and August 2019. This period of 'fieldwork' followed two shorter visits to Gambella region in September 2015 and July–August 2017, during which I also travelled to villages outside Gambella town, something I was unable to do later for security reasons. Before and after my research in Gambella, I spent several weeks in Kampala (December 2017, September 2019) with Nuer refugees, following up on issues I studied in Gambella, and in Addis Ababa (March and October 2018), mainly making use of the library resources of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, which include unpublished theses and Ethiopian publications. In the UK, documents in the Sudan Archive in Durham (SAD) were useful for triangulating some of the information I gathered in Gambella, particularly with regard to the colonial period.

As is common for foreign researchers in Ethiopia, my permission to reside and conduct research in the country was provided through the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa University, where I was a visiting researcher. I travelled to Gambella with a letter (*debdabé*, an Amharic word I learned quickly) from the Institute, which I presented at the offices of the local government and municipality. I was then issued another letter that granted me permission to conduct research in *qebellé* 01, that is, in Newland. I carried this letter with me at all times and was often asked to present it to officials. Peripheral as it is, Gambella is a politically sensitive border area, with a long history of inter-communal violence, displacement, land-grabbing and foreign interventions. Since the beginning of the civil war in South Sudan in late 2013, Nuer in the area have been associated the armed opposition, which also maintained its headquarters on the South Sudanese side of the border next to Gambella. My status as a foreign historian studying 'Nuer culture' and 'tradition' (imagined as entirely apolitical issues) reassured local authorities that I was not there to deal with explosive issues.

Shortly after arriving in Newland I rented a small room in a compound of a Lou family, with relatives scattered across rural Gambella and South Sudan, refugee camps and the

US. Family members came and went on a regular basis and the compound was always bustling with women and children cooking, playing, and studying. It offered a useful glimpse into the multiple networks within which Newland was situated. The compound was located in a relatively central and dense area of Newland. A short walk through a narrow and often flooded path between tin fences led to the main street, where one could find several small restaurants, teashops and tiny grocery stores. Just across the fence, in the neighbouring compound, was 'Newland Cinema': a large structure made of wood and plastic sheets (distributed by the UN in the refugee camps and resold in the market in Gambella) with a TV that broadcasted a mixture of American and Asian action films, football matches, and some Nigerian music videos. My mornings often started to the sounds of 'Time to Party' by Nigerian pop star Flavour, as Newland came to life and the youths running the 'cinema' began heating up their amplifiers.

Figure 2. Fixing the compound's fence.

But if 'Time to Party' signalled that a new day began, it was rarely clear what exactly I should be doing with this day or what it will bring. My initial interest in Newland emerged because of its position as a peri-urban space situated at the edge of the state (or, to return to the illustration used earlier, at the end of the road). I wanted to explore how political communities are forged in such a peripheral yet globally connected frontier setting.

Churches emerged as the focus of my research because of their remarkable omnipresence in all aspects of daily life in the neighbourhood. But my interest in the public sphere and communal life meant that I had no intention to fully immerse myself in the operations of any single church and mute the cultural 'noise' of everyday life.[81] The longer I stayed in Gambella the more confident I was that it was impossible understand people's interest in a certain church without taking into account what they do outside it,[82] and how they relate to their surroundings or engage in the critique of the practices of other religious groups.

My inquiries therefore proceeded in multiple directions which did not always appear immediately linked to each other, and this thesis draws on a wide range of materials. In general, I spent as much time as possible 'hanging out' with a few groups of (mostly young male) interlocutors and friends. Some of the social circles I interacted with regularly were centred around churches, but not all of them. I also conducted dozens of more formal interviews with local 'elders', church leaders and youths. These usually revolved around people's life histories, with special attention dedicated to questions of church affiliation, migration and citizenship. Several elders helped shedding light on Newland's history and the evolution of the Presbyterian Church. A series of life history interviews with leaders of newer Protestant groups helped reconstruct the dynamics behind the proliferation of churches in Gambella since the 1990s. Another set of interviews with Messianic leaders and youths allowed me to reconstruct the history of the movement, its schisms, and the personal circumstances that ignited people's interest in it. When possible and relevant, I met with people more than once. Particularly in the case of Messianics, interviews often led to, or emerged from, longer friendships.

Language was a challenge. Although the formal working language of government offices in Gambella was Amharic (a language I did not formally study), life in Newland generally took place in Nuer. I started studying Nuer during my visit to Gambella in 2017 and continued throughout my fieldwork, but Gambella town's peri-urban environment was not always conducive to studying the language. English was the formal language of teaching in Ethiopian higher education institutions. Many men in Newland were able to converse in it better than I was able to converse in Nuer. This was, in fact, a charged

[81] Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity*, 18, 207-33.
[82] See also, N. Roberts, *To be Cared for: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging in an Indian Slum* (Oakland, 2016), 4.

matter because Nuer in Gambella were perfectly aware that their kin elsewhere in East Africa spoke English much better than them—yet another sign of their abjection and marginality. Nuer who lived in urban areas in South Sudan, Khartoum or Cairo in the past often spoke Arabic, which I was also able to speak in relative comfort. With a few youths (none of whom Messianic) who previously spent time in Israel, I was also able to speak Hebrew. All this allowed me a considerable degree of independence but inevitably slowed down my progress in Nuer.

Figure 3. Dippo Road, leading through Newland to Gambella University.

Most formal interviews I conducted were in English. A few were in a mixture of Arabic with English or Hebrew. When interviewing in Nuer, Buay Tut, who also taught me Nuer, joined as a translator. Most interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Formal interviews, however, were remarkably difficult to coordinate in an environment in which people's plans were constantly changing, and I gradually found ways to engage in more spontaneous yet meaningful forms of interaction and observation. In addition to interviews, I spent about a month observing the local 'customary authorities' arbitrating disputes in the *qebellé*. Since cases were rarely scheduled in advance, this necessitated showing up at the *qebellé* every day and hoping that there would be something to observe. I collected all church hymnals used in Newland (see Chapter 4) as well as various locally

produced or consumed Christian tracts and books (see also Chapter 3), which all proved useful materials after I left Gambella. Studying the Nuer language, I translated songs, from locally produced gospel music through pop and hip-hop to Nuer 'classics' like the songs of Gordon Koang. Some of these appear in the thesis.

Like most people in Newland, I attended church events and services on a regular basis. When I began my research in Gambella, I did not have a specific church in mind which I wanted to follow. I was only vaguely familiar with Gambella's Messianic movement: I knew it existed from earlier visits, but not much more than that. As already noted, nothing has been written about it, so there was no literature that could help me understand the religious scene I was about to enter. My focus on a group of Messianic churches, and of them, on one church in particular, emerged gradually, but even as I focused on Messianics, I never stopped exploring life in Newland and Gambella more broadly and the practices and doctrines of other religious groups. Ultimately, my closest companions were either Adventists or Messianics, and I spent most of my time in their churches and in particular, the Church of God. However, following a Sabbatarian movement also meant that I was often able to attend Sunday services in other Protestant churches that I followed less closely, sometimes alone and sometimes with other acquaintances and friends.

For multiple reasons, my access to female interlocutors and social circles was limited. For a start, there were hardly any women in leadership positions in churches or the local administration, which already meant that women were less likely to volunteer to engage with me. Women were also less likely to speak English or Arabic, the more 'urban' languages. In Messianic churches, men and women sat separately, women were not allowed to talk, and when people sat together outside to chat and eat, they divided into groups according to age and gender. I nonetheless learned a great deal through more casual interactions: in the female dominated compound where I lived, with families of friends, before or after church services, when working in the church compound or sitting in Newland's (women-run) tea shops. This helped counter the fact that otherwise my main interlocutors were male. Going over my notes, I often contemplated how I could approach female Messianics more constructively in my planned follow up visit to Newland, but this was put off due to the COVID-19 crisis. I cannot claim to provide a detailed critique of the gendered dimensions of the Nuer Messianic movement. This can certainly be the

subject of another study. However, conscious of the fact that my interactions in Gambella were biased, I do refer to these dimensions where appropriate.

A *ran-Itheruel* in Gambella's Zion District

It would be misleading, however, to present 'fieldwork' as merely comprising of a set of technical methods for gathering information. Most of my knowledge was gained not through formal methods for 'data collection' but from daily interactions with a wide range of individuals, and from the confusion and ambiguities that often accompanied these encounters. Historians using ethnographic methods benefit from a unique privilege: they interact with other humans. As Donham reminds us, 'documents rarely rise up and hit one over the head', but the conscious effort that 'fieldwork' entails 'to learn from one's mistakes in interacting with people', does.[83] Being hit over the head is useful. As Tsing writes, the interaction between the researcher and his subject creates a productive 'conceptual space' and cannot be reduced to the 'neat dichotomy' between two very different positions or cultures.[84] It was in this space—the space created when the people I met in Newland and I tried to make sense of our encounter—that the ideas presented in this thesis started to evolve.

Of all things that I was in Gambella (a white unmarried man, a PhD student, a vegan) one was particularly influential in the context of this research: I was a *ran-Itheruel* ('a man of Israel') and a *ran-ji-Juudh* ('a man of the Jewish people'). In an environment where, as we shall see, biblical narratives were omnipresent and Christian knowledge was a valued commodity, constantly shared and debated, this association raised all sorts of questions and expectations.[85] Thus, while I struggled to conduct interviews on my own terms, I did find myself constantly interrogate by others about Judaism, the Bible, Israel, Jesus and his descendants (many people assumed that I would be familiar with these, an assumption that makes perfect sense given the Nuer practice of lineage memorisation), the laws of the Torah, the end times, and so on. Rather than despair, I gradually understood that I

[83] Donham, *Marxist Modern*, xxiii.
[84] A. L. Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an Out-of-the-way Place* (1993), 22.
[85] Interestingly, whether or not a *ran-Itheruel* should be considered as a white man (*kaway*, from the Arabic *khawaja*) was moot. Although many people who did not know me referred to me, either in front of me or behind my back, as a *kaway*, I was also often told that 'Israelites' or Jews do not fall within this category. My acquaintances and host family often corrected foreigners who referred to me as a *kaway*: 'He is not a *kaway*, he is a *ran-Itheruel*!'

should let my research be guided by the local circuits of Christian knowledge exchange and argumentation, of which I inevitably became a part. I tried to learn both from the sort of information people sought to gain from me, as well as the information they hoped I will gain from them.

From the vantage point of Messianics in Gambella, the Jewish world comprised of two groups: Messianic Jews, who were Evangelical Christians like them that obeyed the laws of the Torah, and Orthodox Jews, who were descendants of the biblical Israelites, obeyed the laws of the Torah but did not accept Jesus as their Messiah. As far as most Messianics in Gambella were concerned, I was an 'Orthodox' (a label that I am unlikely to be associated with anywhere else in the world). This meant that I was in a slightly better position than most Christians, but still somewhat 'confused' or 'lost' because I failed to believe in Jesus. Some Seventh-day Adventists in Newland applied considerable pressure on me to convert and be baptised (see Chapter 3). Messianics were less preoccupied with this, however, to some extent because the Zionist theologies to which they adhered predicted that some intransigent Israelites will only accept Jesus during the Second Coming. Some of my Messianic friends expressed their hope that I will become a Messianic, but they did not pressure me to do so.

'Fieldwork' mong Evangelical Christians often makes researchers uncomfortable. Hutchinson, reflecting on her experiences in southern Sudan in the early 1990s, did not try to conceal her sense of discomfort with the rise of Christianity among eastern Nuer and the awkward position she found herself at, being asked to pray or comment on Christian ethics or practices of polygyny or drinking: 'Discussions such as these—in which I found myself in the highly ironic position of advocating Nuer marriage practices to local Christian evangelists who assumed, more often than not, that Euro-American practices were inherently superior—usually depressed me.'[86] Perhaps unsurprisingly, scholars working on Nuer society more recently found it more convenient to write on prophets and their followers, rather than on Christianity.[87] Falge, who conducted research

[86] Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 327, 337-8.
[87] S. E. Hutchinson and N. R. Pendle, 'Violence, Legitimacy, and Prophecy: Nuer Struggles With Uncertainty in South Sudan', *American Ethnologist,* 42 (2015), 415-430; E. Hashimoto, 'Prophecy and Experience: Dynamics of Nuer Religious Thought in Postindependence South Sudan', *Nilo-Ethiopian Studies,* 22 (2017), 1-14; N. R. Pendle, 'Politics, Prophets and Armed Mobilizations: Competition and Continuity Over Registers of Authority in South Sudan's Conflicts', *Journal of Eastern African Studies,* 14 (2020), 43-62.

in Gambella in the early 2000s, explained Nuer conversion to Christianity as an attempt to be seen as 'civilised' and 'advanced'. In response to this attitude and as part of her study, she also supported the establishment of a 'traditionalist' movement that followed the teachings of the late Nuer prophet Ngundeng Bong (see Chapter 2) and encouraged its members not to let their 'culture be swallowed by America!'[88]

Sudan has had its unique religious dynamics, in which foreign Christians were explicitly associated with specific actors and political agendas. But there is more behind the uncomfortable relationship between Western 'fieldworkers' and Christianity. 'Neither real others nor real comrades,' as Robbins writes 'Christians wherever they are found make anthropologists recoil by unsettling the fundamental schemes by which the discipline organizes the world into the familiar and the foreign.'[89] It is this sense of infringement, I think, combined with the association of Evangelical Christianity with conservative right-wing politics, that has often led scholars either to ignore or not to take seriously people's religious practices and instead interpret them through a functionalist lens as 'coping mechanisms'. Such explanations, after all, can make Western scholars feel better about the stories they tell. They repackage the unpleasant 'scandal' of fundamentalism as admirable indigenous resistance and 'resilience'.[90] They also do not rely on a great deal of observation of, or participation in, Christian worshipping—activities that may make some scholars feel uncomfortable.[91] However, such approaches are also painfully etic and radically inattentive to people's concerns.

Although I did not share many of their views and beliefs, I decided not to feel uncomfortable among Messianics in Gambella and I would like to think that they were not uncomfortable with my presence as well. I did not pretend to be a Messianic or a Christian. It was very clear that I was an 'Orthodox Jew' (in the sense this label was understood there) or at least, one type of 'Orthodox' out of many. Some groups were certainly more open to my participation than others, but I was always welcomed to join

[88] Falge, *The Global Nuer*, 245.
[89] J. Robbins, 'What is a Christian? Notes Toward an Anthropology of Christianity', *Religion,* 33 (2003), 193. See also, F. Cannell, 'Introduction', in *The Anthropology of Christianity*, ed. by F. Cannell (2006), 1-50.
[90] I am drawing here on Ferguson's critique of anthropologies of African mimicry and modernity: Ferguson, *Global Shadows*, 155-75.
[91] E. Keller, *The Road to Clarity: Seventh-day Adventism in Madagascar* (New York, 2005), 41; I. Van Wyk, *The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in South Africa: A Church of Strangers* (Cambridge, 2014), 30-4.

services not only among Messianics but in any church in Gambella. Of Gambella's two main Messianic groups—the Congregation of Yahweh and the Church of God—I ended up spending most of my time with the Church of God because, for various reasons, I developed closer ties with a broader range of its members. That I was not a Messianic myself certainly left me in the position of a visitor, but after all, there were many 'lost souls' in Newland who were yet to come to know the truth, and I was, in some way or another, one of them.

This brings me back to the experience of being 'hit over the head'. Given my identity as a *ran-Itheruel*, many people in Newland viewed my insistence not to preach and not to try to persuade others to convert to Judaism as not only bizarre but ungrateful. If the Jews have long had a close relationship with God, why have they not come to Africa to preach His truth? And if they have a genuinely good reason to believe that Jesus was not the Messiah, why not share the information with others? Unlike Islam and Christianity, which both played a central political role in Sudanese and Ethiopian history, Judaism, for various reasons, is not a proselytising faith.[92] I was poorly equipped to answer such questions. I tried to be frank, and, based on my basic knowledge of Jewish theology, usually said that Jews did not think that other people have any obligation to believe what they do or follow the same laws. But this was clearly a disappointing response, and arguably not a response at all. In Newland's circuits of Christian knowledge exchange, I was a peculiar node. But coping with this peculiarity and sensing how others coped with it was an illuminating experience.

Thesis outline

History unfolds chronologically, in the only direction the strict regime of time allows it. This is also most commonly how it is told by historians, more often than not to the tempo of grand political transformations like regime changes, coups, revolutions, wars and peace agreements.[93] But this is not necessarily how it is experienced. In an attempt to stay close to the texture and tunes of daily life in Gambella, I decided to follow Hutchinson's

[92] However, on the longer history of debates around this issue, see I. Sassoon, *Conflicting Attitudes to Conversion in Judaism, Past and Present* (Cambridge, 2017).
[93] This is particularly evident in mainstream Ethiopian historiography in which the norm has become to periodise works according to the country's political transformations.

example and build this study around several entangled historical processes which are explored here as parallel threads of a rather open-ended story rather than a chronology. Each of the six chapters of this thesis is organised around a specific set of encounters, institutions, ideas, materials or practices that evolved in the frontierlands over the past century. They all cover roughly the same period of time, but greater attention is paid, in each chapter, to more recent decades (1990s–2010s), in which the Messianic Movement took shape and form.

The thesis opens with the history of Newland, which I use to explore, more broadly, the experience of encountering the state frontier in the periphery. Newland has long been a place people go to in order to seek modern education and links with the outside world. The chapter highlights the centrality of the quest for knowledge at the frontier but also the salient sense of ambivalence towards the ideas of 'modernity' and 'development', which manifested itself in the local association of urban lifestyles and sophistication with trickery and manipulation. Chapter 2 deals with the institutional history of Nuer Christianity and examines how various interconnections that were made possible through people's movement across the frontierlands contributed to the development of churches and the circulation of Christian knowledge. It starts in the early twentieth century with the coming of missionaries to southern Sudan but then explores the introduction of Seventh-day Adventism in the 1970s and the consequent emergence of Messianic groups out of the Adventist church since the 1990s. The chapter demonstrates how claims of biblical authenticity (that is, of being *the true church*) fuelled schisms and institutional fragmentation.

The third chapter focuses on people's spiritual journeys and the evolution of local Christian literacy practices. It traces the process through which the Christian Word of God came to serve as a guide for distinguishing and navigating between divinely created institutions, practices and laws, and human-made ones. As opposed to earlier scholarship that primarily associated conversion to Christianity in the region with utilitarian interests, this chapter highlights the centrality of engagement with texts and doctrinal debates in shaping the local Christian landscape. The centrality of verbal forms in religious life also features in Chapter 4, which deals with the history of Nuer Protestant hymnody and explains how and why various Nuer Christian groups came to adopt different musical styles and aesthetics. It shows how different musical styles were grounded in different

understandings of the way the divine is made present and different views of the sensibilities and dispositions a born-again must cultivate, but also how these styles and aesthetics constantly evolved and were the subject of an ongoing conversation and debate between Christians.

The final two chapters turn to the place of the human body in divine order and truth. The fifth chapter of the thesis explores how the growing focus on human blood rather than cattle in the articulation of kinship ties in Nuer society resonated with Evangelical Zionist theologies that construct Israelite and gentile identities as inalienable and primordial, and how this impacted the way Nuer Messianics imagined their own 'true' identity and place in history—as 'lost' Israelites or descendants of Cush. In Chapter 6 we turn to the relationship between Messianic Judaism and 'Nuer customary law'. The chapter traces the uncomfortable process through which the spiritual significance of cattle has declined and instead, under born-again Christian doctrines, the individual human (body and soul) emerged as the prime means of communicating with God. However, this did not mean that all Nuer 'traditions' relating to cattle were castigated or deemed satanic. Cattle in its desacralised form was still used by Messianics for bridewealth payments, and they insisted that their marriage practices were not only the most loyal to Nuer 'tradition' but also biblically authentic.

Chapter 1

Welcome to Newland: Trickery and embarrassment at the frontier

The literal meaning of the Nuer word for town (*rɛk*, pl. *rɛ̈k*) is 'fence' or 'enclosure'. Before the term came to refer to modern cities it was used to refer to the *zarā'ib* (Arabic, sing. *zariba*), the fenced military posts that were established in southern Sudan during the Turco-Egyptian administration, in the nineteenth century, and were often taken over, in the early twentieth century, by the British.[1] Gambella town did not emerge out of a *zariba*, like many towns in South Sudan, but it did grow out of a colonial post: a British commercial enclave that was established in Ethiopian territory in the early twentieth century for the purpose of regulating the trade between Ethiopia and Sudan. And like South Sudanese towns, at least for eastern Nuer communities, Gambella came to represent 'a frontier of knowledge and enterprise':[2] a commercial and gradually also administrative hub that not only represented the 'government' (*kumɛ*) but attracted people from rural areas who sought to engage with it, acquire useful skills and access new resources.

Newland emerged as an informal settlement just outside the 'fence' of Gambella, decades after the town was originally established. The main force driving its formation and development was people's quest for modern education. Soldiers, 'chiefs', cattle traders and government workers were the first to interact with, and then settle in, the town, but they were followed, from the 1970s, by growing numbers of students and later, whole families. Ultimately, over the past two decades, this marginal neighbourhood turned into a remarkably important node within global Nuer networks that spread across the region and the globe, reaching as far as Australia and Canada. This democratisation of the urban frontier in the distant periphery increasingly brought the supposedly distinct orders of the rural and the urban closer together, turning the town into a village just as much as it was turning the villagers into globally connected urbanites, and rendering Newland a place

[1] C. H. Stigand, *A Nuer-English Vocabulary* (Cambridge, 1923), 26. On the *zarā'ib*, see also D. H. Johnson, 'Recruitment and Entrapment in Private Slave Armies: The Structure of the *Zarä'Ib* in the Southern Sudan', *Slavery and Abolition,* 13 (1992), 162-173; J. W. Burton, 'When the North Winds Blow: A Note on Small Towns and Social Transformation in the Nilotic Sudan', *African Studies Review,* 31 (1988), 49-60.
[2] C. Leonardi, *Dealing with Government in South Sudan: Histories of Chiefship, Community & State* (London, 2013), 154.

that is ironically both globally connected and yet remarkably marginalised. Part of what this chapter aims to do is trace the vertiginous experience of living 'in-between' the 'village' and the 'town', in a peripheral peri-urban space in which, as we shall see, 'transnational integration' is simultaneously experienced as exclusion and abjection.[3]

The limited literature about Gambella has little to say about Newland. Life in peri-urban spaces, especially in peripheral areas like Gambella, are not usually the subject of scholarly interrogation.[4] This chapter represents the first scholarly attempt to reconstruct Newland's history. It is a valuable undertaking, because of all places in the Ethiopian-South Sudanese frontierlands, it is this marginal settlement that epitomises the encounter between those Nuer communities that inhabited the region or have expanded into it during the twentieth century, the state that came to govern it, and the seemingly universal promises of 'development' and 'modernity'. It is a place that attracted people who sought to engage with the state—to benefit from its services, to seek its protection, to enjoy its limited infrastructure and use it in order to reach out to the world beyond the borders of their community—but at the same time kept a cautious distance from its influence and continuously reshaped or even defied its formal institutions and policies according to their community's interests and needs. As such, while Newland is a concrete space, the experiences and influences it represents are not. It is studied here as a settlement of historical significance in and of itself, but also as a metonym for a wider set of encounters and a broader process of cultural change.

The first sections of the chapter are dedicated to tracing the emergence of Gambella town and Newland. Then, it sets to explore the experience of inhabiting this space. In particular, it aims to demonstrate how marginality and abjection—experiences of being unable to keep up with the real or imagined material and intellectual 'progress' existing elsewhere—have fostered a sense of epistemological uncertainty in the frontierlands. Central to this uncertainty has been Newland's position as a peripheral frontier of knowledge: On the one hand, it has long been a place where people go to pursue education as a means of socio-economic improvement; On the other hand, urban wisdom and

[3] B. Weiss, *Street Dreams and Hip Hop Barbershops: Global Fantasy in Urban Tanzania* (Bloomington, 2009), 25; Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity*.
[4] T. Trefon, 'Hinges and Fringes: Conceptualising the Prei-Urban in Central Africa', in *African Cities: Competing Claims on Urban Spaces*, ed. by F. Locatelli and P. Nugent (Leiden, 2009), 19.

embeddedness in the sphere of the 'government' have been associated with trickery and deception. The consequence of these sentiments for those living 'in-between' was pervasive epistemological uncertainty, similar to that described by Archambault in Mozambique: 'a deep sense that truth is elusive and that all is not what it seems.'[5] These local anxieties surrounding deception and trickery are explored here through discussion of Newland's practices of consumption and self-fashioning and popular notions of what it means to be a proper urbanite.

From a 'corridor of death' to a site of encounter

Historians and anthropologists have often described the escarpments along Gambella's eastern edge as a natural barrier, one that has separated the Semitic-speaking peoples of the Abyssinian highlands from the Nilo-Saharan speakers of the Sudanese lowlands. Some networks of long-distance trade traversed this barrier, connecting the highlands with the Nile Valley.[6] But the kingdoms that ruled the Ethiopian highlands for centuries rarely extended their influence beyond the plateaus and into the surrounding lowlands, whose climate and topography were not conducive to the form of settled agriculture and military colonisation upon which the politics and economics of Abyssinian statehood was based.[7] As Donham writes, escarpments 'were the first feature that tended to define the boundaries of human interaction systems in Abyssinia.'[8] Evans-Pritchard described the foothills of the Ethiopian escarpment as a 'corridor of death' infested with malaria and tsetse flies that kept Abyssinian rulers and Nuer communities at a distance.[9] Collins, a historian of Sudan, even suggested that it would have been wiser if Ethiopia's international border had been drawn along the escarpment, leaving Gambella inside Sudan.[10]

[5] J. S. Archambault, *Mobile Secrets: Youth, Intimacy, and the Politics of Pretense in Mozambique* (Chicago, 2017), 15.
[6] E. Kurimoto, 'Trade Relations Between Western Ethiopia and the Nile Valley During the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Ethiopian Studies,* 28 (1995), 53-68.
[7] Fana, *The Political Economy*, 81-83.
[8] D. L. Donham, 'Old Abyssinia and the New Ethiopian Empire: Themes in Social History', in *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology*, ed. by D. L. Donham and W. James (Oxford, 1986), 19.
[9] Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, 133.
[10] R. O. Collins, *Shadows in the Grass: Britain in the Southern Sudan, 1918-1956* (New Haven; London, 1983), 366.

Yet, Gambella has long represented a boundary just as much as it was a dynamic frontier where interconnections between increasingly far-flung actors were forged. The region came into the focus of the Ethiopian state in the nineteenth century, when colonial conquests instigated a diplomatic competition over its political fate. The Ethiopian empire expanded into the western highlands overlooking Gambella from the 1880s,[11] and following the British occupation of the Sudan (1898), negotiations began on the demarcation of an Ethio-Sudanese boundary.[12] These culminated in 1902 with a bilateral treaty that placed the Sobat inside Sudan, left most Anuak in Ethiopia and most Nuer on the Sudanese side of the international border, and granted the British the right to establish a commercial post and a railway station on the Ethiopian side of the border, along the Baro.[13] Itang, a small Anuak village, was initially considered as a site for this enclave, but it was eventually established further east and closer to the highlands, in 1905.[14] Thus came into being the Gambella enclave. The dream of connecting the region to East Africa by rail never materialised.

The small British post in Gambella was situated on the northern side of the Baro and west of the Jejebe (or, Japjap, among Nuer) river. Since the Baro was only navigable during the rainy season, roughly between June and November, there was no way to reach the enclave from Sudan (or conduct any trade using steamers) during the dry season. Basic trails connected Gambella to the highlands, but not roads.[15] Initially, a British customs inspector was stationed in the enclave and it was administered under the Sudan Customs Department, but in 1921 Upper Nile Province assumed responsibility of the post.[16] A British District Commissioner, who had no administrative control outside the boundaries of the small enclave, was stationed in Gambella, accompanied by a small number of Sudan government staff. Some Anuak communities resided along the Baro, inside and

[11] W. Terrefe, 'The Unification of Ethiopia (1880-1935): Wälläga', *Journal of Ethiopian Studies,* 6 (1968), 73-86; A. Minale, *Foundation and Development of Gore Town: 1883-1970*, Master's thesis (Addis Ababa University, 1987).
[12] Marcus, 'Ethio-British Negotiations'; Bahru, *Relations Between Ethiopia.*
[13] E. Ullendorff, 'The Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty of 1902', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London,* 30 (1967), 641-654.
[14] Z. Bahru, 'An Overview and Assessment of Gambella Trade (1904-1935)', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies,* 20 (1987), 79-80.
[15] H. Tewodros, *Gambella: A History of Integration of the Periphery (1902-1992)*, MA thesis (Addis Ababa University, 2004), 16.
[16] Collins, *Shadows in the Grass*, 370-371; J. K. Maurice, 'The Gambeila Enclave', in *The Upper Nile Province Handbook: A Report on Peoples and Government in the Southern Sudan, 1931*, ed. by D. H. Johnson and C. A. Willis (Oxford, 1995), 321-329.

around the enclave, and their leaders developed a close relationship with the British administration. Oromo often served as porters, and most merchants were Greek. Coffee, beeswax and rubber were exported into Sudan; cotton and salt, imported into Ethiopia. At least until the 1940s, there were no Nuer permanently living in Gambella town.[17]

This is not to say that eastern Nuer were disconnected from the Abyssinian economic and political networks traversing the region. Gaa-jak and to a lesser extent Gaa-jiok communities living along the borderlands interacted with Abyssinian troops and Oromo leaders and merchants at least from the late nineteenth century, and occasionally assimilated individuals from the highlands into their communities.[18] From the second decade of the twentieth century, they became increasingly active in the trade of rifles, which they obtained from Oromo and Abyssinian merchants mostly in exchange for ivory, and sold to other Nilotic communities or used against neighbouring Anuak. While rival Abyssinian and Oromo leaders, as opposed to the British administrators on the other side of the frontier, were not interested in imposing any form of administrative control on local Nuer, they did seek Nuer cooperation and support for economic and political benefits. For example, Khojali al-Hassan, the ruler of Assosa, sought to attract Nuer support in his rivalry with Jote Tulla, the Oromo leader of Gidami. For this purpose, he repeatedly invited Nuer to Assosa and sent some to Addis Ababa, trips from which they returned with gifts such as cattle, guns and mules.[19]

Such interactions led to the incorporation of new skills, ideas and objects into Nuer life—the value of guns and knowledge of foreign languages (Amharic and Oromo) being perhaps the most obvious and influential examples. They also resulted in the emergence of a new type of community leaders (*kuar,* sing. *kuäär*) whose influence and power rested not so much on their hereditary claims or spiritual significance but on their central role as entrepreneurial intermediaries linking their own communities with a host of new, foreign and obscure institutions and actors. Mut Dung—a 'man of cattle' (*wut ɣɔɔk*) of

[17] John Winder, *Gambella from May to November 1936 (From the fall of Addis Ababa to the arrival of Italians at the Post)*, SAD 104/17/1-4; Bahru, *Relations Between Ethiopia.*.
[18] Stringham suggests that Oromo and possibly other Muslim individuals were assimilated by Eastern Jikäny communities after traveling to the Sobat with Abyssinian troops. See Stringham, *Marking Nuer Histories*, 212, 220.
[19] D. H. Johnson, 'On the Nilotic Frontier: Imperial Ethiopia in the Southern Sudan, 1898-1936', in *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology*, ed. by D. L. Donham and W. James (Oxford, 1986), 228-229.

Cieng Thian Kaang (Gaa-jak) from Baar who is primarily remembered among eastern Nuer today as the man who allegedly took down a British plane using a club or a spear—gained his authority mainly by cultivating ties with, and usefully exploiting the rivalry between, Khojali and Jote, for his own and his community's benefit. Further east, it is said that Koryom Tut—a man of the Cieng Thiang Tär (Gaa-jak) who was granted the Ethiopian imperial title of a *fitawrarí*—rose to prominence due to his central role in the ivory-for-rifles trade in the borderlands.[20]

For a short period, the Italians also joined the competition over the borderlands and their peoples. After taking Addis Ababa in May 1936, Italian troops proceeded west, reaching Gambella in December. The British enclave was surrounded in advance by barbed wire and armed reinforcement (Upper Nile Province policemen and Sudan Defence Forces soldiers) was sent from Sudan.[21] Nonetheless, no fighting took place when the Italians arrived in Gambella. The British were initially allowed to maintain their presence in the enclave, while the Italian military settled on the eastern side of Japjap river, an area previously occupied by local Anuak and a few Abyssinian officials. As war between Italy and Britain loomed, however, the Italians, too, hoped to buy the loyalty of the borderlands' Nuer in order to uproot British influence in this area. 'Involved in a war with the English,' noted with a great deal of naivety Major Colacino, in charge of the Italian forces in Gambella, 'we should have the sympathy of a quarter of a million Nuer on our frontier to safely advance into enemy territory.'[22]

The Second World War and the *kumɛ* of the *buny*

Eastern Nuer commonly trace their relationship with the Ethiopian state to a mythical meeting between the famous Nuer prophet Ngundeng Bong (*Ŋundɛŋ Boŋ*) and a group of 'highlanders' in the late nineteenth century, which took place in the lands of the Lou Nuer. The group of Ethiopian visitors is commonly described today by Nuer as led by no other than Emperor Haile Selassie. Historians, however, suggest it was a contingent of Ethiopian soldiers who were making their way from the highlands as they tried to reach

[20] On both figures, see: Ibid., 228-231; D. H. Johnson, 'On Disciples and Magicians the Diversification of Divinity Among the Nuer During the Colonial Era', *Journal of religion in Africa,* (1992), 2-22; Stringham, *Marking Nuer Histories*, 219-245.
[21] John Winder to W.H. Haslam, 13 August 1936, SAD 541/12/1-3; Collins, *Shadows in the Grass*, 383.
[22] Quoted in Ibid., 386.

Fashoda in 1898, under the leadership of *ras* Tesemma. In any case, during this meeting, Ngundeng gave the hungry travellers a cow, and prophesised that one day Nuer would be reciprocated by them and enjoy shelter and protection in Ethiopia.[23] Since members of the Ethiopian delegation bowed down before Ngundeng, they were called *buny* (to bend or kneel down, in Nuer)—a word used until today by Nuer both as a noun, to refer to 'highlanders' in general, and as an adjective, to describe anything as Ethiopian, including the government or lands of the country. This mythical meeting notwithstanding, it was only after the Second World War that the Ethiopian government established any meaningful presence in Gambella region and came to be seen, by local Nuer communities at least, as the *kumɛ* responsible for its people.

Histories of Gambella's development tend to gloss over the Second World War as a moment that had little implications for the region beyond the simple fact that it was transferred back to Ethiopian hands after a short Italian interlude. This is not how this period is remembered locally. When war between Britain and Italy was formally declared in June 1940, the British were ordered to evacuate the enclave in Gambella. Within days, Italian troops proceeded along the Baro and occupied the British border post in Jikow (Gaa-jak area) as well.[24] British officials in Upper Nile Province were concerned about the possibility of an Italian offensive on the region and viewed the Baro salient as a particularly vulnerable point.[25] They reinforced Upper Nile's local police forces and tasked them with collecting information about the Italians and patrolling the border,[26] and turned two steamers into gunboats to patrol the Sobat and Pibor rivers.[27] When forces of the King's African Rifles reached Upper Nile in late 1940, the local police escorted them as they moved east to occupy Gambella. The campaign took place in the dry season of 1941, and Gambella town was 'liberated' in late March that year, with the additional support of troops from the Belgian Congo.[28]

[23] Johnson, 'On the Nilotic Frontier', 242-4; Dereje, *Playing Different Games*, 175-7.
[24] C.L. Armstrong, untitled report on Italian incursions into Kassala and Upper Nile Province, 15 June 1940, SAD 541/1/81; Collins, *Shadows in the Grass*, 397-400.
[25] C.L. Armstrong, 'Upper Nile Province: Internal Security and Defence Problems', 12 June 1940, SAD 541/1/77-80.
[26] 'Summary of operations of Upper Nile Police', n.d., SAD 624/3/29-34.
[27] G. N. I. Morrison, *The Upper Nile and the War (1940-1941)* (Khartoum, 1944), 4.
[28] Collins, *Shadows in the Grass*, 397-400; L.-C. H. Moyse-Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles: A Study in the Military History of East and Central Africa, 1890-1945* (Aldershot, 1956), 531-533.

Many Eastern Jikäny are familiar with these events and describe them today as the war of Jak Ŋuan and Kuey Biel against the Italians. Jak Nguan was the Nuer nickname of H. A. Romilly, District Commissioner of Eastern Nuer District. Kuey Biel was the Nuer nickname of G. S. Renny, the Assistant District Commissioner. As the most senior administrative staff in the area both men were formally made officers in the Sudan Auxiliary Defence Force after the outbreak of the war, in order to lead the newly recruited local police forces.[29] Not only were some Nuer involved in the fighting while accompanying these two men, but in the months prior to the reoccupation of Gambella, clashes, involving aerial bombardments, took place between the Italians and the Upper Nile Police around Jikow, forcing local communities in the area to flee for safety.[30] Several policemen died in the course of these clashes, including Deng Duol, a Gaa-jak 'chief' of Cieng Chany and an intermediary of Romilly and Renny, who drowned while helping the troops cross the river.[31]

Interestingly, several elders I interviewed also portrayed these events as the historical moment in which Nuer established their claim over Gambella town, and it certainly seems that it was only at this point that the town entered the collective memory of local Nuer communities in a fairly graphic way. A small hill at the northern outskirts of Gambella town is known until today, at least among local Nuer, as *Päm Cuɔl Jɔak* (Chuol Joak Mountain). Today, Chuol Joak is often said to have been an assistant of Romilly. Some credit him with advising Romilly to wait for the support of Congolese troops before attempting to occupy Gambella town.[32] Earlier accounts suggest that he may have been fighting for the Italians during the Second World War.[33] According to one well known story, Romilly used to eat human flash (or according to some accounts, just uncooked meat),[34] and after Chuol caught him eating a human one day in the forest, Romilly decided

[29] Temporary commission in the Sudan Auxiliary Defence Force for Romilly, SAD 331/28/3; Morrison, *The Upper Nile*, 6. On both nicknames, see the list compiled by Douglas H. Johnson in the 1970s: 'D.C.'s 'Bull Names' and Nick-Names', SAD 541/4/10-11. Romilly appears in this list as 'Janwan'.
[30] 'Summary of operations of Upper Nile Police', n.d., SAD 624/3/29-34; Moyse-Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles: A Study in the Military History of East and Central Africa, 1890-1945*, 533.
[31] Interview with Nyawech Jok, 7 March 2019; H. A. Romilly, note in pocket diary from 23 January 1941, SAD 331/23/9; Morrison, *The Upper Nile*, 11.
[32] Notes, 09 May 2019 (conversation with Gaa-jak elder in *qebellé* 01, Newland).
[33] See the song recorded by Svoboda in the 1970s: T. Svoboda, *Cleaned the Crocodile's Teeth: Nuer Song* (Greenfield Center, 1985), 31.
[34] The origin of this myth is not entirely clear. Nonetheless, Romilly was certainly fond of hunting, and is also said to have been known as 'the hyena' among the Italians.

to kill Chuol. He chased him—according to some current accounts, using a GPS or a plane—and eventually killed him on the small hill which now bears his name.

One of the myths about how Gambella got its name also takes place around the same historical moment in which Nuer arrived with the British to Gambella town and defeated the Italians. The following narrative was provided by a Gaa-jak elder who said that he was born after the events took place. As he was recounting the story to me, he was pointing towards the direction in which each event took place:

> Once, before Italy… it [Gambella] was called Päny. That small place of the *Bär* [Anuak] there, it was called Päny. That's it. When the people fought, [when] the British came, they came to defeat the Italians. They came with the Nuer to the edge [of town] there, to fight Italy, to defeat them. When they defeated them, they call it *Gäm-bɛl*, because the grain [*bɛl*, usually referring to corn or sorghum] was not enough [*gäm*, also commonly translated as 'half']. […] Kuey Biel [Renny] was here, he came to this area, and the people of Jak Nguan [Romilly] came together, and Chuol Joak was killed on that hill there, and then Buay Nyel was killed in this direction, in the direction of Japjap, this side. Buay Nyel was a man of Italy, he came to this side because Jak Nguan used to eat people there. Jack Nguan and Kuey Biel stayed in that side together with Chuol Joak.[35]

Although the British formally controlled only an enclave in Gambella, Nuer often claim today that until the Second World War, British rule extended all the way from Japjap River in Gambella town to the international border, and that only after the War and the defeat of the Italians was Gambella formally transferred to Ethiopian hands. The Ethiopian government's control of the region is therefore described not only as recent but also rather coincidental and somewhat fleeting. This is how Jok Kier Jal, another Gaa-jak elder and one of Newland's most respected custodians of Nuer history, described the consequences of the Second World War, as we were sitting outside his hut not far from Japjap:

[35] Interview with Gatluak Yang, 26 November 2018. For other versions of the myth about how Gambella got its name, see also Dereje, *Playing Different Games*, 177-78. The story about Chuol Joak, largely along the same lines, was recounted to me by several other young and old Nuer.

> After the Second World War, there was a division. There was a demarcation. That is, the British stood up at Japjap river. Do you see this Japjap river? It is known as British side. […] Where we are now [Newland], this is the Ethiopian side. […] British side means Sudan, there was Sudan Council in that place. So again, there is a big division of the land. […] From Japjap to Jikow river, it was considered as Ethiopian land after the division. Because there were Arabs, Sudanese Arabs, on the Sudanese side. The British did not want to take out Gambella from Ethiopia because they were sure that Arabs will attack the Nuer people and Anuak together. […] Great land became Ethiopia. Because British did not want Arab administration to enter into this land. […] That was the reason only, there was no other reason. Otherwise, the land belongs to South Sudan.
>
> […] It was done purposely by British government and Haile Selassie government, to protect black people from Arab killers. There is nothing so-called Ethiopian land or South Sudanese land. The land of Gambella, all of it belongs to South Sudan. But purposely, by the king of Ethiopia and queen Elizabeth, they made it purposely to protect Black person, by Ethiopian government. And then the government of British and the USA have to have a way to enter… like by 1969, up to 1970—there were Israelites who came to Gambella because they wanted to help South Sudanese with guns. They took some South Sudanese to Israel and trained them, as soldiers. Then they were trained and returned and then… aid, arms and ammunitions were supplied to South Sudan, through Gambella. If this was not done by British, where can the Israel come? Israel cannot come to this land. It could have been Arab land up to now.[36]

From the British perspective, the importance of the Gambella enclave declined as the end of colonial rule in Sudan approached. Gambella's trade did not return to its pre-war scale, mainly because new roads in the highlands allowed for the export of commodities from Ethiopia into Sudan through Kurmuk more efficiently.[37] Nonetheless, after regaining control of the country, the Ethiopian government, did show greater interest in

[36] Interview with Jok Kier, 29 November 2018. Jok refers here to the Israeli support to the Anya-Nya movement during Sudan's first civil war. See Y. Gidron, '"One People, One Struggle": Anya-Nya Propaganda and the Israeli Mossad in Southern Sudan, 1969–1971', *Journal of Eastern African Studies,* 12 (2018), 428-453.
[37] Collins, *Shadows in the Grass*, 404.

consolidating its hold of its westernmost outpost as part of the broader effort to integrate its peripheral provinces.[38] In 1946, Gambella region became a separate *awraja* under the Illubabor Governorate. The *awraja* was divided into six *weredas* and Gambella town was its administrative centre. In the following years, the number of 'highlander' government employees and military personnel residing in the small town grew and various government ministries began to establish a symbolic, limited presence in Gambella.[39]

In Addis Ababa and other emerging centres, this was the 'golden age of Ethiopian urban society', driven by the expansion of the bureaucratic state and the education system and the emergence of a new Ethiopian middle class.[40] In the distant periphery—still not connected by a permanent road to any town in the surrounding highlands and largely insignificant commercially—Gambella town enjoyed a somewhat faded and broken reflection of these developments. A primary school was first established in the town in the 1940s, for the children of government employees and soldiers. This school later developed into Ras Gobena, which operates until today at Newland's edge.[41] During the 1950s, Ethiopian Airlines started flying to Gambella, and radiotelegraph and postal services were expanded.[42] The first photo-studio was also opened in the town sometime in the mid-1950s, allowing people to produce family photographs and images for government documents without travelling to Gore.[43] By the late 1960s, however, Gambella town was still not much larger than a few streets.

The expansion of the national bureaucracy nonetheless created at least some opportunities for Nuer from rural areas. As part of the process of administrative consolidation, by the late 1950s, there was an attempt to register 'chiefs' under each *wereda*. These were awarded formal imperial titles (*qeñ-azmach*, *gra-azmach*, *dej-azmach*, and *balambaras*), invited to Addis Ababa (where they were often presented with gifts and clothes), and tasked with tax collection.[44] Indeed, oral histories suggest that the first Nuer to settle in

[38] Markakis, *Ethiopia*, 114-16.
[39] Tewodros, *Gambella*, 39.
[40] M. Di Nunzio, *The Act of Living: Street Life, Marginality, and Development in Urban Ethiopia* (2019), 35. See also: B. Getahun, *Addis Ababa: Migration and the Making of a Multiethnic Metropolis, 1941-1974* (2007).
[41] Tewodros, *Gambella*, 61.
[42] Ibid., 72-3.
[43] Interview with Wendemu, grandson of Nicolas, the local merchant (of Greek origin) who established the studio, 24 November 2018.
[44] Tewodros, *Gambella*, 38-47.

Gambella town also did so around that time. They were often *tabacni* (soldiers), some of whom were consequently recognised by the Ethiopian government as 'chiefs' or became the imperial representatives of their communities. Few Nuer today can recall the official imperial titles of such 'leaders' (or, *kuar*) and it is likely that very few Nuer were using these Amharic titles at the time as well. Elders commonly say today that during these days, the days of Haile Selassie, there was 'little government' in Gambella.

Figure 4. Gambella town, aerial view, April 1967 (detail from a photograph from the collection of the Ethiopian Mapping Agency).[45]

Newland and the democratisation of the urban frontier

If until the 1970s access to the urban frontier and the resources and knowledge it promised was the privilege of a small group of entrepreneurial intermediaries, in the following decades, growing numbers of Nuer effectively made Gambella town their home. Newland epitomised this process, but there is little documentary evidence concerning its

[45] Ethiopian Mapping Agency (Addis Ababa), aerial photographs, 1967, frame 30188.

emergence and development. As an informal settlement in a marginalised peripheral town, local authorities had little interest or capacity to regulate or document its growth. Newland always grew much quicker than the formal maps or plans of Gambella town. Neither was Newland's history an issue that the neighbourhood's residents were preoccupied with recounting or commemorating regularly. In fact, most young people insisted they know nothing about it. If the 'village' was the place of the past and the 'city' was the place of the future, Newland, as its name suggested, was always a place of the present—an interstitial space lacking any independent history that was worth recounting. However, by piecing together the life histories of some of the neighbourhood's older residents and the wider events that shaped the region, it is possible to construct a broad outline of the evolution of this place and the people it attracted.

Central to Newland's growth throughout its history has been people's quest for government services, and in particular, modern education. Until 1959, when another school was opened in Abobo town, Gambella town's Ras Gobena was the only school in the entire *awraja* and had a total enrolment of less than 100 students.[46] By the mid-1960s, the government began to subsidise the education of a small number of students, including some from rural areas who were selected based on their grades and the recommendation of their 'chiefs'. They came to study in Gambella town and received an allowance to purchase food and clothes.[47] Sudan's first civil war (1963-1972) accelerated the expansion of Gambella's education services. By 1970, Gambella hosted some 20,000 Sudanese refugees, and UNHCR funded the establishment and renovation of clinics and schools in the region, including in Gambella town.[48] While a basic primary school was opened by Presbyterian missionaries in Adura in the mid-1960s, and few additional primary schools were later opened in Jikow and Akobo, by the 1960s Ethiopian and Sudanese Nuer began to travel to Gambella town for education as well.

It was during the socialist regime that Gambella town began to expand dramatically, and that Newland emerged. After the Derg came to power in 1974, there was an increase in

[46] Tewodros, *Gambella*, 62-3.
[47] Ibid., 63.; Interview with Wendemu.
[48] UNHCR, 'Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees', 1 January 1972, A/8412, available at: https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae68c7e8.html. Since refugees were not supposed to be settled near the border, Nuer areas like Jikow and Akobo did not benefit from these opportunities directly. See: Tewodros, *Gambella*, 64-5.

the number of Nuer and Anuak holding government positions,[49] and, more importantly, access to education expanded dramatically. For many years, the only high school in Gambella *awraja* remained in Gambella town. Sometime in the mid-1970s, Nuer students who attended it settled at the outskirts of the town, beyond the Japjap river and the neighbourhood known today as Arat Kilo. Along with students, patients who attended the small clinic in Gambella also settled in the town. All were nominally temporary residents, living at the edge of the 'fence' of Gambella, but they were gradually becoming part of its expanding landscape. As generations of urbanising migrants would do after them, they built their homes at the outskirts of town in an area that was still 'a bush' at the time. They grew maize and prepared their own food, occasionally selling their family's cattle in the local market in order to fund their education and other expanses in the town. It was this small informal settlement that became Newland.

Often credited with inventing the name Newland is a Lou Nuer student nicknamed Tomorrow, who is said to have come to Gambella from South Sudan. 'They called it Newland because it was new,' I was told. 'They were the ones who established it.'[50] Some Anuak and 'highlanders' have apparently also heard of Tomorrow, and some of them even credit him with being the first Nuer to settle in Gambella town or with 'establishing' Newland.[51] Nuer elders I interviewed in Gambella dismissed this claim, arguing that it was not him alone who started the neighbourhood but rather, a group of students, and that these students were not *the first* Nuer to settle in Gambella town but rather, that they joined those Nuer students, *kuar* and other 'people of the government' who were already living in the town earlier. These disputed historical narratives, of course, should be viewed as part of the wider conflict between Nuer and Anuak communities over who 'owns' the territories in which Gambella town was established, much like the insistence of each group that the name Gambella originated from its language.

While Nuer elders are probably right to argue that there were Nuer residing in the town before the 1970s, it is also important to recognise that the emergence of Newland brought about a qualitative change in the way Nuer communities viewed Gambella town: it was

[49] By the end of the 1970s, Gambella's six *weredas* all had 'indigenous' governors, and two deputy *awraja* administration posts were created, one of which was occupied by a Nuer, Joshua Delual, and one by an Anuak, Philip Opiu. Tewodros, *Gambella*, 94-5; Dereje, *Playing Different Games*, 136.
[50] Interview, Pastor Matthew (Evangelical Lutheran Church), 19 June 2019.
[51] Interview with Wendemu; Dereje, *Playing Different Games*, 152.

gradually turning from a foreign 'enclosure' into a space of which they too were legitimate members, as a community. Evidently, by the early 1980s, there were already enough Nuer residing in the town to justify the establishment of a new position of a Nuer urban 'customary' authority: the *sefer shum* (or, 'zone leader'). *Sefer shums* were men chosen to arbitrate disputes between Nuer residents of the town according to Nuer 'customary law'. 'It was a pragmatic decision by the Nuer elders and the police,' Dereje Feyissa writes, 'when it became increasingly difficult to entirely and satisfactorily settle Nuer disputes in the government courts because this entails competence in Nuer culture.'[52] Until then, Nuer who resided in town either turned to government courts or to the 'customary' authorities in the village.

Further accelerating Gambella's and Newland's growth was Sudan's second civil war, which broke out in 1983. Throughout the 1980s, Gambella region became entangled in broad geopolitical power struggles and Cold War rivalries. Reciprocating the Sudanese government for the support it provided to Ethiopian rebels, the Derg supported the southern Sudanese rebel group, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), and allowed it to establish bases in Gambella.[53] Nonetheless, the SPLA had a tense relationship with local authorities in the region as well as with local Nuer and Anuak communities.[54] Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of Sudanese refugees poured into Ethiopia due to the violence in southern Sudan. Itang emerged as the world's largest refugee camp and became a major economic and political hub within the region.[55] Further complicating the situation in the region at the time were also the Derg's forced resettlement schemes: by 1985, more than 17,500 families of peasants from the highlands were transferred to four sites in Gambella region, all in Anuak areas.[56]

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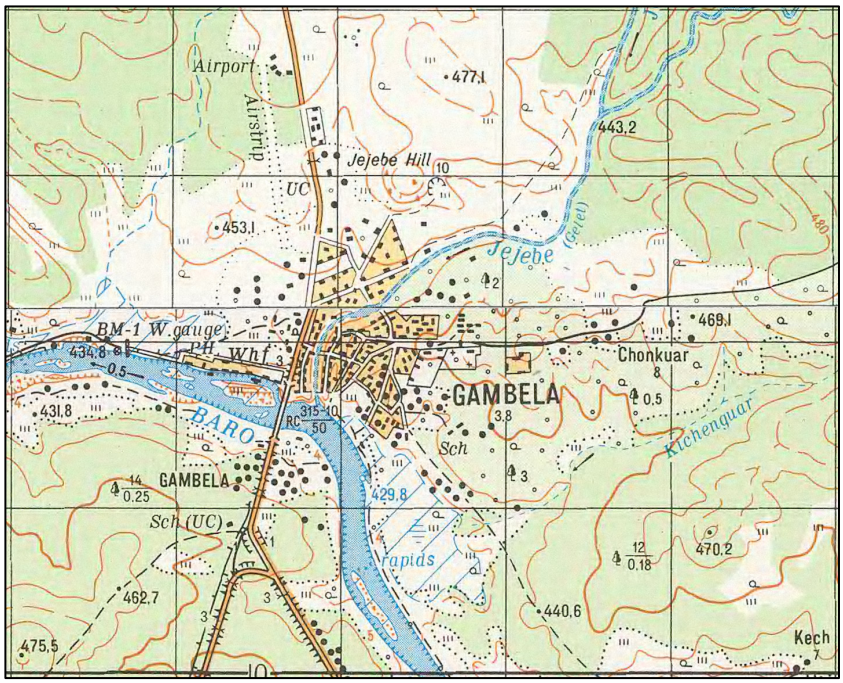
[52] Dereje notes that the *sefer shum* was established in 1980. My interviewees dated the establishment of this authority to the early 1980s, but I was never given a specific date. See F. Dereje, 'Customary Dispute Resolution Institutions: The Case of the Nuer of the Gambella Region', in *Grass-Roots Justice in Ethiopia: The Contribution of Customary Dispute Resolution*, ed. by A. Pankhurst and A. Getachew (Addis Ababa, 2008), 133-154.
[53] Regassa, *War and Peace*; Young, 'Along Ethiopia's Western Frontier'.
[54] S. Manoeli, *Narrative Battles: Competing Discourses and Diplomacies of Sudan's "Southern Problem", 1961-1991*, DPhil thesis (University of Oxford, 2017), 193-197.
[55] UNICEF and Operation Lifeline Sudan, *The Return to Southern Sudan of the Sudanese Refugees From the Itang Camp, Gambela, Ethiopia* (Nasir, 1991).
[56] Relief and Rehabilitation Commission of the Government of Socialist Ethiopia, *Review of Drought Relief and Rehabilitation Activities for the Period Dec. 1984 – August, 1985 and 1986 Assistance Requirements* (Addis Ababa, October 1985).

Gambella region's rising geostrategic importance and the flow of aid naturally also brought unprecedented attention to Gambella town, the administrative hub of the region. For the first time, the Ethiopian state projected its presence into the region through the construction of (relatively) grand infrastructural projects. A bridge over the Baro river was built in 1980, and a new airport was opened outside the town. UNHCR established a new compound in Gambella town in the early 1980s, to coordinate its operations in the region. The students who resided in Newland were evicted to make space for this compound, and were pushed further south, towards the Anuak village of Chenkuar. Ironically, then, elders today recall that they were 'displaced' by none other than UNHCR, and this led to the expansion of the neighbourhood into an area that came to be known as Jonglei. This name, too, is said to refer to the wild and uninhabited nature of the place at the time, as *lëy* in Nuer means wild animals. 'There were animals in this area. It was only forest and animals.'[57] Jonglei, it should be noted, is also the name of the state bordering Gambella in South Sudan, south of Upper Nile State, and thus also had a specific exilic flavour.

Since there was no high school in Itang, some refugees were sent to study in Gambella. Meanwhile, Nuer Ethiopians also registered as refugees and studied in the town, receiving support from UNHCR, while local Nuer students in lower classes are said to have been explicitly instructed to go to Itang, to be educated and receive their rations there as refugees.[58] Meanwhile, fighting between the SPLA and Anya-Nya II guerrillas in Nuer areas along the border during the mid-1980s targeted and displaced Eastern Jikäny communities. The Gaa-jak, in particular, were associated with the leadership of Anya-Nya II, and therefore the movement's guerrilla operations against SPLA troops were answered by the SPLA with atrocities against Gaa-jak communities, presumably Anya-Nya II sympathisers.[59] While many civilians sought shelter in Itang due to these attacks, some also came to Gambella town and settled in Newland and its emerging extension, Jonglei. Others passed through this neighbourhood for more prosaic reasons. One Nuer elder who was a refugee in Itang, for instance, told me how he first came to the town in

[57] Interview with Jok Kier, 21 April 2019.
[58] Interview, James Duop, 2 May 2019. Corroborated by other elders in informal conversations (Notes, 21 November 2018).
[59] P. A. Nyaba, *The Politics of Liberation in South Sudan: An Insider's View* (Kampala, 1997), 48-51.

the mid-1980s to use a phone: he wanted to talk to his brother who was studying in Addis Ababa.[60]



Map 3. Detail from a map produced by the Soviet Union for the Ethiopian government in the mid-1980s showing Gambella town.[61]

If Newland flourished in the 1980s, the early 1990s saw its decline. Opposition to the Derg in Gambella region emerged primarily among the Anuak, fuelled by grievances over the allocation of their lands to Nuer refugees and government resettlement schemes. The Anuak-dominated Gambella People's Liberation Movement (GPLM) was established in the mid-1980s and soon allied itself with other rebel groups fighting the Derg. When the socialist regime collapsed in 1991, the GPLM took power in Gambella. The Derg's fall led to the mass evacuation of the refugee camp in Itang, whose residents hurried back into Sudan. Most Nuer in Gambella town evacuated it as well, fleeing to rural areas or southern Sudan; some of those who stayed behind in Gambella town and Itang were targeted by GPLM militants.[62] The Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), the coalition that came to power following the Derg's fall, established a new system of ethnic federalism. Ethiopia was divided into nine federated states, of which

[60] Notes, 21 November 2018.
[61] Ethiopian Mapping Agency (Addis Ababa), detail from a map titled 'Socialist Ethiopia, 1:50,000', series ETH4, sheets 0834D1 and 0834D3.
[62] Dereje, *Playing Different Games*, 149-51.

Gambella was one. Due to their association with the Derg, the GPLM excluded Nuer from positions of power in the following years, and the region's political landscape was dominated by Anuak.

Global Newland and Ethiopia's education boom

It was not long before Sudanese refugees started returning to Gambella in the early 1990s. They were registered at a reception centre in Tharpam, near Itang, but sent to Dima and Pugnido refugee camps, in southern Gambella region, far away from Gambella town or any established Ethiopian Nuer community. In the following years, these two camps replaced Itang as regional hubs, attracting Nuer and other South Sudanese communities from the entire region as well as Ethiopian Nuer and Anuak. Meanwhile, with few opportunities for education or government employment in Gambella, a growing number of Nuer who were able to start studying in the 1980s in Gambella town or Itang found ways to resume their education in Addis Ababa, as either citizens or refugees, and a small community of Nuer students emerged in the Ethiopian capital. It was only in the late 1990s, following the gradual reincorporation of Nuer politicians into the local government of Gambella, that Newland began to attract residents once again in significant numbers.

A combination of intertwined factors led to the dramatic expansion of Newland since the turn of the century. One was the aggressive expansion of Ethiopia's education system, which attracted people to the region and Gambella town. Another was the gradual emergence of significant Nuer communities in the US, Canada and Australia, whose members increasingly sought avenues to connect with relatives back in Ethiopia and South Sudan. Nuer had been resettled in Western countries by the UN since the 1990s, usually from refugee camps in Kenya and Ethiopia. Initially, contact with these distant relatives could only be maintained through Addis Ababa, as very few individuals in Gambella had a phone in the house and there were no money transfer agencies operating in the region. But this has dramatically changed with the growing availability of mobile phones and the emergence of numerous banks and money transfer agencies in Gambella town and, later, even inside Newland. Instability, and, from 2013, civil war, in South Sudan, once again turned Gambella into a place of refuge, further accelerating Newland's

rise as a key hub not only for Nuer communities from across the region, but from across the globe.

The expansion in education opportunities in Gambella was perhaps the most evident manifestation of the EPRDF's developmentalist agenda in the region. Already before the outbreak of civil war, it was not uncommon for eastern Nuer who graduated from schools in South Sudan to try to access higher education in Ethiopia. That growing numbers of students graduating from secondary or high schools in Ethiopia with good grades were sent to public colleges and universities, with government support, created an incentive for borderlands communities and refugees to graduate from high school in Ethiopia, as citizens. After war broke out in South Sudan and spread to Malakal and eastern Upper Nile State, hundreds of thousands of (primarily) Nuer refugees crossed into Ethiopia and were hosted in refugee camps near Itang, Pugnido and Jewi, outside Gambella town. Gradually, those with local relatives or the financial means to support themselves outside the camp have been able to access Ethiopian IDs (see also Chapter 5), move freely and settle as citizens, including in Newland.

Statistics in Gambella are notoriously unreliable but can nonetheless be telling. Between 2010 and 2017 the number of students identified as Nuer registered in Gambella region in grades 11-12, rose from 380 to 2,833 (of which only about 11 percent were females). The number of those studying in grades 9-10 grew from 4,224 to 9,804, while the number of Nuer students in primary schools (grades 1-8) grew from 29,313 to 54,807 over the same period.[63] These figures should be taken with several pinches of salt. It was very common for youths to register in schools only for the sake of taking their final exams and getting a certificate, and not because they had any intention to attend classes on a regular basis. One could pass the national exams after memorising the relevant study books, which were widely available in the market, without going to classes at all. In fact, I was told that many schools in the *weredas* were locked in a vicious cycle in which neither students nor teachers bothered to attend them, each group claiming it does not attend because the other is absent. The national exam, in turn, guaranteed access to the higher

[63] Gambella Education Bureau, *Education Statistics Annual Abstract 2003 EC (2010-2011 GC)*, September 2011, 18; Gambella Education Bureau, *Education Statistics Annual Abstract 2009 EC (2016-2017 GC)*, December 2017, 23.

education system in Ethiopia, possibly (depending on one's grades) with government support.

In 2014, Gambella University was opened at the site of an older agricultural college east of Newland. Its students came from across Ethiopia, but a substantial number of them were Oromo and Nuer. Previously, students from the region could only be sent to other universities around the country. By 2019, there were already at least three additional private colleges operating within Newland alone and offering degrees, as well as a host of other smaller schools offering courses, primarily in English and literacy. All were established by Nuer entrepreneurs, to cater for the growing numbers of youths seeking educations in the fast-growing neighbourhood. The largest private college, Trinity Lutheran, was established in 2016 by a local Nuer-led church with support from American Evangelicals. It offered a degree in theology (for students on scholarships, selected by the church), but also in several highly sought-after 'secular' fields such as human resources, logistics and nursing. By 2019, it had an enrolment of around 500 students,[64] which, though all Ethiopians on paper, included a considerable number of Nuer from South Sudan and former rebels. Some youths in Newland were even studying for more than one degree at the same time.

Newland's infrastructure was basic at best, but as the story of Trinity Lutheran College suggests, much of its modest development was made possible through capital from abroad. Many of the Newland's residents were able to fund their stay in the town, their education or their medical treatment, through remittances sent by relatives either in neighbouring countries or in the US, Canada and Australia.[65] The acquisition of land in Newland and the construction of new houses (rarely much more than tin-roofed mud structures covered with cement) was often funded by relatives in the diaspora, as was the establishment of many of Newland's small businesses: DSTV 'cinemas', restaurants, pensions, grinding mills. Moreover, with Ethiopian Airlines flying regularly into Gambella (twice a day at the time of my research), Newland also served as a convenient meeting point and the ultimate portal to the region for Nuer from the diaspora—much

[64] Interview with Chuol Kun, Head of Trinity Lutheran College, 29 March 2019.
[65] F. Carver and D. Ruach Guok, *"No-One Can Stay Without Someone": The Role of Transnational Networks to the Lives and Livelihoods of the Nuer-Speaking Peoples of Gambella and South Sudan* (Nairobi, 2020).

safer and more accessible than anywhere in South Sudan. In particular, young singles (mostly, but not only, men) from the diaspora travelled to Gambella regularly to find potential partners for marriage and negotiate with their families.

After the fall of the Derg and as the town expanded, Gambella town's administrative structure was revised and Newland came to form an independent *qebellé—qebellé* 01—the town's main 'Nuer *qebellé*'.[66] By 2019 this sprawling *qebellé* already comprised of eight sub-zones. The *qebellé* offices were located next to Chenkuar primary school and not far from the offices of UNHCR and comprised of one old concrete building with three rooms and another mud house with four rooms, constructed around an open court. Between the two buildings, and attached to the concrete building, was also a small and rundown mud structure that served as the *qebellé's* detention cell, guarded by Nuer law enforcement personnel—a combination of 'militia' and 'police assistants'. This set of dilapidating structures was the ultimate representation of the Ethiopian *kumɛ* in Newland. Almost all positions in the *qebellé* were held by Nuer and attached to it were Nuer *sefer shums* who regularly arbitrated disputes under the trees in the *qebellé*'s open courtyard. This did not necessarily mean that all residents of *qebellé* 01 were Nuer. There were some 'highlanders' residing in the area as well, although the last Anuak residents of Chenkuar (which became the heart of Newland) are said to have left it by the mid-2000.

As opposed to rural *qebellés* that were associated with and controlled by a specific lineage and territorial community (*cieŋ*), Newland's *qebellé* 01 was a pan-Nuer *qebellé*. Most of its residents were Eastern Jikäny, but there was also a considerable number of Lou in the neighbourhood (primarily from the Mor sub-section) as well as individuals and families from western Nuer communities, coming from as far as Bentiu. Neither Lou nor any other non-Eastern Jikäny Nuer community had 'its own *qebellé*' in Ethiopia outside Gambella town, but in Newland all were nominally welcome. Most people in the neighbourhood were fully aware of their friends' and neighbours' origin, and as further discussed in Chapter 5, urban identity never came to replace one's strong affiliation with a specific *cieŋ.* However, to explicitly ask someone in town about his or her 'tribal' background

[66] The adjacent *qebellé* 02 (an area known as 'Arat Kilo') to its west was also dominated by Nuer, though it was significantly smaller.

was politically incorrect.[67] This pan-Nuer urban ethos was illustrated well by the emergence of a host of Nuer-owned restaurants in Newland, whose names emphasised Nuer unity, such as Nuer One (*Nuer Kɛl*), Good-Kinship (*Gɔamaar*), All of Us (*Kɔndiaal*), Let Us Love Ourselves (*Nhɔaknɛ-rɔ*), and Kinship of all Nuer (*Maar Nuääri Diaal*).

Figure 5. 'NUER, E, KEL RESTAURANT' (Newland Street branch).[68]

Although the area at large was still known as 'Newland', the neighbourhood has expanded since the late 1990s into various sub-zones and districts. Many of these were, more or less formally, named after the churches that dominated them, and which we will come to know better in the following chapters: Jonglei area expanded into Olive (named after the Seventh Day Adventists church at its centre); to its south, Olive neighboured Baba Johane (named after the Zimbabwean movement formally known as Gospel of God Church); Baba Johane bordered District (named after the large compound of the Church of the Nazarene, the headquarters of Gambella district). Meanwhile, at the north-eastern edge of Newland was Zion District (with the Church of God at its heart), and next to it, Kibbutz Ayahad, the large camp of the Congregation of Yahweh. By 2020, newcomers to what

[67] When violent clashes broke out between Gaa-jak and Gaa-jiok refugees in the camps near Itang, resulting in a number of deaths and great destruction in the camps, this hardly had any effect on the atmosphere in Gambella town.
[68] Since local keyboards lacked Nuer letters, posters of restaurants were rarely spelled properly in Nuer.

we may call here ‘Greater Newland’ were establishing their homes along the foothills—some 3 kilometres east from the spot where Newland originally began.

Town life, embarrassment and the performance of modernity

Throughout my time in Newland, Nuer from all walks of life explained to me that I had chosen my research methodology very poorly. As a foreign student of ‘history’, my decision to conduct ‘fieldwork’ in Ethiopia *and* in a town—rather than in a rural area or in South Sudan, ‘where the Nuer come from’—was seen as purely absurd. I was repeatedly warned that Nuer ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’ in Ethiopia, and particularly in Gambella town, have already been ‘mixed’ with various external influences and do not represent the ‘original’ or ‘pure’ Nuer way of life one can supposedly find elsewhere. On several occasions, I was advised to abandon my clearly ill-informed efforts and consult Evans-Pritchard’s books instead, where some ‘proper’ history could be found. The ‘town’, as opposed to the ‘village’, was perceived as a space in which people did not possess any reliable knowledge of their collective history or ‘traditions’, and therefore in which no reliable ‘data’ could be found. It was where people encountered ‘civilisation’ or ‘modernity’ (terms very often used by people in Newland, in English), which gradually eroded their ‘original’ identity as Nuer.

As such, these ideas were hardly unique to Gambella. They represented a local articulation of a familiar narrative of modernisation in which certain changes are conceptualised as a movement from a supposedly static and unchanging ‘traditional’ sphere of life in the village towards a supposedly universal ‘progressed’ culture, epitomised by the city. Hutchinson documented the adoption of such modernist worldviews by Nuer communities decades ago.[69] The more recent studies of Falge, Dereje and Grabska also highlight the prevalence of these ideas among Nuer communities in both Ethiopia and South Sudan.[70] The embracing of the myth of modernisation was lucidly demonstrated by the language used to describe the changes brought about by western education and state bureaucracies. The Nuer word for ‘development’ (*cuɔp*) comes from the verb ‘to arrive’ (*cop*). A ‘developed’ lifestyle (*ciaŋ cuɔp*) or urban

[69] Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 40.
[70] Dereje, *Playing Different Games*; Falge, *The Global Nuer*; K. Grabska, *Gender, Home & Identity: Nuer Repatriation to Southern Sudan* (Woodbridge, 2014).

lifestyle (*ciaŋ rɛk*), associated with towns, stands in contrast to the 'traditional' Nuer lifestyle (*ciaŋ nuäärä*), associated with the 'village' (*rɛy ciëŋ*, literally, 'within the homeland or community'). The 'movement' from the lifestyle of the 'village' towards that of the 'town' was described as 'going forward' (*wä nhiam*).

Spaces, as well as the services and products available in them, were placed in an order, imagined as either horizonal or vertical, in which Newland occupied a very 'low' or 'backward' place: 'under' or 'behind' Addis Ababa, Khartoum, Nairobi, Dubai, and 'America', but 'above' or 'ahead' of villages and refugee camps. Such hierarchies resonate strongly with discourses in other post-colonial settings.[71] Crucially, however, these imagined spatial hierarchies of high and low, backward and forward, also corresponded with the labels of 'fake' and 'original', and, when it came to human beings, were associated with the intellectual states of ignorance (or, being easily manipulated) and smartness (or, being educated, undeceivable and independent).[72] Thus, all products available in the local market—shoes, clothes, mobile phones, body lotions, laptops, sunglasses, sold mostly by Oromo and Tigrayan traders—were often described as 'fake'. Newland may have been a globally connected estate, therefore, but its residents were acutely aware of their marginalised position within the transnational networks of which they formed a part.

These imagined hierarchies manifested themselves, above all, in the daily workings of Newland's economy and local practices of consumption and self-fashioning. Involvement in the trade of products distributed in Gambella's refugee camps—oil, Plumpy'Nut (a peanut-based paste) and 'feeding' (Super Cereal, a fortified flour used to produce porridge)—was strictly the domain of women and children. These were collected in the camps and brought to Newland, to be sold on the street. Wood and charcoal (produced in the forests at the outskirts of Gambella town) were usually sold by 'highlanders' or elder Nuer who resided in Newland but never really sought or had the means to adopt an 'urban' lifestyle. For an educated grown-up man to be selling oil from the camp, charcoal from the woods, or (and this was unthinkable) to be shining shoes on the street, was highly inappropriate. 'If I open a business selling charcoals, and I get money and buy clothes,

[71] Compare: J. Cole, *Sex and Salvation: Imagining the Future in Madagascar* (Chicago, 2010), 64-7; Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity*; Newell, *The Modernity Bluff*.
[72] Newell, *The Modernity Bluff*, 42-3.

people will say: "Look at this guy with the clothes from the money of charcoals [*yiow mim*]",' one teenager explained to me. 'It is embarrassing!'[73] The most 'appropriate' jobs were in government institutions, that is, jobs that involved no 'manual labour' and arguably hardly any labour at all.

Figure 6. Women selling Plumpy'Nut and 'feeding' from the refugee camps.

Families with connections in Kenya and Sudan often traded informally with goods from these places, travelling to Khartoum or Nairobi and returning with large bags filled with African and Arab clothes, perfumes, watches and hair products. These were then sold on the streets or through networks of friends. There was less of 'embarrassment' involved in the trade of these goods, for they clearly originated from places located 'higher' in the imagined hierarchy of modernities and development. Relatives visiting from 'America' (a title often referring to the US, Canada and Australia collectively) were expected to bring with them impressive piles of goods. They did, of course, spending much of their earnings on the maintenance of wide social networks in Gambella through the distribution of cash and gifts. The blazing sun during the dry seasons and inescapable mud and flooded paths during the wet season notwithstanding, any grown up man in Newland who 'respected himself' wore a suit, with a tie, 'leather' shoes and a shiny golden hand-watch—all preferably, but rarely, bought outside Gambella. Arab Jellabiyas, imported

[73] Notes, 26 February 2019. On the definition of different sorts of money according to their immediate source, see also Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 56-102.

from Khartoum, were also gaining some popularity, as growing numbers of Nuer who previously lived in Sudan settled in Newland.

Figure 7. Products from Khartoum sold in Newland.

This concern with Western clothing, imported commodities and brands in an environment as impoverished (and oppressively hot) as Newland may seem perplexing, but is in many ways paradigmatic of post-colonial urban styles. As in the 'modernity bluff' of Abidjanais men described by Newell, what appeared to be mimetic performances of urban sophistication, cosmopolitanism and wealth in Newland were not only, as Ferguson suggests, claims for 'membership in a spectacularly unequal global society,'[74] but also meaningful 'semiotic acts in which deceit is a true mediation of power.'[75] Being an urbanite, in other words, meant knowing how to put on a show that demonstrated one's mastery of modern styles and tastes. That some local commodities were considered 'fake' and deemed inferior to more 'original' versions imported from the West, therefore, did not mean they were wholly worthless. Like the counterfeits described by Siegel in Indonesia, Gambella's counterfeits were always, to some degree, 'almost valid', and thus neither entirely 'fake' nor 'real' in the sense in which these terms are often used to describe labelled goods in the West.[76] They appeared to promise their possessors, as the

[74] Ferguson, *Global Shadows*, 167, 174-5.
[75] Newell, *The Modernity Bluff*, 260.
[76] J. Siegel, *A New Criminal Type in Jakarta: Counter-Revolution Today* (Durham, 1998), 57.

Comaroffs write, 'access to things they could not otherwise have, filling the gap between globally tweaked desires and local scarcities.'[77]

Crucially, however, a hand-watch, sunglasses or shoes sent by relatives from 'America' were always more suitable for a proper urban performance than ones bought locally, providing it with a greater degree of legitimacy and indexing global links.[78] Therefore, due to Newland's perceived marginalised ('low') position in transnational circuits of styles and commodities, the 'gap between globally tweaked desires and local scarcities' was never *really* filled. Any performance was always at risk of falling short, and at the end of every failed attempt of self-fashioning or stylistic slip, I was often reminded, were shame (*pöc*) and embarrassment (*buɔar*). The centrality of these sentiments in governing the way people engaged with markets, commodities and styles, was another manifestation of the changing nature of social relations and communal priorities at the urban frontier. Hutchinson described how rural Nuer communities in the 1980s felt that the expansion of state bureaucracy and the establishment of chiefs' courts 'had the effect of undercutting the sense of shame formerly associated with acts of theft (*kuël*), incest (*ruaal*), adultery (*dhöm*), and other serious errors (*dueri*).'[79] Instead of shame and embarrassment, she observed, interpersonal relations came to be governed by the power of fear (*dual*). In town, it seemed, these sentiments have emerged in a new context, governing people's attempts to keep up with a vaguely defined and constantly evolving global hierarchy of styles and commodities.

Knowing all the tricks: Urban wisdoms, rural doubts?

In early 2019, a group of Nuer youths recorded a song titled 'Kɔn Gaat Newland' ('We are the Sons of Newland'). I first heard it being played from a small shop in Newland. The song, I learned, was recorded in a small studio in the neighbourhood, run by a member of the Church of God whom I knew well. The singers themselves were not members of this church, but the owner of the studio gave me a copy of the song and put me in touch with one of the artists—a man in his late twenties whose stage name was Coco Man. The song (more than six minutes long) was a self-portrait of the 'sons of

[77] Comaroff and Comaroff, 'Law and Disorder', 14.
[78] Newell, *The Modernity Bluff*, 175-81.
[79] Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 40-1.

Newland': four verses of rap and a catchy hip-hop chorus in which they praise their own sophistication, smartness and proficiency in urban lifestyle. With the exception of a few English and Amharic terms, the song was in Nuer. Below is its chorus, followed by selected quotes from some of the verses:[80]

> We surpass [*läny*] people in wisdom [*pël*]—we are the sons of Newland! We surpass people in thinking [*cär*]—we are the sons of Newland! We surpass people in learning [*gɔ̱ar*]—we are the sons of Newland! We know the lifestyle of the town [*ciaŋ rɛk*]—we are the sons of Newland! There are few things we cannot do—we are the sons of Newland!

> Come to *Gambella* in peace, come to the big land [*wec*] in peace. You—do not mess yourself up in embarrassment [*/cu rɔdu puɔl kɛ buɔar*]. […] The wisdom we have, there is no one that can miss it. *We are superstars, hip-hop, football,* and *basketball, nigga!*

> […] I am a son of Newland, whose thinking is not bent [*mi /känɛ cɑ̱ɑ̱rɛ gɔ̱ŋ*]. Newland has taught us good wisdom that has no tricks in it [*mi thiɛlɛ rɛydɛ cɑ̱ɑ̱p*]. […] [If] you come talking, we will do it [talk], [if] you come in war, it [the war] will be fought. We are very smart: we 'know' [have shaken off] all the tricks [*cɑ̱ɑ̱p diaal cɑ̱ kɔ kɛ tɛŋ*].

> […] We grow up in wisdom in Newland, we surpass people in thinking. There is nothing we cannot do, we are respected, nothing can deceive us [*kɔ wän*]. Our thinking will dazzle [*gäy*] you. Look, the son of Newland studies and stays long [*wɛlɛ*; stays long in town getting used to its lifestyle],[81] there is no man that surpasses us.

> We surpass people in smartness. All of us, we do all things with endurance [*kɛ dhiääl*]. We love ourselves together all of us, there is nothing we cannot do. Nothing can deceive us.

[80] Coco Man gave me the lyrics of the entire song when we met. The quotes that appear here were translated with the assistance of Buay Tut. Italics indicate words sang in English.
[81] A young man who 'got stuck' in the town—studying, working, perhaps not getting married—was known as a *thawɛl*. This noun derived from the Arabic word for lengthening, lingering or delaying at a certain place for too long (*ṭawwal*). Consequently, the Nuer verb *wɛl* came to describe the process adaptation to urban life.

> Who can surpass us? […] Our brains overflow. *Hip-hop* started where? We are the sons of Newland. Urban lifestyle started where? We are the sons of Newland. *Swag* started where? We are the sons of Newland. Courting girls started where? We are the sons of Newland.

It seems fitting that Coco Man and his colleagues chose to express themselves through hip-hop, a style known for its claim to authenticity and to 'keeping it real'.[82] They claim not only autochthony (to Newland) and originality (in their articulation of its style), but also to be entirely 'on top of it' in an environment, so it seems, full of threats of deception, manipulation and confusion. Their song resonates with other descriptions I heard in Newland of the 'son of the town' (*gat rɛk*): gentle, cannot be confused, very smart and educated, prefers to avoid fighting, and ignores insults because he is above them and therefore does not care. But when a *gat rɛk* goes to the village, I was also told, he feels out of place. The food is not of his liking; he misses his diverse urban social milieu; his cloths are inappropriate. His rural relatives regard him with suspicion. They see him as a *wän wän*, that is, a crafty, sophisticated trickster—like the serpent from the Garden of Eden.[83]

The ideal *gat rɛk* is someone who cannot be 'deceived', because his wisdom is unmatchable, and yet may be seen as practicing trickery. This reoccurring portrayal tells us a great deal about the meaning of education in Newland and more generally in the eyes of Nuer communities, as well as about the uncertainties of life at the urban frontier and engagement with 'governments', schools and the world 'out there'. To be sure, these discourses resonate with urban discourses observed elsewhere, in larger and much more cosmopolitan cities. Newell describes a similar set of labels in the Ivorian urban slang language Nouchi: an opposition between *gaou* and *yere*, with a *yere* being a proper modern urbanite who 'cannot be scammed' and the *gaou* being 'someone easily duped'.[84] Urban wisdom and anxieties of deception are often associated with the ability to navigate successfully an economy and a social sphere of illicit activities, crime and violence.[85] But

[82] Weiss, *Street Dreams*, 197-221.
[83] The serpent is described in Genesis 3:1 as 'more crafty than any of the wild animals…' In the Nuer Bible this is translated as: '*lɛ̱y mi pɛl kɛ pël mi wän wän rɛy lɛ̱ɛ̱yni dial…*' A thief is also known as a *wään*, though more commonly used in Gambella in this context was the word *cuär*.
[84] Newell, *The Modernity Bluff*, 11-4.
[85] See also, Di Nunzio, *The Act of Living*.

to understand the enduring relevance of these concerns in Gambella, we need to examine their history in the context of Nuer society and South Sudanese statecraft.

Together with the quest for knowledge and new skills, scepticism, suspicion and doubt have long been a feature of the urban-rural encounter in South Sudan and its frontierlands. For if the encounter with new actors beyond the perimeters of one's community always represented an opportunity to gain useful skills and expertise, it also exposed one's vulnerability to manipulation by those perceived to possess greater (but also mysterious and unknown) capacities. Hutchinson shows how modern education and literacy, in particular, were both admired and feared by rural Nuer communities in the 1970s and 1980s. She discusses the sense of vulnerability these felt vis-à-vis the powerful but unintelligible world of the 'paper', associated with the *turuɔ̱k* (educated foreigners), which symbolised, for rural Nuer, 'their simultaneous dependence on and estrangement from the powers of the government.'[86] 'Now the *turuɔ̱k* know people by a way we cannot know,' she quotes a man complaining. Literacy and knowledge of 'paper', in this context, represented not only the ability to 'tap the powers of government,' but also the possibility of being able to see through its deception and manipulation strategies.[87]

Over the past decades, such sentiments of vulnerability, inferiority and humiliation have instigated and sustained an extraordinary race for modern education. The history of Newland sketched above, as well as the life histories of educated Nuer in Gambella, clearly demonstrate how access to education has been a central factor in shaping people's engagement with states and their repeated movements across the international border, or from urban spaces to refugee camps and towns (as well as in between the latter two). When asked why they came to live in Newland, almost all residents of the neighbourhood gave the same answer, regardless of the period in which they migrated to the town: they came there to study, or to accompany other family members who were students. 'But there are only students here!' was the most common reaction I heard when I said I am conducting research in Newland. When asked to narrate their own biographies, people in Newland consistently framed their lives not around wars or political upheavals but around

[86] Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 283.
[87] Ibid., 283-5.

their quest for education.[88] Moreover, virtually the only activity associated with life in town that was widely accepted as justifying the postponement of marriage and the establishment of a family, was education.[89]

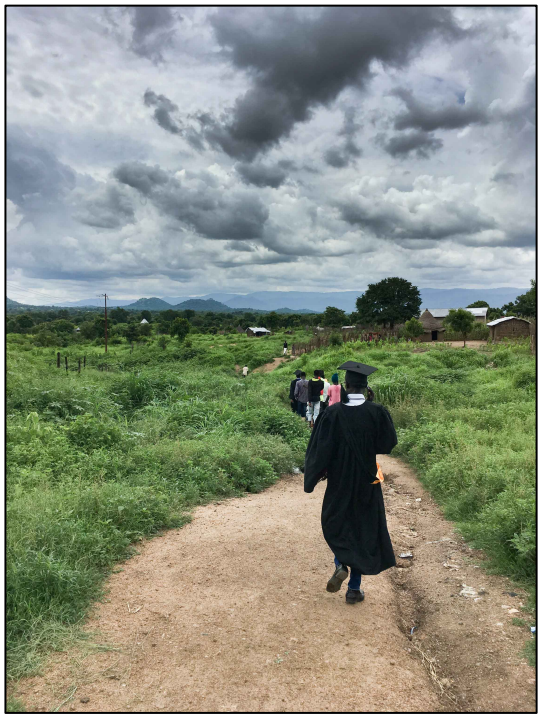


Figure 8. Walking towards Newland's outskirts to attend a family graduation party, after a graduation ceremony in the centre of town.

National exams and graduation ceremonies were arguably the most important events in Newland's calendar, impacting the movement and plans of people throughout the region. When Gambella University held its graduation ceremony, hundreds of cheering family members travelled from their villages and refugee camps and women were dancing and chanting outside Gambella's municipality hall for as long as the ceremony inside proceeded. Framed portraits of (primarily) men wearing gowns and mortarboards—often prepared in local photo studios weeks in advance before graduation ceremonies—decorated tukuls and mud houses across the neighbourhood. At the graduation party of

[88] In one rather striking case, a friend with no military experience whatsoever told me how he tried to join the rebels in 2014 in Nasir solely because he hoped that when the rebels capture Malakal he would be able to return to his family's house and salvage his Sudanese high school certificates that he left behind when the war broke out. On education and migration, see also Carver and Ruach Guok, *The Role of Transnational Networks*.

[89] This point was driven home to me, naturally, when I realised that being a student was the only acceptable explanation that I could provide in Gambella for the otherwise alarming fact that I was not married at the age of 28.

the Lou Community Association in Newland, for instance, the numbers of Lou Nuer students graduating with degrees and diplomas was read aloud, before a long series of church and community representatives came forward to congratulate them. 'Now, in every city of Ethiopia you find a Nuer lecturer,' Jok Kier Jal, himself a dedicated mature student in Gambella University, once told me with pride. 'In every city of Ethiopia, from South to North of Ethiopia! No city with a university without a Nuer lecturer!'

There are several ways to interpret Newland's education fervour. At the most simplistic level, education was obviously seen as an avenue for individual material improvement. Indeed, youths in Newland commonly hoped that a degree would land them a job in the government or an NGO, in either Ethiopia or South Sudan—a hope that was becoming increasingly unrealistic given that there were clearly not enough job opportunities to serve the skyrocketing numbers of fresh graduates in the region. Once they have 'something in their hands', the argument often went, they would be able to marry. Hence also the popularity of degrees in technical fields that were seen as more sought-after in the job market. At another level, there was also clearly a sense of both personal and communal pride associated with access to education, as Jok's vivid imagery of an educated Nuer vanguard taking over Ethiopia's education system suggests. Accumulating degrees was certainly a matter of prestige, and, when it came to postgraduate studies, also an index of access to wealth and links with people in positions of power in government institutions or NGO.

But there was another, not unrelated, aspect to this quest for modern education. As the song of the 'sons of Newland' indicates, with its emphasis on deception and trickery, education also seemed to promise the rather vaguely defined intellectual capacity to be self-aware, in control and undeceivable. Hence the common description of the ideal 'son of the town' as someone who—having supposedly 'ascended' to the level of sophistication and intellectual 'potency' of the *turuɔk*—can see through deception and tricks but also deceive and trick others who are less educated. Hence also the salience of the labels of 'fake' and 'original' associated with modernity: the ideal educated urbanite, clearly, could tell the difference between the two.[90] The irony in Newland, given its perceived 'low' position in the imagined hierarchy of 'progress', was that the ideal of

[90] Newell, *The Modernity Bluff*, 12.

feeling undeceivable was, indeed, an ideal. For even the education made available in Gambella, based exclusively on copying and memorisation of reproduced 'handouts' and textbooks with little local resonance, was largely an exercise in performance and always suspected of being significantly inferior to that available to people elsewhere.[91]

Figure 9. Paintings on the wall of a primary school in Newland.

The imagined hierarchy of intellectual sophistication—in which the rural, illiterate and uneducated was associated with ignorance and susceptibility to manipulation, whereas the educated urbanite was undeceivable—was illustrated well by the debate in Gambella around the meaning of the *gaar* (facial marking or 'scarification') and its rejection by educated urbanites. Hutchinson described the emergence of a class of educated young men who rejected the rite of initiation and scarification in the 1980s. The 'bull-boys' (*tut dhɔgali*, sing., *tuut dhɔgal*), as they were called, occupied an ambiguous position in Nuer society, being sexually mature but not fully recognised as 'men' (*wutni*, sing., *wut*) as they were uninitiated. Hutchinson identified the rejection of the *gaar* as an attempt to

[91] Gambella University was one of the poorest and newest public universities in the country, formally operating in English, a language many of its students did not speak. The massive expansion of Ethiopia's higher education system came with a dramatic decline in its quality. See: L. Reisberg and L. Rumbley, 'Ethiopia: The Dilemmas of Expansion', *International Higher Education,* (2010), ; G. A. Akalu, 'Higher Education in Ethiopia: Expansion, Quality Assurance and Institutional Autonomy', *Higher Education Quarterly,* 68 (2014), 394-415.

subscribe to a certain Pan-African or South Sudanese identity.[92] In Gambella, Dereje described how the practice was framed as 'backward' by educated Nuer at least since the 1960s, and several campaigns led by such elites led to its practical extinction within Ethiopia, though it certainly continued across the border in South Sudan.[93]

Interestingly, men in Newland have eventually turned the debate on the status of uninitiated men on its head by altering the historical meaning and origin of the *gaar* altogether. Among both young and old in Newland, it was considered an (almost) undisputed historical fact that the *gaar* was a British invention, introduced by the colonial government in order to allow it to easily differentiate between various southern Sudanese peoples. The specific context in which the British decided to introduce the practice changed between different versions of this myth, which has been circulating and evolving in Gambella for decades. But the underlying message was similar: it associated the *gaar* with British dishonesty and Nuer ignorance. Clearly, in this narrative the *gaar* no longer symbolised definite manhood, but neither was it merely a sign of unfashionable 'tribalism'. Instead, it was an embarrassing testament to one's (and one's community's) susceptibility to being taken advantage of by the more educated—in this case, the British, whose characterisation as deceptive and treacherous was a common theme in many of the local myths about the colonial period.[94]

Welcome to Newland

Newland's history, I proposed earlier, encapsulates the changing nature of engagements between, on the one side, the borderlands' eastern Nuer communities, and, on the other side, the state and the cultural influences associated with it. In local memory, the coming of the Ethiopian 'government' to what is now Gambella is entangled in the events of the Second World War, though the foundations of the town itself were established decades earlier. As an urban frontier, Gambella town's history is not radically different from that of other urban locales in South Sudan: a colonial post dominated by foreign

[92] Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 270-8.
[93] Dereje, *Playing Different Games*, 169-71.
[94] Consider, for example, the story mentioned earlier about Jack Nguan killing Chuol Joak. One version of the story about how Gambella got its name, recounted to me by a youth in Newland, suggests that the British duped Nuer cattle traders and gave them only half (*gäm*) of the maize (*bɛl*) they deserved when they came to the town to sell their cows (Notes, 1 July 2019).

administrators, merchants and soldiers attracting a small number of local entrepreneurs and diplomats but gradually developing into a town in the final decades of the twentieth century as state institutions expand and a growing number of civilians appropriate them and seek to benefit from the services and knowledge they promise. What rendered Newland unique was its simultaneous position not just as a local urban frontier but also a frontier between states, a place of refuge, and an increasingly central hub that connected dispersed Nuer communities from around the world.

Thus, of all the freshness and independence its name conveyed, Newland was a place that hardly made sense on its own. Despite being a marginalised settlement outside a small town in one of the most inaccessible and peripheral areas of Ethiopia, Newland's history has been shaped by developments and forces that stretched across the region and the globe. The purpose of this chapter was to recount this history from a local perspective—from the frontier. Exploring the history of what is otherwise an unknown and perhaps unremarkable settlement offered an opportunity to delve into the experience of being 'in-between' the 'village' and the 'city' at a peripheral frontier zone, or, as some people in Newland would have it, the experience of living in a space where 'culture' is 'already mixed', 'history' is at best murky and at worst entirely inaccessible, and yet 'modernity' feels like a distant illusion. Scholars observed that urbanisation, rather than a linear process of cultural change, often requires 'straddling' urban and rural ways of life and economies and dealing with various material insecurities and moral ambiguities.[95] Highlighting the central role played by education and global networks in Newland's development in recent decades, this chapter also identified a salient concern with embarrassment and deception in local discourses on urban life—a sense of epistemological uncertainty.

This concern is a testament to the enduring importance of knowledge as a commodity in the frontierlands—a commodity that is both sought and suspected. It also demonstrates once again that despite the fact that the democratisation of the urban frontier has blurred the empirical distinction between rural and urban ways of life, the imagined dichotomy between these two spheres continued to be upheld, serving as a cultural, temporal and

[95] H. Englund, 'The Village in the City, the City in the Village: Migrants in Lilongwe', *Journal of Southern African Studies,* 28 (2002), 137-154; Trefon, 'Hinges and Fringes'; Leonardi, *Dealing with Government*, 148-58.

moral frame of reference for a growing number of people living in a 'kaleidoscopic' world in-between their reflections.[96] Navigating the urban frontier, benefitting from its opportunities and resources, gaining new knowledge, and skilfully performing 'modernity' and global connectivity without being outwitted and 'messing yourself up in embarrassment' was certainly a valued skill in Newland. But drifting too far into the urban world, one also risked losing touch with one's community and becoming a morally corrupt, selfish trickster,[97] for urban 'wisdom' also required proficiency in the art of manipulation and deceit. In the following chapters we see how religious practices, ideas and institutions emerged and evolved out of the various encounters afforded by the frontier, and how they both responded to, and were fuelled by, the moral and epistemological ambiguities and concerns of inhabiting it.

[96] De Boeck and Plissart, *Kinshasa*, 17-8.
[97] See also C. Leonardi, '"Liberation" or Capture: Youth in Between "*Hakuma*", and "Home" During Civil War and Its Aftermath in Southern Sudan', *African Affairs,* 106 (2007), 391-412.

Chapter 2

Frontier entrepreneurship: A genealogy of Nuer Messianic Judaism

Interactions and encounters at the urban frontier and with the fringes of the state, we have seen, offered borderland communities access to new skills and knowledge but were also underpinned and shaped by a sense of vulnerability and concerns with deception and manipulation. Over the past century, the dissemination and circulation of knowledge of Christianity was increasingly embedded in these encounters, and it travelled, was picked up and used in unexpected ways with the democratisation of the urban frontier, as the movement of individuals accelerated and expanded and the diversity of sources of knowledge increased. This chapter explores the emergence of the Nuer Messianic Jewish movement and situates it within the broader context of the rise of Evangelical Christianity and the proliferation of churches among eastern Nuer communities. By presenting the institutional genealogy of Nuer Messianic Judaism, it shows how this faith emerged out of the particular opportunities and encounters offered by the frontier and how it spoke to longstanding concerns with deception and fakery.

A historical account of the emergence of Messianic Judaism out of Evangelical groups and among eastern Nuer communities is of broader significance to our understanding of the history of Christianity in the Ethiopian-South Sudanese borderlands. In the growing body of literature on Pentecostalism and Evangelical Christianity in Ethiopia, Gambella is barely a footnote,[1] and the history of Sabbatarian movements in Ethiopia in general and in Gambella specifically is largely an unwritten one. This is ironic because data from the

[1] On evangelical Christianity and missionaries, see: O. M. Eide, *Revolution & Religion in Ethiopia: The Growth & Persecution of the Mekane Yesus Church, 1974-1985.* (Oxford, 2000); T. Eshete, *The Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia: Resistance and Resilience* (Waco, 2009). On Pentecostalism, see: J. Haustein, *Writing Religious History: The Historiography of Ethiopian Pentecostalism* (Wiesbaden, 2011); J. Haustein, 'Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in Ethiopia: A Historical Introduction to a Largely Unexplored Movement', *Multidisciplinary Views on the Horn of Africa,* 1 (2014), 109-127. Other studies on evangelical Christianity in southern and south-western Ethiopia include: B. L. Fargher, *The Origins of the New Churches Movement in Southern Ethiopia: 1927-1944* (Leiden, 1996); S. Grenstedt, *Ambaricho and Shonkolla: From Local Independent Church to the Evangelical Mainstream in Ethiopia: The Origins of the Mekane Yesus Church in Kambata Hadiya*, PhD thesis (Uppsala University, 2000); D. Freeman, 'Pentecostalism in a Rural Context: Dynamics of Religion and Development in Southwest Ethiopia', *PentecoStudies,* 12 (2013), 231-249; T. Eshete, 'The Early Charismatic Movement in the Ethiopian Kale Heywet Church', *PentecoStudies,* 12 (2013), 162–182-162–182; E. Egeland, *Christianity, Generation and Narrative: Religious Conversion and Change in Sidama, Ethiopia, 1974–2012*, PhD thesis (Uppsala University, 2016).

census of 2007 suggests that Gambella was, in fact, the region with the largest proportion of Protestants in the country.[2] The rise of Evangelical Christianity and Pentecostalism in Gambella followed a different trajectory than it did in the highlands and other parts of south-western Ethiopia. While Gambella's religious landscape was influenced by developments elsewhere in Ethiopia, it was equally shaped by religious dynamics in southern Sudan as well as by the migration of Nuer communities around the East African region and the resettlement of members of these communities in the US since the 1990s.

Institutions, extraversion and churches in the frontierlands

A detailed history of the rise of Christianity among the Nuer, too, is yet to be written. Existing accounts, though illuminating, are partial, fragmented and outdated. Falge's and Hutchinson's most recent works that deal with Christianity among eastern Nuer communities are based on research conducted in the late 1990s or early 2000s in South Sudan and Ethiopia. Hutchinson has identified a general sense of confusion and a growing competition over resources in the 1990s due to the growing number of Christian denominations supported by foreign donors.[3] Falge has identified similar trends and documented how support from the diaspora led to quarrels among communities over leadership positions in churches.[4] Both have sought to explain Nuer conversion to Christianity in the context of displacement and war.[5] Neither were concerned, however, with the differences between Nuer churches or their institutional history, and neither makes any reference to the Church of God, which was only established in Gambella in 1999, or any of its offshoots, which emerged later.

While this chapter does lay out some of the key theological doctrines of the churches it explores, its focus is on churches as institutions. As mentioned already, scholarship that deals with the appeal of certain religious movements in Africa in general and South Sudan

[2] In Gambella 71.1% of the population were recorded as Protestants. In Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples', 55.5%. See: J. Haustein and T. Østebø, 'EPRDF's Revolutionary Democracy and Religious Plurality: Islam and Christianity in Post-Derg Ethiopia', *Journal of Eastern African Studies,* 5 (2011), 758.
[3] Hutchinson, 'Spiritual Fragments'.
[4] Falge, 'The Ethiopianisation'; C. Falge, 'The Effects of Nuer Transnational Churches on the Homeland Communities', *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development,* 42 (2013), 171-205.
[5] Falge, 'Countering Rupture'; Falge, 'The Cultural Resilience'; Falge, *The Global Nuer*; Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*; Hutchinson, 'A Curse from God?'; Hutchinson, 'Spiritual Fragments'.

in particular often focuses on their social and political 'message' and practices and links their rise to various material and moral crises to which they are understood as providing an antidote. What such explanations tend to overlook is some of the more mundane and perhaps less spiritual aspects of Christian life, and the basic empirical fact that churches are also institutions. This is significant, from a historical point of view, because it implies that their rise and fall depends not only on ritual and doctrine but also on entrepreneurship, the accumulation and distribution of resources, the development of some bureaucratic structures, the distribution of responsibilities and formal positions of authority, and the organised transfer and recording of all sorts of knowledge.[6] To properly historicise and understand the public role of Christianity in Gambella, we have to take seriously these institutional aspects of religious life.

The first parts of this chapter present a history of the rise and spread of Christianity in the Ethiopian-South Sudanese frontierlands by focusing on the movement of knowledge and people within this space, and, consequently, the local institutionalisation of Christianity. It starts with the arrival of Presbyterian missionaries to southern Sudan and describes the incorporation of Nuer into the larger bureaucracies of the Evangelical Church of Mekane Yesus and the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Ethiopia up to the 1980s. As we shall see, disseminating knowledge of Christianity and developing church institutions gradually became an entrepreneurial strategy and a viable career path for those individuals whose life trajectories straddled the urban-rural divide. In a process that resonates with developments in other parts of Africa that witnessed the rapid spread of born-again Christianity, by the 1990s, starting a church in Gambella emerged as a popular form of frontier entrepreneurship and 'a means of access not only to a new form of personal accumulation, but to a world of transnational connections, images, and imaginaries.'[7]

Without diminishing the significant changes that shaped this phenomenon over the past century, which are explored in this chapter, we can think of the entrepreneurs who initiated the establishment of new churches and the spread of Christian knowledge among their kin as part of a much older tradition of trade, interlocution and exchange across frontiers in this region. As Leonardi describes, even before the coming of the colonial

[6] See also Robbins, 'The Globalization', 130-1.
[7] Marshall, *Political Spiritualities*, 181-2.

state, South Sudan's 'political economy of knowledge' encouraged and rewarded the acquisition of useful skills and substances through migration and engagement with neighbours and foreigners.[8] Knowledge, objects and techniques that could be used to communicate with spirits or God, control the weather, guarantee the health and fertility of humans and animals were particularly valuable. Johnson has shown how migrations and interaction with new peoples during the nineteenth century also led to the adoption of new forms of magic, medicines and spirits among Nuer communities in the Upper Nile.[9] Non-Christian Nuer today openly acknowledge the Dinka origin of some of the spirits they worship, a theme we return to in subsequent chapters.

Christians today will undoubtedly draw a clear line between the 'pagan' practices their communities adopted in the past and the 'true religion' they 'found' more recently, but it was into this economy of knowledge exchange, appropriation and creolisation that Christianity entered when it first appeared in the region. As we shall see, from an early stage and even before settling among Nuer, missionaries attracted curious interlocutors, people in need and diplomats who sought to benefit from what they had to offer and entered into relationships of exchange with them. But if early encounters with missionaries took place in relative proximity to home and were not deemed particularly attractive for many Nuer, by the final decades of the twentieth century Christian knowledge and institutions became valued assets to be 'exchanged' through remarkably far-flung and unpredictable interconnection. From a *longue durée* perspective, therefore, the frontier engagements this chapter describes can be understood as a form of what Bayart called 'extraversion',[10] in which one ventures into the outside world, or at least the world beyond one's community, in order to access external resources (including religious techniques and expertise) as an entrepreneurial political strategy.[11]

After examining the proliferation of Nuer born-again churches from the 1990s, the chapter describes how the Church of God was established in Gambella (and later South Sudan) by Nuer who previously sought refuge in Kenya and joined it there. The Nuer

[8] Leonardi, *Dealing with Government*, 21-40.
[9] Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 65-70.
[10] J.-F. Bayart, 'Africa in the World: A History of Extraversion', *African Affairs,* 99 (2000), 217-267.
[11] Bayart's notion of extraversion has been applied by scholars studying the spread of Christianity and Pentecostalism elsewhere in Africa. See the discussion in: B. Meyer, 'Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches', *Annual Review of Anthropology,* 33 (2004), 462-3.

founders of the Church of God were Adventists before joining it. It was the Seventh-day Adventist Church that introduced a fundamentalist discourse of authenticity and doctrinal purity to Gambella's Nuer, and this discourse, ironically, later led many of its members to leave it in favour of Messianism. After being established in Gambella, however, the Church of God too fragmented into at least four major Nuer Messianic groups over the past decade. To get a sense of what Messianics in Newland meant when they insisted that they are the members of the true church or followers of the true faith, and why this was important, we also need to understand what 'church history' meant for them. The final section of the chapter therefore explores the interest of Messianics in the institutional history of their churches. Looking at both the institutional history of Nuer Messianic Judaism and the debates around it in Gambella, that we start encountering the entanglement of this faith in questions of biblical authenticity, a theme that is further developed in the next chapter.

From imported knowledge to a community-wide religion

The Anglo-Egyptian government divided the territories of southern Sudan between different foreign church missions and assigned the Sobat area to the American Presbyterian Mission. The Mission's first post was established in Doleib Hill, in 1902. From the start, evangelism was inseparable from the missionaries' medical and educational efforts, forming part of a wider vision of social and cultural transformation. 'Our primary task among these people,' wrote Don McClure, an American missionary who worked in Doleib Hill the 1930s and later among the Anuak in Gambella, 'is to lead them to saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, but hand in hand with that program we must teach them to improve their social and economic standard of living.'[12] By 1913 the station in Doleib Hill had '200 acres of land available for cultivation, a vegetable garden, a fruit orchard, selected cattle and sheep and goats, even some ostriches, a windmill for irrigation, a store, and industrial buildings.'[13] The products were sold or exchanged for livestock. 'It was no uncommon sight to see a crowd of Dinkas or Nuers [sic],' an

[12] Quoted in C. Partee, *Adventure in Africa: The Story of Don Mcclure* (Grand Rapids, 1990), 64.
[13] C. R. Watson, *The Sorrow and Hope of the Egyptian Sudan: A Survey of Missionary Conditions and Methods of Work in the Egyptian Sudan* (Philadelphia, 1913), 164.

American missionary described in 1913, 'accompanied by Shilluk buyers, coming with their stock to trade for durra.'[14]

Though located among Shilluk communities, Nuer and Dinka from further afield also frequented the missionaries' clinic in Doleib Hill, and rumours about the healing capabilities of the foreigners spread: 'A Nuer with a skin disease came. When he was healed, he went home—then returned several weeks later with 30 patients.'[15] In 1912 the mission expanded, and an additional post was established among Gaa-jiok Nuer communities in Nasir. When the first Presbyterian missionaries—Rev. Elbert McCreery and Dr. Thomas Lambie—arrived in Nasir, it is said that they were received by local Nuer 'chiefs' who already knew them and had witnessed their medical work in Doleib Hill.[16] Nonetheless, the mission in Nasir faced various logistical challenges in its early days, and the skills and intentions of the missionaries were not necessarily well received. James Gatdet, a prominent leader in Newland's Mekane Yesus church, writes:

> When they first arrived, the Nuer were somewhat suspicious of them, until they were able to give physical healing to many sufferers. […] Many people who came for the treatment were healed from physical sickness and accepted Christ through Lambie's medical assistance. They were able to witness to their friends and neighbors. In spite of this, Lambie had faced many challenges in his work at Nasir. People to whom he offered medical assistance were strong traditionalists. They did not fully accept the help from the medicine brought to them by the missionaries. They did not even trust the medicine.[17]

Dr. Lambie left Nasir to Ethiopia in 1919, travelling through Gambella up the highlands to Sayo, where he opened a clinic and a mission which later evolved into the Evangelical Church Bethel.[18] Medical work in Nasir continued, however, and from 1916, the mission also established an education programme. The school in Nasir was rudimentary in its

[14] Ibid., 168.
[15] W. B. Anderson, 'Thomas A. Lambie: Missionary Pioneer in Sudan and Ethiopia, 1907-1942', in *Gateway to the Heart of Africa: Missionary Pioneers in Sudan*, ed. by F. Pierli, M. T. Ratti, and A. Wheeler (Nairobi, 1998), 129.
[16] Ibid., 132.
[17] J. Gatdet Tang, *The Rise of Christianity Among the Eastern Jikany Nuer*, BA thesis (Mekane Yesus Theological Seminary, 2000), 17.
[18] Lambie established a close relationship with Emperor Haile Selassie due to his respected medical skills, and ultimately continued his work in Ethiopia under the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM). See Donham, *Marxist Modern*; Eshete, 'The Sudan Interior Mission'; Fargher, *The Origins.*

early years, and the missionaries were generally impressed that local Nuer 'were not interested' in what they had to offer.[19] The education programme nonetheless slowly expanded during the 1920: as part of a colonial policy that relied on missions to provide education in southern Sudan, British officials 'sent' local boys to the school and subsidised it. From the 1930s, a growing number of children joined it 'voluntarily', and the mission even opened a separate school for girls.[20] Baptisms in Nasir started as early as 1919, but Evans-Pritchard estimated that by 1940 there were only 214 Nuer Protestants—'easily the lowest figure for any of the major peoples of the southern Sudan.'[21] The first Nuer pastor—Moses Kuach Nyoat, who was educated as a boy, and later taught, in the mission's school in Nasir—was not ordained before 1958.[22]

By the time the Sudanese government expelled all foreign missionaries in 1964, Christianity was associated with a small class of educated men, but hardly gained ground among eastern Nuer communities at large. In the following decades, however, against the background of displacement and war, it gained remarkable momentum. Pastor Moses Kuach was arrested by the Sudanese government, and soon after he was released, fled to Ethiopia.[23] There, he joined American missionary Charles Jordan (locally known as Manpiny) who relocated from southern Sudan to Adura, inside Gambella but close to the border, and established a station with his wife, Mary Alice. Neither Charles nor Mary were theologians; they ran an agricultural development programme and a popular medical clinic. Visitors and patients, however, were taught the gospel in Adura and encouraged to travel back to their communities and evangelise (*naŋä Ruac Kuɔth raar*, literally, 'take the Word of God out') using images, leaflets, recordings, hymns and translations of some parts of the New Testament.[24] Moses Kuach was the mission's only pastor, and also travelled to Pi-Lual, where Nuer refugees were initially settled, to preach and baptise there.[25]

[19] Letter by Mrs. Ilda Smith, available in: Sanderson and Sanderson, *Education, Religion and Politics*, 449.
[20] Ibid., 97-8, 157-8, 192.
[21] Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 48-9.
[22] E. C. Vandevort, *A Leopard Tamed* (New York, 1968), 78.
[23] Ibid., 216.
[24] Gatdet Tang, *The Rise of Christianity*, 32.
[25] Vandevort, *A Leopard Tamed*, 216.

Falge and Hutchinson attributed the dramatic spread of Christianity among eastern Nuer communities during the 1970s to a political atmosphere in which conversion to Christianity became a political act of resistance against the Sudanese government and its Islamisation agenda, as well as to a growing Nuer interest in modern education and in the healing Christianity appeared to promise.[26] The problem with these explanations is that it is not always clear that the dynamics they identify were the causes for the spread of Christianity rather than its outcome. What they downplay is another crucial historical process that accelerated during the 1960s and shaped the way Christian knowledge travelled and Churches operated in Nuer society: the emergence of a substantial class of school-educated Christians who assumed positions in churches (either as pastors or, and more often, volunteer evangelists), and were eager to spread the Christian message among their communities, drawing on their new knowledge and ties with international or national church institutions as a new strategy of entrepreneurship.[27]

Notably, this process took place during—and arguably *due to*—a period of minimal direct interaction with foreign missionaries. By 1977, following the coming to power of the Derg, foreign missionaries left Gambella as well. Already in 1973, however, four Nuer pastors were ordained, and oversaw new Presbyterian congregations in Nuer villages in Gambella and the refugee camps.[28] In addition, both Anuak and Nuer Presbyterian churches in Gambella were incorporated into greater Ethiopian bureaucracies: they became part of Bethel Church, which maintained its contact with the Presbyterian church in the US and was itself integrated into the larger Ethiopian Evangelical Church of Mekane Yesus.[29] On the ground, the distinction between the Presbyterian Sudanese churches, which organised as the Presbyterian Church of Sudan after the expulsion of missionaries from Sudan,[30] and the Ethiopian churches, formally, part Mekane Yesus, remained blurred. Nuer moved freely between them as they migrated. But being part of a national bureaucratic structure meant being part of an organisation with at least some salaried positions, as well as global and national ties.

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[26] Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 312-7; Falge, 'The Cultural Resilience', 207-212.
[27] Compare, on conversion among Uduk in the late 1960s: James, *The Listening Ebony*.
[28] These were: John Kang, Peter Lual, Peter Pal and Moses Hoth. See: Gatdet Tang, *The Rise of Christianity*, 33.
[29] Interviews with Rachel (American missionary in Gambella, 1 August 2019), Ding Gach (20 December 2018) and Pastor Matthew (5 December 2018).
[30] R. Werner, W. Anderson, and A. Wheeler, *Day of Devastation, Day of Contentment: The History of the Sudanese Church Across 2000 Years* (Nairobi, 2000), 345.

Similar processes of institutionalisation and localisation of churches took place across southern Sudan in the decade following the end of Sudan's first civil war and the 1972 Addis Ababa Peace Agreement. Like the Presbyterian Church, other southern churches also set up independent local institutions after the expulsion of missionaries, and in 1965, the Sudan Council of Churches was founded, as an ecumenical organisation uniting most of Sudan's Christian organisations. In the 1970s, after the first civil war came to an end, the Council played a central role in attracting funds from international Christian donors for reconstruction and aid.[31] Meanwhile, churches in Sudanese towns and Gambella became popular social centres for the growing numbers of youths who left their villages and communities in search of education. The absence of missionaries notwithstanding, therefore, the popular association of Christianity with education was consolidated. By the 1980s, whether in Sudan or Ethiopia, it became common for baptised school-educated men to become volunteer evangelists within their communities.[32]

Sudan's second civil war and the social disruption and mass displacement into refugee camps that it brought about only accelerated these trends. This is not, however, simply because the war caused remarkable suffering and uncertainty, but because with fewer opportunities for education in southern Sudan, on the one hand, and the opening of refugee camps, on the other, it again created the perfect environment for the young educated elite to share its knowledge with the wider community. Many of the children who came to Itang refugee camp in Gambella sought education. In the camp, under the auspices of the SPLA, churches assumed an unprecedented role in public life. Several Sudanese denominations cooperated and worked with the SPLA, which effectively controlled the camps, and coordinated not only prayers, rallies, mass baptisms and celebrations,[33] but also the provision of services and aid.[34] As far as most people were concerned, churches provided education, to the extent that 'church members and

[31] Ibid., 342.
[32] As Robbins argues, processes of 'localisation' of churches and religious revival support each other and are crucial for transforming Christianity from the domain of a small vanguard of educated elites into a community-wide religion. J. Robbins, *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society* (Berkeley, 2004), 123-124.
[33] Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe*, 99-113.
[34] A. De Waal and R. Omaar, *Great Expectations: The Civil Roles of the Churches in Southern Sudan* (London, 1995).

education became virtually inseparable.'[35] According to one estimate, some 12,000 students attended schools 'run jointly by the churches and the SPLA' in Itang.[36]

Despite its supposed commitment to Marxism and its strategic alliance with the socialist Derg regime in Ethiopia, by the late 1980s, the SPLA leadership came to cultivate a close and mutually beneficial relationship with southern churches. In 1989, the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC) was established as an ecumenical umbrella uniting several southern denominations, both Catholic and Protestant, operating in territories controlled by the SPLA. One of the main purposes of this new structure was to enable both southern churches in rebel-held areas and the SPLA to access donor funding. Nominally the 'spiritual wing of the movement' and practically a new channel to access international relief, the NSCC incorporated southern churches into the resource extraction machinery of the SPLA.[37] For church leaders, the benefit of this arrangement was access to resources (though under the supervision of the SPLA) and humanitarian infrastructure (including flights).[38] For most southern civilians, the implication was a growing involvement of churches in the provision of relief and social services in the refugee camps and later across southern Sudan.

Seventh-day Adventism and the 'day of the *kumɛ*'

While Mekane Yesus represented the main Ethiopian church institution Nuer incorporated themselves into, it was not the only one. The Seventh-day Adventist Church was operating in Ethiopia's southern highlands, in the town of Gimbie, since the 1920s.[39] It did not have any missions in Sudan and attempts to start work there during the 1950s had failed.[40] As the story is commonly told by elders in Gambella today, however, sometime in the late 1960s, Mak Chuol Joak, a Nuer from Jikow working with the imperial government, met with the leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Addis Ababa. The latter were interested in expanding the operations of the church into Gambella, to carry 'the saving truth to the millions who were sitting in gross spiritual

[35] A. De Waal, *Food and Power in Sudan: A Critique of Humanitarianism* (London, 1997), 82.
[36] Werner, Anderson, and Wheeler, *Day of Devastation*, 396.
[37] De Waal, *Food and Power*, 342-9; Ashworth, *Voice of the Voiceless*, 70.
[38] De Waal, *Food and Power*, 347.
[39] W. Truneh, *Adventism in Ethiopia: The Incredible Saga of the Beginning and Progress of the Seventh-Day Adventist Work in Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa, 2005), 296.
[40] Werner, Anderson, and Wheeler, *Day of Devastation*, 363.

darkness.'[41] Identifying an opportunity, Mak connected them with several educated South Sudanese and Ethiopian Nuer: Peter Pal Panom, Reat Chuol Joak and John Joak Yul. The three were taught the Adventist doctrine in Addis Ababa, baptised, and soon returned to Gambella to begin organising a local mission.[42]

Much like the Presbyterians, Seventh-day Adventists focused on education and medical work as a means of spreading the gospel. 'They called it a school in the beginning,' Nyawech, a Gaa-jak elder who was among the first members of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Gambella, explained. 'A school and a hospital. This is how they brought it out slowly, not as a church.'[43] In first few years of operations in Gambella, the evangelists moved between several villages, until they established a church in Nguangkea. An airstrip was cleared, allowing the Church to send medical aid by plane. After the coming to power of the Derg, the flights stopped and the church moved to the village of Luel, which was accessible by boat. A small school was opened there, clothes were sent from Addis Ababa, and members cultivated a small farm.[44] In the following years, more Seventh-day Adventist churches were established among Gaa-jak communities in Gambella, and later across the border, in Sudan. Peter Pal was ordained in 1983 and became the first Nuer Seventh-day Adventist pastor, while some young members of the church received scholarships to study in Adventist colleges in Ethiopia.[45]

What made the Seventh-day Adventist Church exceptional was not its developmental agenda or bureaucratic structure, but its sectarian attitude. Seventh-day Adventism emerged in the mid-nineteenth century in the US out of a millenarian movement that predicted that the Second Coming of Christ would occur in 1844.[46] After the date passed

[41] Truneh, *Adventism in Ethiopia*, 316.
[42] 'Introduction and Development of the Seventh-day Adventist International Church in Gambella Peoples' National Regional State: A Brief History', (n.d., on file with author). This is a document shared with me by members of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Gambella. It is based on interviews with old members of the church and was written for the occasion of the upgrade of Gambella to the status of a 'field' in the Church's structure, in 2018. The names of the individuals involved in the establishment of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Gambella, and broad outline of the events, have been recounted to me by others in Gambella.
[43] Interview with Nyawech Jok, 7 March 2019.
[44] D. Reat, *The Establishment and Expansion of the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Luäl/Luel Village (1970-1991)*, BA thesis (Addis Ababa University, 2010).
[45] Truneh, *Adventism in Ethiopia*, 317.
[46] J. M. Buttler, 'The Making of a New Order: Millerism and the Origins of Seventh-Day Adventism', in *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by R. L. Numbers and J. M. Buttler (Knoxville, 1993), 190-208.

and nothing happened (the 'Great Disappointment'), some believers gathered behind a young lady, Ellen G. White (1827–1915), a prolific writer recognised as possessing a prophetic gift. White's followers, who eventually formally organised to form the Seventh-day Adventist Church, came to view themselves as God's faithful end-time people: the eschatological 'remnant' (Revelation 12:17) whose duty was to inform the followers of other Christian denominations, who were deceived by false doctrines and institutions, about God's judgment, the events of the end times, and the Second Coming of Christ. Though initially aiming to attract Christians from other Protestant denominations, by the turn of the century American and European Adventists began to establish missions across the world.[47]

Suitably, it appears that the most powerful message the new church delivered to its members in Gambella was that they had been duped by the Presbyterians. They were made to pray on the wrong day of the week, a practice with potentially grave implications. After all, a careful reading of the Scriptures indicates that God had never instructed men to replace Sabbath with Sunday. While Sunday had already come to be known in the Nuer language, under the influence of the missionaries, as the day of God (*cäŋ-kuɔth*), Seventh-day Adventists taught that it was made special not by God but by 'the government'—again, invoking the association of the *kumɛ* with deception and trickery. Adventists were to pray, as sanctioned by God, on *cäŋ-lɔŋä*, 'the day of rest', or better, 'God's day of rest' (*cäŋ-lɔŋä-kuɔth*), which other 'Protestants' (as Adventists referred to them) simply called *cäŋ-kä-bɑ̱kɛl,* 'the sixth day'. When I asked Nyawech what was the 'Word of God' that people taught when the church first arrived in Gambella, she explained:

> The Word of God that people were preached was that people need to pray in that day [Saturday], because the day we moved from [Sunday] was the day of the government [*cäŋ-kumɛ*]. You tell someone that this day [Sunday] is not the day. This [Saturday], is the day of the laws [*cäŋ-ŋutni*, also referring to the Ten Commandments]. The day we used to pray in until He [God] sent His Son—that is it [that is the correct day]! This is 'Seventh-day' [*Thɛ-bɛn Dɛy*]! […] If you go with the wrong day, how can you trust yourself that 'I will be

[47] On this process, and the tension between the Church's sectarian attitude and expansionist aspirations, see S. Höschele, *Christian Remnant — African Folk Church: Seventh-Day Adventism in Tanzania, 1903-1980* (Leiden, 2007).

raised' [*bi rɔ ŋäth idi i bä rɔ jiɛc*; raised from the dead during the Second Coming of Christ]?[48]

Throughout the decades, the Seventh-day Adventist Church consistently maintained its separation from other 'Sunday' denominations that adopted a more communal attitude. It also rejected, as we shall see, the increasingly charismatic worshiping style of Protestant churches. When Protestant and Catholic churches cooperated in Itang, Adventists usually operated alone. They did not join the NSCC or any of the ecumenical organisations that were formed in Ethiopia in the following decades. When members of Protestant churches joined the Adventist church, they were re-baptised, by immersion. However, this sectarian attitude did not prevent the church from becoming highly popular, particularly among youths, who very often joined it despite the association of their families with other churches. At the time of my research, the Seventh-day Adventist church was easily one of the largest churches in Newland. It outnumbered most other Protestant churches and had the largest number of branches in the neighbourhood. As we shall see, its emphasis on literacy and close reading of the Scriptures, and its claim to have superior access to the 'truth', only made it more attractive.

The political economy of the Nuer born-again revolution

A surge in the number of Nuer churches began in the late 1990s. It was driven by multiple factors, the combination of which rendered Gambella the epicentre of this process. The first was the coming to power of the EPRFD in 1991. This resulted in the opening up of Ethiopia's religious space, allowing protestant Churches to operate in the country with fewer restrictions than ever before.[49] The second was the commencement of resettlement programmes, which relocated South Sudanese refugees from Ethiopia and Kenya to the US. Resettled Nuer soon began to link their relatives in Gambella with Evangelical American churches, which opened up new avenues for support and incentivised the establishment of new churches. The third factor was the presence of a large number of Nuer students in Addis Ababa during the 1990s. This educated elite played a central role in linking Nuer in the US and missionaries in Addis Ababa with communities in Gambella region, an action which emerged as a popular form of frontier entrepreneurship. An

[48] Interview with Nyawech Jok, 7 March 2019.
[49] Haustein and Østebø, 'EPRDF's Revolutionary Democracy', 756.

additional factor was the spread of Pentecostal doctrines, which inspired young entrepreneurs to challenge established church hierarchies and establish their own congregations.

These factors quickly encouraged defections from existing churches and the formation of dozens of new ones. The doctrinal differences between most of these new Evangelical churches were marginal, and their leaders often openly recognised that. The fact that Christianity has already spread to become a community-wide religion by the 1990s and that being a churchman already emerged as a respected way to serve one's community, access resources and forge international links meant that new churches did not usually have to convince members to accept the Christian doctrine, but only to encourage them to start worshipping (and paying their tithes and offerings) at a different church, which promised better services, religious expertise and opportunities. The wider such new churches spread, geographically and socially, the more likely it became that they will break apart, with management quarrels leading some members to defect, seek alternative patrons, and start new organisations. At least in their early stages, new churches commonly operated, segmented, and spread through kin and community networks, and competition and disputes over resources and leadership positions were not uncommon. Falge and Hutchinson identified this process of division and the tensions arising from it when it began to emerge about two decades ago. They referred to it as 'segmentary Christianity', in reference to 'traditional' Nuer political structures.[50] This emphasis, however, downplays the expansionist logic of Evangelical Christianity. While the kinship structures can certainly help tracing the spread of Christianity and fission among churches in Nuer society, the fact is that similar patterns of denominational schism are common across the Protestant world,[51] and therefore should not be viewed as an exclusively *Nuer* phenomenon.

Several churches were established in Gambella with the explicit support of American groups. In these cases, typically, Nuer who were resettled in the US connected with new religious groups there, and then offered to link them up with their relatives back home for the purpose of establishing new missions in Ethiopia and southern Sudan. That the civil war in Sudan was commonly portrayed in Western countries as a battle between a brutal

[50] Hutchinson, 'Spiritual Fragments'; Falge, 'The Ethiopianisation'; Falge, 'The Cultural Resilience'.
[51] For example, in South Africa: Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets*, 43-53; Comaroff, *Body of Power*, 171-2.

Islamic regime and marginalised Christians guaranteed the sympathy of American Evangelical groups. For relatives back in Gambella, on the other side of the globe, such collaborations meant access to resources (such as direct funding and donations to the new church, scholarships, or special support for educational or humanitarian projects), positions in the new institutions, as well as the respected position of custodians of the Word of God. Some of the largest churches in Gambella were created through such collaborations, mediated by resettled Nuer, including the Evangelical Covenant Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church, and Trinity Lutheran Church.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church, for example, was 'brought' to Gambella by several Gaa-jak men who were resettled to the US from Kenya in the 1990s. In 1997, they called a relative in Addis Ababa, Matthew Riek, and proposed to collaborate and establish a new church in Gambella. Born in Maiwut, South Sudan, Matthew joined the Presbyterian Church as a young boy. In the 1980s, he moved to Itang and later to Gambella town, to study. While in high school, he became an evangelist in Mekane Yesus, and in 1995 he was ordained as pastor and sent to Addis Ababa by the church. When his relatives from the US suggested starting a new church—in a phone call he described to me vividly more than two decades later—he agreed. By 1998, the new church had branches in Newland, the refugee camps of Dima and Pugnido, as well as Maiwut (South Sudan), and welcomed its first American visitors. Support from the US, and consequently from Canada and Australia as well, enabled the church to pay small salaries to pastors, develop the church compound and send selected members to theology school.[52]

In a number of other cases, new religious organisations were established when Nuer in Addis Ababa decided to link with religious groups and missionaries there. These include the Church of the Nazarene, Christian Temple Church as well as the Gospel of God Church ('Baba Johane'). The Church of the Nazarene, for example, an American Holiness church, entered Ethiopia in 1992, immediately after the fall of the Derg. When its missionaries met a few Nuer Ethiopians and South Sudanese—some, students, others, on their way to the US—in Addis Ababa, they offered them to join the church. They were invited to attend a Bible course (where they were taught, as one of them recalled, 'how to repent, why become a Nazarene and also why do you baptise'), and soon returned to

[52] Interview with Pastor Matthew, 19 June 2019.

Gambella to start organising churches in the refugee camps and Nuer areas. The Church of the Nazarene had significant presence in Africa, and, like the Seventh-day Adventist Church, a developed international bureaucratic structure and education facilities, which guaranteed access to various opportunities for its members as well as occasional material support. In 1999 the Church also purchased a boat, which groups of missionaries used for several years to provide medical assistance and 'plant' new churches in South Sudan and Ethiopia along the Baro and Akobo rivers.[53]

It would be wrong, however, to reduce the spread of new churches to a race after resources. While certainly attractive, external support was usually provided only for special 'projects': schools and scholarships, new buildings, workshops, medical missions. Even those churches with foreign patrons commonly raised funds for their ongoing expanses locally, through tithes (*wäl-wäli*) and offerings (*muc*). Different churches deployed different strategies and degrees of surveillance to guarantee funds are raised, but all relied on them for their survival and development. And it was these locally raised funds—often supplemented by support from private individuals and families from the diaspora—that also enabled the emergence of numerous smaller and largely independent Pentecostal churches since the early 2000s. As access to the Scriptures grew and, under the influence of Pentecostals from across Ethiopia and Africa, the worshipping style of youths became increasingly charismatic, religious entrepreneurs were able to ground their authority in the Bible and the Holy Spirit even without any association with an international church bureaucracy.

While numerous small and independent Pentecostal churches emerged in Gambella, spearheading the Pentecostalisation of Nuer Christianity since the early 2000s has been Christian Temple Church, formerly known as Crusaders Church. This church was perhaps the most striking case of an organisation which, despite its claimed affiliation with a larger movement, did not benefit from substantial external material support and nonetheless grew quickly to become one of the most vocal and dominant forces in Nuer Christian life. The church was established by Simon Deng, originally from Ulang, South Sudan, who was in Addis Ababa in the late 1990s. After watching a film about Jesus, he

[53] The paragraph is based on separate interviews with Simon Hoth (07 December 2018) and John Yien (26 February 2019), as well as on: 'Church History and Polity: Church of the Nazarene', The Horn of Africa Creative Leadership Institute (CLI), Addis Ababa, (on file with author).

claims, he was inspired to establish a congregation in Addis Ababa for Nuer students. It was started as a Presbyterian congregation, but when 'the leaders of Presbyterian delayed to come to us, then those of Christian Temple Church came and preach us and taught us… we have got interest to work together with them, and that was my decision.'[54] Although the Nuer-led church was associated with the 'highlander' Christian Temple Church in Addis Ababa (known as IMPACT Worship Center), it was not a part of an international church bureaucracy.[55]

Figure 10. Christian Temple Church, Newland.

Starting from 2000, Christian Temple spread quickly through Gambella, into South Sudan and consequently to Nuer communities in Uganda, Kenya and Sudan as well. If the more established churches initially sought to restrain Pentecostal practices like ecstatic dancing, speaking in tongues or the practicing of miracles, and even punished dissenting members, Christian Temple carried the Pentecostal flag with pride. 'We demonstrate the Holy Spirit here,' Deng told me. On Sunday mornings, the Church's main compound, not far from Gambella University, was always bustling with hundreds of men in colourful suits, leather shoes and golden watches and women in African wax fabric dresses, and the church hall, a long mud structure whose internal walls were always decorated with colourful pieces of cloth and ribbons, was packed with sweating worshippers, its air filled

[54] Interview with Simon Deng, 12 December 2018.
[55] IMPACT Worship Center in Addis Ababa was affiliated with the International Ministries of Prophetic and Apostolic Churches Together (IMPACT) Network—an American group founded in 1995 by Apostle John Eckhardt.

with whispers and cries. Youth members of the Church have become the prime producers of Nuer gospel music, and their hits were popular across the community, including among members of Sabbatarian churches. Ultimately, even churches like Mekane Yesus came to tolerate the gradual Pentecostalisation of their services in order not to lose youth members to other churches.

Partly as a response to the proliferation of Nuer churches, another religious movement that emerged and was institutionalised in the late 1990s through engagements between individuals in the refugee camps in Ethiopia and relatives in the US was the Ngundeng movement. This movement focused on the songs and prophesies of Ngundeng Bong and was underpinned by an ideology that regarded Jesus as God's emissary to the white people, not to the Nuer. This stance notwithstanding, institutionally, the movement structured itself like any other church in Gambella as a hierarchical organisation that comprised of groups of youths and elderly women led by several elder men (who were even called 'pastors'), was funded by members' offerings, and ran weekly worshipping programmes. The movement came to be known as the 'Ngundeng Church' (*Luak Ŋundɛŋ*, or 'Ngundeng's cattle byre'). Born-again youths often ridiculed Ngundeng followers, claiming that they joined the movement solely because it allowed them to drink and smoke, and some Christian elders expressed concerns that the movement would draw youths away from Christianity. In practice, it was a rather marginal movement in Gambella town, and prayers in Newland's single Ngundeng church—held on Wednesday mornings—were usually attended by not more than two dozen worshippers.

The coming of the Church of God

The Church of God emerged in Gambella during the period of born-again revival described above, and its institutional genesis, like that of other churches, has been shaped by the journeys of individuals across the region. However, it followed a rather different path, both geographically and theologically. I first heard the story about how the Church of God 'came' to Gambella from Panom Puk, whose own life history was closely linked to the evolution of this institution.[56] By the time we met, Panom was no longer a member of this church. He has joined one of its latest local offshoots—Ahavat Yeshua Messianic

[56] This narrative is based on a series of interviews with Panom as well as multiple other leaders and members of the Church of God and other messianic groups in Gambella.

Congregation—but was in the process of joining another Messianic Jewish congregation elsewhere in Ethiopia due to disagreements with the leaders of Ahavat Yeshua. He did not tell me all of that in our first meeting. We were sitting on a piece of wood in the quiet compound of the Assembly of Yahweh. Established in the early 2000s, this used to be the first compound of the Church of God in Newland, before internal rivalries led to its first split. The compound was a large open space, with an unpainted church structure (a cement-coated mud house), on which someone wrote in capitals letters: 'JERUSALEM CHURCH OF GOD (SEVEN) DAYS'.

The Church of God (Seventh Day)—not to be confused with various Pentecostal groups with similar names—originally emerged in parallel to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the US, in the second half of the nineteenth century, but its first leaders challenged Seventh-day Adventists on several grounds.[57] It has since then fractured into hundreds of groups that bear similar titles and adhere to similar beliefs.[58] The most central aspect of the Church's doctrine is strict observance of what is understood to be God's Law. This means observance not only of the Sabbath, but also of the Jewish festivals and Jewish dietary rules. While the term 'legalistic' often carries a negative connotation in Christian discourse, Church of God members, at least in Gambella, would accept it with pride: They know the laws, and unlike 'the Protestants', obey them. Like the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Church adheres to an apocalyptic-millenarian faith, expecting the Second Coming of Christ in the near future, though the two groups disagree on how precisely this event will unfold. Like the Seventh-day Adventist Church too, it is a 'remnant church' with a highly sectarian attitude. By following Mosaic Laws and celebrating the Jewish festivals, its members seek to emulate the faith and practices followed by the first Jewish and gentile followers of Jesus Christ.

Several other important doctrinal issues are directly linked to the Church's fundamentalist attitude. Its name derives from the name used in the New Testament to describe the church first formed by the apostles. Central to its teachings and doctrine are the writings of one of its first elders, Andrew N. Dugger, including the books *A History of the True Religion Traced From 33 A.D. to Date* and *Bible Home Instructor*. Crucially, unlike the Seventh-

[57] R. C. Nickels, *A History of the Seventh Day Church of God* (Neck City, 1973).
[58] D. V. Barrett, *The Fragmentation of a Sect: Schism in the Worldwide Church of God* (New York, 2013).

day Adventist Church, Church of God reject what Zionist Christians often call 'replacement theology', that is, the notion that Christians have replaced the Jews as God's chosen and that God's covenant with Abraham is no longer valid. Thus, as for many other Zionist Evangelical movements around the world, the Church of God doctrine ascribes great importance to the Jewish people and the modern state of Israel in its eschatology, and (in line with God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 to bless whoever blesses him) associates support of the state of Israel and the Jewish People with divine favour. The Church claims to have its headquarters in Jerusalem, where Elder Dugger lived until his death in 1975.

'It was October 2001 when we started settling here,' Panom started recounting as we sat down. As was often the case during interviews in Gambella, he spoke confidently about the history of his church. Names of elders, dates of baptisms, conferences and annual meetings were uttered far quicker than I could possibly follow or write down. It took me longer, however, to figure out how his own life history fitted within these events. Originally from Jikow, Panom moved with his family to Itang in 1986 due to fighting between Anya-Nya II and SPLA troops around his village. There, as a young boy, he joined the Seventh-day Adventist church, and was baptised. But when the SPLA promised to take young boys for schooling in Kenya, Panom joined. In January 1991, before the fall of the Derg and Itang's evacuation, he left the camp, walking with SPLA troops not to school in Kenya but to Sudan's Eastern Equatoria. He was 14 at the time, and spent the next years serving the southern rebel group as a member of the 'Red Army'—a label referring to minors conscripted by the SPLA—cooking, clearing roads and constructing military barracks. When he finally arrived in Kakuma in 1995, Panom re-joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which was already active in the camp and drew members of various nationalities.

A Messianic Kenyan businessman who came to spend the Sabbath at the Seventh-day Adventist church in Kakuma in early 1996 introduced a small group of Nuer and Dinka believers, Panom among them, to the Church of God and its doctrine. His name, I was told, was Mualimu Umondi. Following his encounters at the camp, Umondi connected the curious Adventist refugees with another businessman, Njihia Kimani, and through the latter, contact was made with Edward Macharia, one of the leaders and founders of the Church of God in Kenya. Different groups affiliated with the Church of God have been

active in Kenya since 1970. According to their members, they emerged after members of several Kenyan Sabbath-keeping churches learned about the Church of God from pamphlets and tracts, wrote to its leaders in Jerusalem, expressed interest in the Church's doctrine, and asked to join it. Edward Macharia was one of them. In late 1970, an elder from Israel, Andy M. Shoemaker, was sent to baptise and ordain the first Kenyan members of the Church of God.[59] Disputes and splits over the following decades led to the establishment of various groups associated with the Church in Kenya.

Figure 11. Children entering the Church of God on a dry season Sabbath.

In any case, following the encounters in Kakuma in 1996, Andrew N. Dugger's books were dispatched to the camp, and by August 1996, a group of over 40 Nuer and Dinka refugees were baptised in Lake Turkana as members of the Kenyan Jerusalem (Seventh Day) Church of God. Of this group, six were selected and ordained as elders: three Nuer and three Dinka. Before the year was out, Panom was back in Maiwut, South Sudan, after voluntarily leaving Kakuma under a UN repatriation scheme. He did not immediately start preaching, however. In 1999, a relative of his, Tut Ruot, who also joined the Church of God in Kakuma, followed Panom and returned to Gambella as well. Having spent more time in Kenya, he was more familiar with the Church of God's doctrine and already 'knew how to preach'. The two established a church in Lare, Ethiopia, and in June 2000, two

[59] M. Khisha Makokha, *The Call: A History of Church of God 7th Day in Kenya* (Kenya, 2016).

Kenyan elders, Edward and Francis Macharia, came to Addis Ababa to ordain them. The Church of God's doctrine spread through family members and traveling NGO workers, and new congregations were soon formed in other parts of Gambella region, including Gambella town and the refugee camps of Dima and Pugnido. I was told, for example, that the church was first brought to Dima when one Eastern Jikäny from Nasir (who joined the Church of God in Gambella town) travelled to Dima to work with an NGO.

While members of other protestant churches also joined the Church of God, Seventh-day Adventists were naturally the prime target of its preaching efforts and most prone to accepting its message: they already recognised the holiness of the Sabbath but did not observe it (for instance, they used money and cooked on Sabbath); the did not celebrate Christian holidays, but also did not 'know' about the Jewish festivals; they understood the Bible in a literal way and yet accepted 'replacement theology', denying the validity of God's covenant with Abraham and the importance of the Jewish People and Israel. By 1999, it should be noted, the Old Testament was translated into Nuer and began to circulate. As the following chapter demonstrates, this also facilitated the spread of the Church of God doctrine, particularly among 'literalists' who studied the Bible in search of truths about the past, present and future. In at least two cases (in the villages of Liet Nyaruach and Thorow), whole Seventh-day Adventist congregations decided to switch to the Church of God.[60] As Panom once told me: 'It was the Seventh-day Adventists that taught us to search for the truth.'

Fragmentation, defections and realignments

From the very beginning, the activities of the Church of God in Gambella were marred by internal divisions and leadership quarrels. In the first years, these quarrels concerned the naming of the church. Initially, the church was known as Jerusalem (Seventh Day) Church of God, but due to misunderstandings between the members in Gambella and the elders in Kenya (and between the elders in Kenya and those in Jerusalem), some Nuer began to use the name Assembly of Yahweh as well. The church split into two camps, with each calling for the registration of the church in Ethiopia under a different name. In practice, the two camps were divided along community and citizenship lines: one group,

[60] Notes, 15 July 2019.

supporting the name Church of God, mainly comprised of individuals who resided in the refugee camps and later spread into the South Sudanese areas of Nasir, Malakal, Juba, Waat and Akobo. The Assembly of Yahweh group mainly comprised of Gaa-jak Nuer and had its main congregations in Gambella town, Lare, Pagak and Maiwut.[61]

The two groups split, though they continued to follow the same doctrine and maintained their ties with the same elders in Kenya. The labyrinth of allegations that sustained the tensions between them over the years could be the subject of a separate book. Attempts at reconciliation have had limited impact, and the Assembly of Yahweh group (which ultimately also abandoned this title and publicly referred to itself as Church of God as well) remained considerably smaller. Further divisions in the Church of God followed the same logic that drove defections and splits in other churches, with competing religious entrepreneurs breaking away from an existing institution once they were able to secure enough local or external support to sustain a new institution. However, in the case of Messianic Zionist groups, quarrels had a salient doctrinal facet and repeatedly focused on questions of links to Israel, the 'real' Jews and the 'true' church.

In 2009, the leader of the Church of God sought to link the group with a new movement in Israel, led by an American Evangelical Zionist called Don Esposito. Esposito, himself a former member of the Catholic Church, the Church of God (Seventh Day) and one of its main offshoots, the Worldwide Church of God, settled in Israel in 2005. He claimed that the daughter of Andrew Dugger, Naomi Dugger Fauth, asked him to take over the leadership of the Jerusalem congregation of the Church of God, which had reportedly been inactive since the 1980s. However, arguing that 'uniformity of our basic beliefs and faith in our Heavenly Father's Word are what make us a member of the one and only true congregation of Yahweh, not being on a church roll of one segregated Church of God group,' Esposito also established an independent international ministry, the Congregation of Yahweh.[62] Through this ministry, he started to support some of the older Church of God congregations that operated in Kenya.[63] When Church of God leaders in Gambella learned about his activities through the internet, they reached out. 'At the time we had our

[61] I draw here on discussions with individuals from both camps.
[62] Don Esposito, 'A.N. Dugger congregation is back after almost 20 years', *The Journal: News of the Church of God*, n.d., available at: http://www.thejournal.org/issues/issue101/andugger.html.
[63] Don Esposito, 'COG member visits CG7 descendants on Kenya trip', *The Journal: News of the Church of God*, n.d., www.thejournal.org/issues/issue73/esposito.html.

sister congregations in Kenya, and they were the ones having tuned up with Jerusalem,' one of the elders who led the initiative explained. 'We hadn't had any communication with Jerusalem then.'[64]

But not all members of the Nuer-led Church of God (operating, by then, in both Ethiopia and South Sudan) agreed to switch sides and become affiliated with Elder Don's ministry. While quarrels over the leadership of the church in Gambella were certainly part of the story, the ideological bone of contention was Esposito's leadership and the use of the sacred name, Yahweh. The Church of God split into two, with some members cooperating with Don's ministry as the Congregation of Yahweh, and the rest maintaining their ties with the congregations in Kenya as the Church of God and claiming that Esposito was a 'deceiver'. In April 2010, Esposito and the leaders of the new faction met in Addis Ababa, and by 2012, three Nuer elders of the Congregation of Yahweh from Gambella were invited to Israel for the first time. Following several such study trips to Israel, in 2015, members of the Congregation established a 'kibbutz' at the outskirts of Newland, with support from Israel, in order 'to live a sanctified life,' separated from 'the worldly people'. Inspired by Esposito's writing, the leaders of the group also began to claim that the Nuer are one of the Lost Tribes of Israel and harboured hopes to be relocated from their sanctified kibbutz to the Holy Land.

We return to these thorny and highly contested doctrinal issues and theories in greater detail in subsequent chapters. Suffice to say here that the defection of the Congregation of Yahweh and its apparent success in establishing ties with (what appeared from Gambella as) a prominent religious leader in Israel caused a great deal of confusion among the members of the Church of God in Gambella. For a short time, the loss of members to the new Congregation of Yahweh led the Church of God and Assembly of Yahweh to cooperate again, but new disagreements and quarrels soon brought this fragile unity to an end. More importantly, some entrepreneurial church members still challenged the Church of God leadership over the group's questionable ties with elders in Jerusalem and Jews 'by blood' in the Holy Land. After all, if 'the truth comes from Jerusalem', how come they had no brethren there but only in Kenya? And if theirs is the 'true church', how come it has no representation in the Holy Land?

[64] Discussion with Congregation of Yahweh elders, 24 December 2018.

Figure 12. Observing the landscape in the Congregation of Yahweh's kibbutz, looking east across a small valley towards a part of the kibbutz called 'Hebron'.

In February 2011, Church of God leaders gathered in Nasir, South Sudan for their annual meeting, which was also attended by Elder Edward Macharia from Kenya. Much of the discussion revolved around solving the conflict between the Church of God and Assembly of Yahweh groups, but then the issue of the Church's headquarters and links in Israel also came up. Macharia suggested that money will be raised in order to send representatives from Africa to Jerusalem, to construct a church and be based there. Chuol Bol, at the time still a member of the Church of God, recounted:

> The question was asked, 'Was there no Church of God temple there in Jerusalem?' He said, 'No'. We ask about the members [in Israel], and he said there are no members. We asked, 'Where did those who believe in Yeshua, *those who are Jews by blood*, where do they pray?' He said that those people are not Church of God members. They pray as Messianic Jews members in Jerusalem. They have different doctrine than Church of God, different system. They are there. We asked: 'Are they good believers?' He said, 'Yes, as we know, they are Jews, they are good believers.' That history led us—or I can say that it led me—to research Messianic Judaism.[65]

[65] Interview with Chuol Bol, 14 February 2019.

As quarrels ravaged the Church of God in Gambella, Chuol and other members began reaching out to various Messianic Jewish groups around the world through the internet, seeking new collaborations and guidance. They were soon put in touch with those organisations operating or linked to congregations in Ethiopia: Jewish Voice Ministries International, the Messianic Jewish Bible Institute (MJBI) and Tikkun International, an umbrella organisation of a host of Messianic Jewish groups. Of course, their independent efforts to seek new allies in Israel angered the leaders of the Church of God, and in early 2015, Chuol and several other dissenting members decided to start a new independent Messianic group and established their first congregations in the refugee camps near Itang and in Newland. They sought ties with multiple Messianic Jewish groups and were loosely affiliated with one Israel-based ministry called Revive Israel. Consequently, they also named their new movement Ahavat Yeshua ('Love of Jesus', in Hebrew)—the name of a Messianic congregation supported by Revive Israel in Jerusalem.

Figure 13. Ahavat Yeshua Messianic Congregation (a structure used until a larger one was built in 2019).

Similar patterns of division continued in the following years. Quarrels between the founding members of Ahavat Yeshua and concerns that Revive Israel's leaders were not observing Mosaic Law strictly enough led, by 2020, to the breaking apart of the congregation. One of Ahavat Yeshua's senior members left it and allied, after investing considerable energy in searching for proper alternative partners, with another Israel-based

Messianic group called King of Kings Ministries. In Israel, King of Kings was associated with multiple congregation of Israelis of Ethiopian origin, and therefore also maintained links with congregations in Ethiopia. Meanwhile, a dissenting member of the Congregation of Yahweh, citing concerns about Esposito's background, also left the group and founded a new congregation. He affiliated with a group called Yahweh's Assembly in Yahshua, another international Sabbatarian Zionist movement with congregations in Ethiopia. Another group of youths previously associated with Ahavat Yeshua established a congregation of Nazarene Judaism, to which we return in the next chapter. Thus, by 2020, there were already more than five Nuer religious groups in Gambella that originated from the Church of God. 'In five years, there will be ten or twenty Messianic congregations in Gambella,' a member of the Church of God commented on these splits.

Strictly speaking, the international groups with which congregations in Gambella affiliated themselves had somewhat diverse doctrines and theological roots. While some (Revive Israel, Tikkun) saw themselves as part of the Messianic Jewish movement, others (the Congregation of Yahweh, Yahweh's Assembly in Yahshua) considered themselves part of the Sacred Name Movement, which traces its roots to the Church of God, and, as opposed to Messianic Jews, is less concerned with evangelising Jewish communities and tends to put greater emphasis on Old Testament Law. In practice, however, Church of God and its splinter groups had much in common. All adhered to premillennialist Zionist doctrines and put a great emphasis on observance of Mosaic Law, commonly referred to themselves as 'Messianics' or 'Zionists' (*ji Dhayɔn*), expressed an extreme interest in the Israeli state, and described themselves as either Israelites 'by blood' or Jews 'by faith'.

Institutional roots and the question of origin

In 2015, following the latest round of disagreements with the leadership of the Assembly of Yahweh group, the Church of God established a new compound at the outskirts of Newland, right next to the kibbutz of the Congregation of Yahweh. The church stood at the centre of the spacious and unfenced compound, and around it, several members of the church have built their houses. They referred to this area as Zion District (*Dhayɔn Dithtik*). It was located far beyond the reach of Gambella town's basic infrastructure, and there was no electricity or running water, but during the rainy season a small stream

passed nearby, flowing from the mountains towards the Baro. On Saturdays, after the morning prayer and Bible classes, congregants sat under the trees outside the church, talked, rested and had lunch together. Sabbath lunch was usually eaten in groups according to age and sex, with members sharing a large bowl of maize grains that were boiled the previous evening, before sunset, with some salt and oil.

In addition to Bibles, the Church's annual Bible Lessons booklets and perhaps a few hymn books, a worn-out paperback copy of Dugger's *A History of the True Religion* was often also around—passing between members of the church, being investigated, skimmed through. As its name suggests, this book, written in the 1930s, provides an account of what it considers to be 'the true religion'. It is not a very easy read, and certainly not a flowing text. In fact, much of the book comprises of quotes from other works. It covers, in a chronological order, century by century, the development of the 'true church' as it survived, unpolluted and uncorrupted by the influence of the Roman Catholic Church, from the days of the New Testament and until re-emerging back out of historical obscurity in the late nineteenth century. This was, as far as Church of God members were concerned, the history of their church:

> From our doctrine you can also satisfy, because the apostles have preached. What they are preaching is what we are preaching also. You can see the match: Apostles were all Sabbath keepers; we are also Sabbath keepers. Our history is also linked exactly to the early church, the one which was formed in 33 A.D. by the disciples of Christ. There is a book called *History of True Religion* [sic], you can find it online. It is done by Andrew Duggar with another co-author called Clarence Dodd. This is very important because it traces the root of the true church back to 33 A.D. It is indicating that there was no single time that the true faith has vanished out of the surface of the earth. Some denominations are saying that there was total darkness on the earth's surface. Like some groups of Seventh-day Adventists, they are perching that one.
>
> Most people, they believe that all people were forced to Sunday by the Roman Catholic Church and what is now happening is that people are now trying to come out of Catholicism. That view, we are not in line with it. […] God is the one who was taking care of the church when Israel was evicted by the Romans out of Jerusalem, so God has managed to take care of them up to those places

> where they are dispersed until he managed to restore them back to the Holy Land. So those who were nourished by God in the wilderness are the same people who were holding the true faith. They are the same people who planted this faith in America and some other places, and they are the same people also we got this faith from, so our historical background has a link with that early church that has been planted by apostles of Jesus Christ.[66]

We return to the question of history and descent in greater detail in the following chapters. The issue I want to address here relates more specifically to the question of the institutional history of churches. How people recount the history of their church and, indeed, what they consider the history of their church to be in the first place, say a lot about what their church means to them. As Engelke argues, referring to the way members of the Zimbabwean weChishanu Church recount its history, it is 'not only a narrative of agents and actions in time and space but also a capsule of cosmology.'[67] For Messianics, church history (and its interrogation) mattered a great deal. It mattered because it established a link between them and Jesus Christ and the Bible. The local institutional history of their church in Gambella as recounted in the previous sections of this chapter—how Panom and Tut came from Kenya, how the church was established and grew, who joined it and who did not, how and why it divided—was only a small part of what they considered to be the history of their church. And this part only made sense when recounted and considered in relation to a much longer narrative.

For members of the Church of God, interrogating the Scriptures in conjunction with Dugger's book promised a comprehensive historical account that placed their congregation in Gambella in a clear position vis-à-vis divine past (the apostles, Jesus Christ, Abraham, the very creation of the universe) and future (the Second Coming of Christ and the establishment of His Kingdom). Members of the Congregation of Yahweh, who generally viewed Don Esposito as the legitimate representative and leader of the Church of God in Israel, shared a similar view. 'We need to know the original line from messiah,' a member of the Congregation once told me, referring to the leadership of his movement, 'passing from messiah to other elders, to other elders, until now, until Don

[66] Interview with Gatluak, 10 February 2019.
[67] Engelke, *A Problem of Presence*, 110. See also Haustein's call to consider local historical narratives when writing Pentecostal history: J. Haustein, 'Historical Epistemology and Pentecostal Origins: History and Historiography in Ethiopian Pentecostalism', *Pneuma,* 35 (2013), 345-365.

Esposito. […] The righteous way is not only to be a righteous person. *You should know the line!*'[68] Members of Ahavat Yeshua, meanwhile, insisted that a true church can only be led by Jews 'by blood', members of God's Chosen People.

Information on the long genealogy of one's church was therefore carefully gathered and archived by Messianics and, as the discussion above suggests, played a key role in the debates that raged between the different offshoots of the Church of God in Gambella. For instance, when I once asked about the context in which the leadership of the Church of God was transferred to Don Esposito, a member of the Congregation of Yahweh took me to his hut in the kibbutz, and then, after several minutes of searching through the content of his suitcases, pulled out an old and partly torn printed copy of a blog post written by Esposito more than a decade earlier. On several occasions I, too, was asked to help with extracting information from the internet on issues such as the biographies of Andrew Dugger or Don Esposito, to verify, for example, where and when or by whom they were ordained, or check whether they were truly of Jewish descent. Dedicated members of the Church of God often shared photographs of Andrew Dugger and his family on Facebook and engaged in long discussions about his life and writings.

The Messianic concern with the history of church institutions and leaders stood in stark contrast to the attitude among members of 'Sunday churches'. When I approached such churches to learn about their histories, usually the following scenario ensued: members of the church quickly sent me to its founder, who would (after we managed to set a time to meet) recount how he established it. In most cases, it was a story about the church either being 'brought' by him from somewhere (e.g., the US, Addis Ababa) to Gambella, or, in the smaller Pentecostal churches, locally initiated following a combination of a revelation of some sort or another and disputes with the leaders of his previous church. As such, these were considerably recent and local histories, usually dating back to the 1990s, or slightly earlier if one takes into account the personal lives and biographies of church founders. Educated members of Mekane Yesus traced the history of their church slightly further back—to Jordan Manpiny (the 1960s) or Dr. Lambie (the 1910s). I was never lectured, however, on the global histories of the Lutheran or Presbyterian churches or the origins of Pentecostal theology.

[68] Notes, 27 July 2019.

This is not to suggest that Protestant or Pentecostal churches were personalised ventures. The charismatic leadership of some pastors notwithstanding, all churches in Newland were *institutions*, and small initiatives that failed to institutionalise ultimately perished. All were also 'localised' in the sense that they were both entirely Nuer-run from top to bottom (at least within Gambella, in the case of large international denominations) and all were committed to providing as many members as possible formal roles.[69] This factor also explains why many of the larger churches established sub-branches even within a small territory: the more churches were established, the more roles there were to distribute to members in order to keep them engaged and the more opportunities there were to raise funds and reach new members.[70] Nonetheless, members of Protestant or Pentecostal churches, as opposed to Messianics, were generally not concerned with the global histories of their institutions or theologies, nor with their position within the longer history of Christianity.

The Messianic concern with institutional and doctrinal purity also shaped the stance of Messianic groups with regard to their cooperation with 'Sunday churches' or with each other. Many, though not all, 'Sunday churches' were united under the Nuer Christian Missionary Network, which primarily served as a platform for church elites to organise events and 'workshops', raise funds, and cooperate with political leaders. The youth groups of many of these churches also held popular weekly joint worshipping programmes and big regional conferences under an organisation called Nuer Christian Youth Network for Peace and Development (*Mat Ɲuëtn̲i Ɲäthä Nueer̲i kɛ ku̲i Malä kɛnɛ Cuɔ̱p*, or, as it was popularly known, 'Youth Malä'). Messianics (and Seventh-day Adventists) joined neither of these organisations. 'We don't have religious unity with them, and we regard them as part of Roman Catholicism,' Gatluak, whom I also quoted earlier, explained, stressing a point I heard repeatedly from Messianics in Newland. 'All of them together have left the true faith. They reject the sabbath day and most of them are preaching that the Ten Commandments have been abolished.'[71]

[69] Robbins, 'The Globalization', 130-131.
[70] By 2020, for example, the Seventh-day Adventist Church operated no less than eight branches within Greater Newland alone. Some of these branches were small (attracting several dozens of members on a Sabbath) and located a short walk from each other, but each had its own Sabbath School groups, fundraising mechanisms and administrative infrastructure.
[71] Interview with Gatluak, 10 February 2019.

There was no consensus, however, with regard to the relationship between different Messianic groups. Leaders of Church of God offshoots fiercely rejected any form of cooperation, but this stance was fuelled by personal grievances and hostility towards 'defectors' just as much as it was justified by doctrinal differences and priorities. Members of these groups were more ambivalent. Seeing the fragmentation of the Church of God throughout the 2010s and the confusion it brought, some have called for greater cooperation and unity between the different groups that adhered to a similar faith. Based on Andrew Dugger's leaflets from the early 1970s, some members argued that all of these groups were, in fact, part of the Messianic Jewish movement, and should strive for 'Unity in body of Messiah'.[72] Nonetheless, a proposal to form a Messianic Zionist alternative to Youth Malä—an umbrella organisation whose proposed name was Nuer Messianic Youth for Salvation and was supposed to unite all offshoots of the Church of God—was rejected by the leaders of these movements.

Frontier entrepreneurship

At first glance, the factors that led to the emergence of Messianic Judaism in Gambella may appear radically contingent: former child soldiers and refugees who were introduced to fundamentalist Christianity in Ethiopia's refugee camps gathering years later in a Seventh-day Adventist church in northern Kenya, a traveling Kenyan Messianic exposes them to a new doctrine, they pick it up, travel back home and spread it among their communities. As the history of Nuer Christianity presented in this chapter has shown, however, the genesis of this movement was part of a longer history of seemingly coincidental and yet productive frontier engagements that shaped Nuer Christian thought and institutions. Gambella's position as a unique frontier zone and a meeting point for a range of actors and institutions has turned it, among other things, into what we may call, following Johnson and James, a 'Christian frontier'.[73] Though Christian missionaries first started operating among the Nuer in colonial Sudan, it was Gambella that emerged since the 1970s as a hub of Christian activity. And the impact of the encounters, connections and collaborations this frontier region enabled was felt across eastern Nuer society.

[72] 'Jerusalem Lover' (an undated and unsigned booklet written by members of the Church of God in 2019); Isaac C. Luke and Duol M. Lul, 'Were we part of The Messianic Jewish Movement?', 2017.
[73] Johnson and James, *Vernacular Christianity*.

In the Nuer language there was no immediate translation for 'religion' or 'belief'. Most commonly used, for both, was the word *ŋäth*, which better translates as 'trust' or 'faith'.[74] There were also no obvious Nuer translations for 'Christian' or 'Christianity'. One could be 'a man of the church', *ran luak kuɔth*, but this label was generally reserved for more committed Christians who also represented the church in the community. Thus, referring to the influence of Christianity in the 1980s, Hutchinson talks about the 'people of the church' (*ji luak kuɔth*).[75] If one was a member of a specific church, he was likely to refer to himself as 'a man' of that church ('a man of the Church of God', 'a man of Seventh-day') or, if not a particularly devoted member or formally part of the church, just say that he prays (*pal*) there.[76] While in Amharic the term '*p'ënt'ë*' was increasingly used to describe Pentecostals, and more broadly all Protestants who are not members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church,[77] this label was hardly ever used in the Nuer language in Gambella, even among members of churches that defined themselves as Pentecostal.

Theologically, churches in Gambella differed from one another. While most adhered to Evangelical Protestant brands of Christianity, a clear line separated the fundamentalist Sabbatarian groups (Messianics and Adventists) from other Protestant 'Sunday churches' whose worshipping practices and rhetoric assumed an increasingly Pentecostal tone since the early 2000s. Other groups (like 'Baba Johane') did not fall neatly within these categories, or (in the case of Ngundeng Church) rejected Christianity altogether. The distinctions between groups will become clearer in the following chapters, as we turn to their styles and practices. Nonetheless, institutionally, all churches not only emerged through similar frontier interconnections but were also structured in a remarkably similar way, offered their members a similar set of services and activities and imposed on them similar financial obligation. Moreover, all promised to provide individuals and communities with concrete knowledge about the way humans communicate with God, the workings of the universe He created, and their own position and role in history. Messianics' quest for, engagement with and evaluation of this knowledge is the focus of the next chapter.

[74] See also, Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 9.
[75] Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 39, 144.
[76] Members of the Ngundeng Church, particularly youths, were often called *gaat Dɛŋ*, the 'children of Deng'.
[77] Haustein, 'Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity'.

Chapter 3

Lost and found: Conviction, doubt and the 'speech' of God

The previous chapter examined the evolution of Messianism among Nuer communities in Gambella primarily from an institutional perspective. However, looking at the way the Church of God emerged out of the Seventh-day Adventist movement and later split into multiple other Messianic groups, and examining the ways in which members of these organisations narrated their histories, we have already seen that questions of biblical authenticity were central to the evolution of these movements in Gambella. This story remains incomplete without the experiences of those who joined Messianic movements and without their deliberations, dilemmas and decisions. This chapter draws on the life histories of individuals who joined the Church of God in order to explain what drew them to Messianic Judaism and explore the relationship between Christian literacy practices, spiritual transformation and concerns with deception, authenticity and the truth. If the previous chapter focused primarily on church leaders, frontier entrepreneurs and the institutions that they established, this chapter turns to the rank-and-file of Messianic groups and traces the way Christian knowledge and the Bible entered the frontierlands' 'political economy of knowledge'.[1]

This chapter starts with a brief discussion of some of the scholarly approaches to understanding the appeal of Messianic Judaism to Evangelical 'gentiles' on which I draw, which emphasise the concern of this faith with identifying the biblically authentic. Since Messianics in Gambella adopted this faith after they already accepted the inerrancy of the Bible, an account of their religious transformation should start with the meaning and implications of conversion to Christianity among eastern Nuer and local approaches to studying the Christian Word of God. The chapter explores the link between literacy and Christianity, established during the colonial period, and then turns to the practice of evangelism, through which biblical knowledge spread from a small literate elite to the wider community. More than other Christians, Adventists and Messianics put great emphasis on the study of the Bible. The second part of the chapter explores people's

[1] Leonardi, *Dealing with Government*.

journeys to (and within, and away from) Messianic Judaism through their engagement with the Scriptures. By presenting the life histories and spiritual trajectories of three individuals, it tells the story, and traces the methods, of people's pursuit of authenticity, and the uncertainties and confusion that simultaneously drove and undermined this project.

Messianic Judaism and the pursuit of authenticity

As mentioned in the introduction, there has been a tendency among scholars to emphasise the roles of wars, marginalisation and the association of Christianity with formal education in explaining the spread of Christianity in and around South Sudan. Falge's work, which builds on research conducted in Gambella's refugee camps and in the US in the early 2000s, is a good example. It is also the most recent ethnography of Christianity among eastern Nuer. Reading Falge's studies, we learn that Nuer chose to become Christian for various reasons: as a means of inclusion in the Ethiopian state,[2] in order to access jobs, scholarships, 'modern technology or spiritual healing',[3] as a form of resistance to the Islamist Sudanese government or an empowering 'strategy' to 'counter the processes of war and rupture',[4] or simply out of pressure, as church leaders fought over resources and prestigious positions of leadership and strategically manipulated their communities to serve their material interests.[5] Hutchinson also describes conversion in the 1980s as a 'political statement' and emphasises the link local communities drew between Christianity and literacy and the Christian promise to provide protection against various misfortunes associated with sorcery and 'divinities of the earth'.[6]

One of the shortcomings of such functionalist or utilitarian explanations for Christian conversion is that they have little to say about Christianity as such. On the contrary, Falge highlights the 'cultural resilience' of eastern Nuer in the process of conversion, suggesting they had little to no interest in matters of doctrine.[7] The image that emerges from her account suggests that Nuer may have adopted Christianity, for a host of practical

[2] Falge, 'The Ethiopianisation'.
[3] Falge, 'The Cultural Resilience', 206.
[4] Falge, 'Countering Rupture', 171.
[5] Falge, *The Global Nuer*.
[6] Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 312-6.
[7] Falge, 'The Cultural Resilience'.

reasons, but behind the new façade they did not change a great deal. As Robbins warns, however, without dismissing the importance of the worldly advantages associated with conversion, we should also not ignore the ways in which converts also come to see the world and make sense of it through the lens of their new faith.[8] Religion can bring material benefits, comfort and prestige, but its 'fundamental question', as Peel writes, is 'whether it is true—in the sense of whether it corresponds to the experience of potential adherents.'[9] These points are particularly important when the people about whom we write appear to be taking their faith seriously. And Messianics in Gambella took their faith very seriously.

What, then, is the appeal of fundamentalist Christianity, Evangelical Zionism and Messianic Judaism? What leads people, of all churches, to a Messianic congregation? Since Messianic Judaism initially emerged out of Jewish communities, the literature on this faith has had little to say about the role of 'gentiles' in Messianic groups or about the appeal of this faith to individuals who are not of Jewish origin. The literature on Messianic Judaism in North America has primarily focused on the controversial position of this movement vis-à-vis the Jewish world, its ambiguous position between Evangelical Christianity and mainstream Judaism, and its beliefs and practices. In the African context, Messianic Judaism has received even less attention. Where members of communities that claim Jewish ancestry have adopted a Messianic faith—as some Lemba, Igbo or Beta Israel did—scholars have naturally tended to focus primarily on their genealogical claims or on those members of these communities that adopted 'normative' or Rabbinic Judaism. Messianism does not easily fit within the common taxonomies of African faiths: For scholars of Judaism in Africa, it represents a deviation. For scholars of Christianity, it is a marginal phenomenon.

Some useful leads can be found in scholarship on fundamentalist Christianity and Messianic Judaism elsewhere in the world. In a recent paper, Hillary Kaell seeks to explain the growing popularity of Messianic Judaism among American Pentecostals and other Evangelical Christians. Her study focuses on older individuals or couples that attend services in North American Messianic Jewish congregation. She argues that gentile

[8] Robbins, *Becoming Sinners*, 84-8.
[9] J. D. Y. Peel, 'Conversion and Tradition in Two African Societies: Ijebu and Buganda', *Past & Present,* 77 (1977), 121-2.

believers in Messianic Jewish congregations engage in religious 'seeking' and are attracted to Messianic Judaism for a combination of intellectual and sensory reasons: they want to better understand Jesus and biblical prophesies about the end times, aspire to learn how to 'worship like Jesus', and toy with the idea of uncovering personal Jewish roots.[10] The themes identified by Kaell resonate with what attracted Nuer in Gambella to Messianic Judaism, even though the demography of those American 'gentiles' (mostly Pentecostals) who attend Messianic Jewish congregations was slightly different. This chapter, too, emphasises the role of Christian learning and critique in people's spiritual journeys and movement between denominations.

Another study, which does not focus solely on Messianic 'gentiles' but deals with their experiences as well, is Dulin's examination of Messianic Jews' understandings of authenticity. Here, too, processes of searching and learning are central, and perhaps because Dulin focuses on American fundamentalist Messianics rather than more charismatic congregations, his findings resonate more with the dynamics in Gambella. Dulin shows how the Messianic Jewish evaluation of authenticity is strongly influenced by the fundamentalist Christian model of reality. Like fundamentalists, Messianic Jews 'view the words of the Bible as a pure medium, an index of divine intent,' and thus understand their faith, which is closely modelled upon biblical descriptions of the form of Christianity practiced by the followers of Jesus, as the most authentic one. Rather than an artificial mixture of Judaism and Christianity, as some outsiders see it, Messianics view their faith as the only 'real' faith. Like many of my Messianic informants in Gambella, therefore, many of the American Messianic Jews and 'gentiles' Dulin studied were Evangelical Christians before joining Messianic groups and were therefore 'pursuing fundamentalist authenticity prior to their involvement in Messianic Judaism.'[11]

As this observation suggests, a historical account of the rise of Messianic Judaism in communities whose members did not previously practice 'normative' Judaism has to take into account how and why they came to pursue fundamentalist authenticity in the first place and how they understand it. The focus of this chapter is therefore not on 'conversion' as such but on people's spiritual journeys and local literacy practices. Christian literacy is a topic that has been neglected in the literature on Christianity in

[10] Kaell, 'Born-Again Seeking'.
[11] Dulin, 'Messianic Judaism', 44.

Africa, as Kirsch argues, as opposed to the more experiential aspects of worship and religious practice in Pentecostal churches.[12] However, as Keller's work on Seventh-day Adventists demonstrates, particularly among fundamentalist non-charismatic churches, religious devotion can only be understood if we pay close attention to the act of studying the Bible.[13] If, as Hutchinson, Falge and other scholars of South Sudanese societies note, there was a close link between literacy, modern education and Christianity in the region, then it is imperative to examine what literacy was actually used for, and why it came to matter so much to so many people.

Missionaries, literacy, evangelism

As in other parts of Africa—although relatively late—education, literacy and Christianity went hand in hand in colonial southern Sudan. We have already seen that colonial authorities relied on missions to provide education in the south. Missionaries also assumed a central role in the colonial efforts to record and study local languages, in particular Ray Huffman of the mission in Nasir and Father Crazzolara of the Catholic Mission in Yoynyang, who also published some of the first Nuer dictionaries in the late 1920s.[14] All members of the 'Sub-Committee on Nuer' in the Rejaf Language Conference of 1928, organised by the colonial government in order to promote the standardisation of southern Sudanese languages, were missionaries.[15] Unlike the Catholic missionaries that worked among Nuer communities west of the Nile, who did not emphasise the role of literacy and did not produce a Nuer version of the Scriptures, the Presbyterians, as Evangelical Protestant missionaries elsewhere, were committed to what Sugirtharajah called 'scriptural imperialism':[16] They sought to disseminate biblical texts among as many people as possible, in vernacular languages.

In southern Sudan, Presbyterian missionaries worked on the translation of the Bible into four languages: Shilluk, Murle, Anuak and Nuer.[17] The first written texts to appear in the

[12] T. G. Kirsch, *Spirits and Letters: Reading, Writing and Charisma in African Christianity* (New York, 2008).
[13] Keller, *The Road to Clarity*.
[14] R. Huffman, *Nuer-English Dictionary* (Berlin, 1929); J. P. Crazzolara, *Outlines of a Nuer Grammar* (Wien, 1933).
[15] Sudan Government, *Rejaf Language Conference, 1928: Report of Proceedings*, 1928, 34.
[16] R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge, 2001).
[17] J. Persson, *In Our Own Languages: The Story of Bible Translation in Sudan* (Nairobi, 1997), 12-3.

Nuer language—although they were not widely circulated at the time—were Christian texts. A collection of biblical stories in Nuer was published by the mission in Nasir in the 1920s.[18] In 1935, the Gospel of Luke was published in Nuer by the British and Foreign Bible Society.[19] Later, the American Presbyterian Mission established its own printing house in Malakal, Spearhead Press, which published individual books from the Bible translated by missionaries and Nuer students. The book of Genesis, translated by Presbyterian missionary Eleanor Vandevort and pastor Moses Kuach, was published in the early 1960s, followed by several other books from the New Testament. Working with Kuach, Vandevort wrote, she struggled to produce an 'exact, and therefore inerrant—as Evangelicals use the term—translation of the Scriptures.'[20] The full New Testament, as noted earlier, was published in 1968. By then, missionaries were already expelled from southern Sudan, but as we have already seen, Christianity was beginning to spread rapidly.

Even before the Bible itself was available in Nuer, however, command of 'papers' and knowledge of Christianity were intertwined, and directly linked to the notion of an individual commitment to learn in order to access new knowledge. Vandevort, who arrived in Nasir in 1949 to replace Huffman, describes how the mission employed young local students as paid village evangelists. These went out to villages on the regular basis to teach people about the Bible, and about praying and worshipping God as Christians. Armed with a pencil and a notebook, they registered the names of those villagers who attended their evangelism sessions. 'Riek would take out his notebook and pencil and read off the names registered in this particular place,' she writes of her experience accompanying an evangelist on a village tour. 'No one else there had a paper. No one else had a pencil. No one else could read and write.'[21] After attending such sessions for a period of time, individuals had to 'satisfy the examining board of missionary and church elder by answering correctly to questions relating to Jesus Christ and salvation.'[22] Only then they were baptised.

[18] Sudan Government, *Rejaf Language Conference*, 49.
[19] *Ruacni ti Gou Ti Ca Gor E Luk Me Ca Puoth* (London, 1935).
[20] Vandevort, *A Leopard Tamed*, 99.
[21] Ibid., 34.
[22] Ibid., 33.

From the mid-1950s, the American Mission's Spearhead Press published *Light: A Christian Magazine for the Sudan*, on behalf of the Southern Sudan Christian Council. The magazine covered all churches and Christian missions in Sudan, featuring updates on their development as well as 'worldwide news for and about Christians', illustrated lessons on the Bible and the life of Jesus, Bible quizzes, and articles about various aspects of the Christian lifestyle promoted by the church. One issue from 1958, for instance, was specifically dedicated to the topic of money, advising readers on how to save it and use it wisely. Another, from November 1955 (titled: 'Salute the Schools') was dedicated to education, celebrating the work of missionary schools across Sudan. *Light* issues usually also included a small section in Arabic, but most of their content was in English. Edited and produced by educated southern Sudanese and foreign missionaries, the magazine reflected the vision of a young (and mostly southern Sudanese) Christian and literate elite leading its nation into modernity through evangelism, education and work.

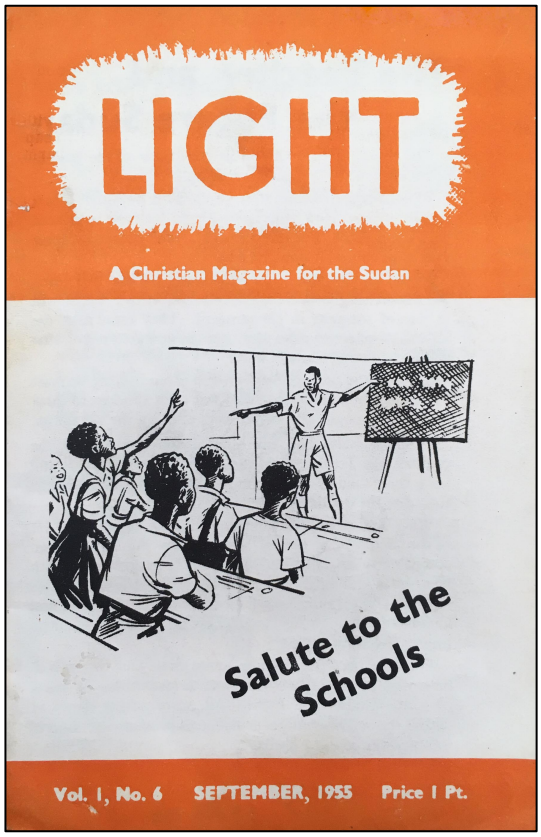

Figure 14. Cover of *Light: A Christian Magazine for the Sudan* (September 1955).

Being literate, members of this elite had access, through the Bible, to the Word of God—which came to be known in Nuer as *Ruac Kuɔth*, that is, the 'speech' or 'talk' of God—

and saw it as their mission to disseminate its truth among their communities. In 1959, for instance, *Light* published a short piece titled 'Fishing', by Moses Kuach, then already ordained as a pastor. In the text, Kuach equated the work of the evangelists in Nasir to that of fishermen, and the Word of God to both their net and food. 'To train them, I first asked them a question,' he wrote, describing a conversation he had with local evangelists: 'What do you taken when you go fishing?' The young men reply: 'We take the Word of God and spread it all over the hearers.'[23]

> Then I said, 'Let us follow the example of our Lord Jesus and start our work of fishing in homes. But before that, led me ask you another question. Have you learned how to throw the fishing net well? Can we just throw our nets anywhere in the river carelessly? No! We must be *careful* and *prayer-full*.
>
> 'Then, too,' I said, 'we need to eat before we go fishing.'
>
> One of the boys asked, 'What kind of food do we need?'
>
> Another boy answered, 'The Holy Spirit is our helper, and the words of God in the Bible will be our food. They will give us strength to do work for God all through the day. Men and women who are hungry can not do this hard work, because the Holy Spirit is not their helper and they do not know what the Word of God means for them.'
>
> From Tuesday to Friday, we prayed. Again on Saturday afternoon we met and practiced how to tell the Words of God to the people.
>
> 'What are we to tell the people?'
>
> We are to tell them what we read in John 3:16.[24] For God so loved the world that He came down to see His people whom He has loved, and he found them in darkness of sin, and struggling with Satan, who was stronger than they were. So He sent and gave to us His Son, who is stronger than Satan.

The missionaries may have won few souls for Christ by the time they had to leave Sudan, but the legacy of their 'scriptural imperialism' was incredibly influential. Not only was the New Testament in the Nuer language available by the 1970s, but a new Protestant 'semiotic ideology' gained currency among eastern Nuer communities, that is, a new set

[23] Moses Kuach, 'Fishers,' *Light*, December-January 1959, 10-1. Italics in original text.
[24] 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.'

of ideas about how signs function and should be understood.[25] In this semiotic ideology—characteristic, as Engelke shows, of post-missionary Evangelical Christianity elsewhere in Africa—the Bible (*Ruac Kuɔth In Rɛl Rɔ*, literally, 'the Holy Speech of God') was taken as 'a definitive sign through which God's presence is manifested' and a source of truth, meaning and authority.[26] The practice of educated Nuer evangelists going out to tell their communities 'what they read' persisted long after the missionaries left. 'Most of the evangelists can read the Bible in their language,' Thompson Gach Puk, a Nuer who worked with American missionaries in the Omo Valley in Ethiopia, reported following a tour of Upper Nile in the early 1970s. 'They teach the people who want to be baptized and then send for the pastors.'[27] Hutchinson describes how in the early 1980s youths who gained literacy skills in urban centres 'returned to their home communities extolling the benefits of the Christian faith as well as of literacy.'[28]

Kuoth Nhial, the 'speech' of God, and the Holy Bible

To appreciate how the 'speech' of God was understood, we must evaluate how new Christian knowledge and media spoke to existing local beliefs. That Christianity introduced new methods for understanding the world and identifying divine intention, does not mean that it entirely displaced older Nuer cosmologies. Evans-Pritchard's *Nuer Religion*, based on fieldwork that was concluded before Christianity had significant impact on rural Nuer, includes a detailed discussion of the Nuer concept of '*kwoth nhial*' (*Kuoth Nhial*), which, as he notes several times, was in many respects similar to the God described in the Hebrew Bible: the creator of all things, a judge, a powerful spirit (*kuoth*) that is invisible, immaterial, omnipresent, associated with the sky or the heavens (*nhial*), but whose precise nature and form is mysterious and beyond the human capacity to comprehend.[29] The longer history of the Nuer notion of this supreme being is opaque. Horton hypothesised that since Nuer (and Dinka) were cattle herding communities whose members regularly migrated and interacted with other communities, they were likely to

[25] Keane, *Christian Moderns*, 16-23.
[26] Engelke, *A Problem of Presence*, 48.
[27] 'Thompson Gac Puk's report on his visit to the Sudan, Dec.-Feb. 72-73,' SAD 646/9/26. On Thompson Gac, see: M. F. Swart, *The Call of Africa: The Reformed Church in America Mission in the Sub-Sahara, 1948-1998* (Grand Rapids, 1998), 184-6, 248.
[28] Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 315.
[29] Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*.

develop an elaborate notion of a supreme being, as opposed to more isolated communities which tended to focus on 'lesser spirits'.[30]

In any case, Nuer Christians today usually explain that their non-Christian ancestors worshiped the same God mentioned in the Bible before the coming of the missionaries. They were simply not informed about the arrival of His son, neither did they have access to His 'speech'. Indeed, Evans-Pritchard observed that Nuer who had 'contacts with foreign peoples' at the time of his fieldwork did not regard them 'as having a different God' from *Kuoth Nhial*. Foreigners only had 'a different name for him and a different manner of communicating with him. A Dinka prays to *kwoth a nhial*, whom he calls *nhialic*. Similarly the Muslim or Christian prays to *kwoth a nhial* under other names.' Thus, Evans-Pritchard concluded: 'The Nuer attitude in this matter shows clearly the markedly monotheistic tendency of their religious thought. It is polyonymous, but not henotheistic.'[31] Lienhardt mentioned a similar attitude among Dinka with regard to the nature of their supreme being, *nhialic*.[32] As Horton argues, this is not a unique stance, as 'African peoples characteristically see Islamic and Christian ideas of God as referring to their own supreme being.'[33] The implication of this attitude was that the adoption of Christianity did not require Nuer 'converts'—if we can still describe them using this term—to recognise the existence of an alternative supreme being, but rather to gain new knowledge with regard to the nature, history and workings of a supreme being they already 'trusted' (*ŋäth*) to exist.

Equally important, Nuer spiritual practices featured a strong emphasis on the verbal. *Kuoth Nhial* did not 'speak'. He was primarily understood to manifest Himself through those functions of the sky that are both unpredictable and either threaten or benefit humans—lightning (*mar nhial*) and rain (*nhiaal*)—or through diseases and death.[34] But divine 'speech' was made available to humans through other means, and particularly, since the late nineteenth century, through the words of prophets. The eastward migration in the nineteenth century resulted in the introduction of new 'free-divinities' to Nuer

[30] R. Horton, 'On the Rationality of Conversion', *Africa,* 45 (1975), 227.
[31] Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 49.
[32] G. Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka* (Oxford, 1961), 57.
[33] Horton, 'On the Rationality of Conversion'.
[34] Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 124-5.

society.[35] The first and most prominent among these divinities was Deng, which Nuer communities came to know through their Dinka neighbours. It was 'free-divinities' like Deng that seized the famous Nuer prophets that emerged in this period and spoke, through them, to the people. A prophet in the Nuer language was referred to as a 'sack' or 'vessel' of divinity (*gök kuɔth*), and divinities, representing 'refractions' of God, were said to have 'fallen' from the sky when they possessed human beings. The songs and sayings of prophets, therefore, which were very central to their activities and legacy, came from these divinities.[36] The notion that divine guidance and command can be made available to humans in the form of speech was not foreign to Nuer as it may have been to other communities in the region with different spiritual traditions.[37]

The language and format in which the 'speech' of God was made available to Nuer speakers is also important. Writing on the translation of the New Testament into Uduk, in Sudan's Blue Nile, James describes the 'tangible immediacy of the Gospel' for local listeners and readers in the late 1960s.[38] One reason for this immediacy was the fact that most people who were exposed to the Bible at the time had very little knowledge of the historical or social context of the events it describes. Another reason was that the sense that the language of the Bible is removed from everyday life (a sense any reader of the Bible in most English translations and certainly in Hebrew immediately gets) was lost upon translation to Uduk. Thus, read in Blue Nile, the Bible felt as if it describes events that took place 'little more than a couple of generations ago.'[39] The Nuer language, too, does not have a written tradition in which an ancient text is easily distinguishable by its vocabulary and style. Missionaries who worked on the translation of the Bible drew on everyday expressions in Nuer, which they learned from their interlocutors and students. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the Nuer Gospel also instilled its early readers with a similar sense of immediacy.

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[35] Like Johnson, I follow here the term used by Lienhardt ('free-divinities') rather than that used by Evans-Pritchard ('sky spirits'). However, like Evans-Pritchard, I use 'God' rather than 'Divinity', for the supreme being *Kuoth Nhial*. On free-divinities in Nuer society, see: Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 55-70.
[36] Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 45-8; Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 101-4, 333.
[37] Compare, for example: James, *The Listening Ebony*, 218-20. In this sense, I think that the Nuer notion of the Christian *Ruac Kuɔth*, a term usually translated as the 'Word of God', is closer to the biblical *dvar-ha'el* in Hebrew, which refers to God's 'saying' or 'speech' (*davar*) but also His will or command as expressed vocally.
[38] Ibid., 238.
[39] Ibid.

With the democratisation of urban frontiers across South Sudan and its borderlands, the proliferation of churches, the rise of Evangelical Christianity among eastern Nuer communities, and the publication of the complete Holy Bible in Nuer in the late 1990s, the Book has spread far and wide. If previously it was only a small group of educated elites that were able to access it—both physically, for it was mostly available in schools and churches, and intellectually, for they were able to read—since the 1990s, growing numbers of people were able to study and debate the Scriptures themselves. Although people in Newland were certainly more familiar with world history and geography than rural Uduk were two or three generations ago, my impression was that the Nuer Holy Bible, as published in 1999 in an accessible common language translation, continued to instil a sense of 'tangible immediacy' in its readers.[40] There were few terms in the Bible the average Nuer-speaker, young or old, could not understand, and it included illustrations, maps, a glossary and short introductions summarising each book, which all made it an appealing source of information.

There were no shops regularly selling Bibles in Newland at the time of my research. And yet, every household seemed to possess at least one Nuer Bible. They were occasionally sold on the street by individuals who brought them from Kenya or South Sudan, but many people also kept their old copies as they travelled, for years.[41] To make sure the books endure in Gambella's harsh weather conditions and do not fall apart under constant use, people used to glue to them a black plastic cover and hammer nails into their binding. This also gave Bibles a more prestigious appearance and a distinctive presence as an object. Bibles were often held proudly in photographs, representing the enduring presence of, and personal commitment to, the Word of God. Since backpacks were not commonly used in Newland, it was very common, especially but not only on weekends, to see people walking around holding their Bible (and often, also a hymn book, or the Bible Study Guide booklets, if they were Seventh-day Adventists). This should not imply that they were treated, however, with extreme ceremoniousness: People placed inside the Book papers, notes and money, and the Bibles of dedicated church members were worn-out,

[40] The Nuer translation was produced using the English Good News Bible, which is a modern simplified translation in everyday language.
[41] Some Nuer who came from South Sudan or Sudan used an Arabic Bible, but this was extremely rare. More common was the use of English Bibles of various translations, both in physical copies and through smartphone applications. Amharic Bibles could be found in one or two shops at the centre of Gambella town but were not used in Newland.

torn, and filled with lists, drawings and highlighted verses.[42] The Holy Book, in other words, was valuable for the information it encompassed about the 'speech' of God, but not 'fetishised' as an object.[43]

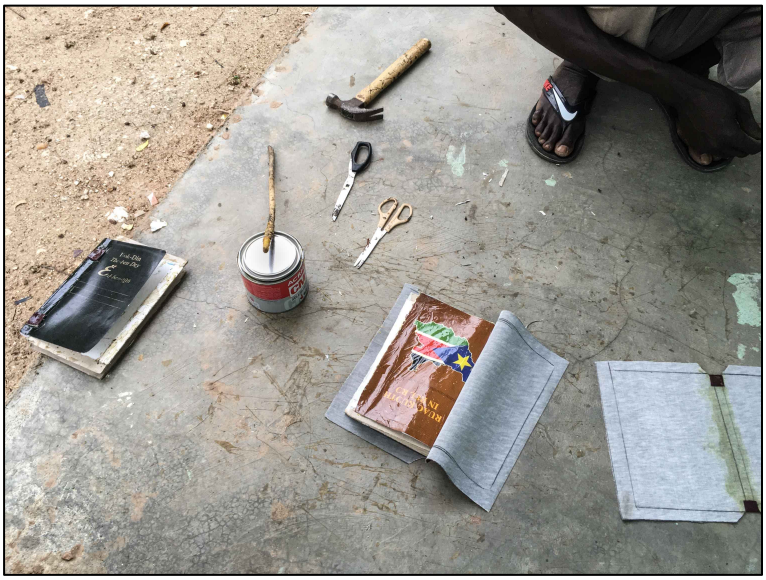

Figure 15. Covering the Bible and a hymn book in Olive Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Teaching the 'speech' of God

In hymns and sermons, virtually all churches in Gambella likened evangelism and worshiping to a battle (against the devil) and those carrying out these tasks were described in songs and dances as soldiers (*lathkëëri*). But if Pentecostals were more likely to equate the Holy Spirit to a rifle in this context—as a very popular gospel song by artists from Christian Temple Church stated: *Yiëë Kuɔth ɛ mac kööra!* The Holy Spirit is a war gun!—for Messianics and Adventists, it was the Word that served as the ultimate weapon and shield.[44] In the work of evangelisation ('taking the speech of God out'), then, it was the Bible that was equated to a rifle.[45] These metaphors summarise well the difference between Messianics and Adventists and most other Protestants in Newland when it came to the role of the Bible in the circulation of knowledge of the divine. The former did not

[42] As among the American fundamentalists Crapanzano studied in the US: Crapanzano, *Serving the Word*, 54-6.
[43] Kirsch, *Spirits and Letters*.
[44] The quote is from the song *Yecu cɛ ben ɛla kaan ɣɔaa* ('Jesus came to save the world') by Buony Mabiel.
[45] Notes, 28 June and 16 July 2019.

seek to persuade new converts with performances of miracles or revelatory interventions of the Holy Spirit, but with lists of verses, which they carefully memorised and were, ideally, always ready to invoke when discussing their faith.

By far the favourite tool for evangelisation and preaching members of the Church of God possessed (apart from the Bible itself) was the 'Bible chart'. This was a large poster with a set of illustrations describing some of the key elements of the biblical prophesies on 'the coming of God's Kingdom' (*Ben Kuäärä Kuɔth*) from the books of Revelation and Daniel. Under each image was a reference to the verse it illustrated, encouraging the spectator to further interrogate the Bible in order to fully grasp its meaning. Several leading questions ('The coming of the Kingdom of God is near or not yet?' 'God's Kingdom will come in war or in peace?') similarly guided the viewer through the references. To be sure, without the biblical text, the poster was fairly obscure, and even with the Bible, a fair amount of explaining was required. Church of God youths would train in advance in explaining the meaning of the chart vis-à-vis the Scriptures, to make sure people do not stare at it 'for nothing' (*baŋ*). When going out to preach, they would hang the Bible chart in a central public area such as one of Newland's main junctions. Children and youths would soon gather around it, explore the illustrations and take notes. Before long, passionate debates about the Coming Kingdom would evolve.

Whether carried out in church or as part of an evangelisation campaign, preaching was referred to in Nuer as *Ruac Kuɔth*, ('the speech of God'). During sermons—in particular, but not exclusively, in Seventh-day Adventist and Messianic churches—listeners often carefully noted down, inside their own Bibles or on separate notes, the lists of verses referenced. For many, these references to the Scriptures were the most important part of preaching and teaching. Verses were usually cited by preachers with no reference to the context in which they originally appear in the Bible—clean of the polluting ambiguities of genre and the potential open-endedness of narrative.[46] After a while, I too learned to sit in church and quickly open my Bible (I normally used an app on my smartphone, as was not uncommon in Gambella) in the right place as references to the Scriptures were uttered—sometimes dozens of verses within the course of a single sermon. Once the preacher referenced a verse, those quick enough in the audience would immediately start

[46] Crapanzano, *Serving the Word*, 146-7.

reading it aloud, in an authoritative voice. If more than one person started reading at the same time, the more confident and louder naturally prevailed.

But here too there was a difference between all Sabbatarian groups and other Protestants. In most 'Sunday churches', preaching was a relatively short part of the worship programme, usually not longer than 45 minutes. It came towards the end of the service, after several hours of songs, prayers and announcements. Messianics (and Adventists), on the other hand, spent most of their time in church on Sabbath studying and discussing the Bible. Sabbath programmes in the Church of God began in nine o'clock in the morning, with a song and a prayer followed by the reading of the Ten Commandments: a church elder read the commandments aloud (Exodus 20:3-17), sentence by sentence, with the whole congregation repeating. This was followed by a lesson ('teaching', *ŋiic*) from the Church of God's annual Bible Lessons booklet, sent to Gambella from the US every year. The booklet included a lesson for each Sabbath of the year, addressing various issues, from church doctrine to family life. Titles of lessons included, for example: 'God's power over our bodies', 'Our duty towards the poor', 'Husbands and wives', 'Wisdom', and 'Thy truth (the journey to The New Jerusalem)'.

Figure 16. Eden Seventh-day Adventist Church holding an afternoon Bible study session under the mango trees by the Baro River with a visiting preacher from Kenya.

Each Sabbath lesson comprised of a series of questions, each presented with references to specific biblical verses in which one was supposed to find answers. These questions

were followed by a short concluding statement, summarising the lesson's key message in a sentence or two. Although lessons were supposed—according to the brief instructions in the beginning of the Church's booklet—to take the form of a participatory discussion, my experience was that they were usually taught as a lecture. Every week another member was chosen to go through the lesson before the congregation, and throughout the lesson the audience participated by reading the required verses, but not by making any comments. However, once the lecture—which lasted about an hour—was over, there was time for questions, and at this point the lesson turned into a more open discussion in which the implications of the biblical message to life in Gambella were discussed. Women, it should be noted, were not allowed to talk in church. They did not preach, and if they had any questions about a lesson, they had to approach any of the elders privately after the programme ended.

Figure 17. Bible studying on Sabbath in the Church of God.

In the Church of God, the morning Bible lesson was followed by songs and prayers and two additional but shorter study sessions during the day, which were often based on other Church of God leaflets and materials. These study sessions paralleled similar classes in other Messianic congregations, each drawing on the interpretations and written materials produced by the international groups it associated itself with and their respective leaders. The Congregation of Yahweh held two consecutive Bible lessons on Sabbath morning, one after the other, often based on Don Esposito's writing or materials of his ministry. Meanwhile, Ahavat Yeshua usually drew on materials of Messianic Jewish organisations

and preachers (most commonly, the books of Dan Juster and Asher Intrater) in their Sabbath study sessions. At the Seventh-day Adventists Church, too, 'Sabbath School' sessions were held on Saturday mornings, and were based on the quarterly Bible Study Guide booklets which were disseminated by the Church's headquarters in the US and locally translated into Nuer and re-printed. Other lessons and sermons in the Seventh-day Adventist Church were often based directly on the books of Ellen G. White.

In short, while all churches in Gambella emphasised the role of the Bible as a source of truth, both Adventists and Messianics put much greater emphasis on the act of interrogating it, thus also stressing the responsibility of each and every individual to seek knowledge in this way. Their attitude in this regard was similar to that of fundamentalist Christians elsewhere who privilege the close reading of the Scriptures over subjective sensory experiences and spiritual guidance as a method of identifying divine truth and intent.[47] On the face of it, therefore, Bible studying was regarded as a liberating act that promised the comforts of epistemological certainty and spiritual coherence. But as we shall see in the following sections and as might be expected, unearthing the meaning of the Scriptures was far from a straightforward exercise, and studying the Bible produced doubts and confusion just as much as it encouraged religious commitment to any specific church, rendering the search for the authentic an effort that never fully came to an end.

Agency: Evangelism, studying and becoming informed

Nhial was born in Lare in 1983, the year Sudan's second civil war broke out.[48] He started primary school in Itang, before moving back to Lare in the 1990s and then moving to Gambella town to attend secondary school. The first church Nhial joined, around 2000, was the Evangelical Covenant Church of Ethiopia. The Evangelical Covenant Church was one of the new churches 'brought' to Gambella from the US in the late 1990s. Nuer from Gambella who were resettled in the US from Kenya a few years earlier reached out to friends and relatives back home and suggested opening local branches of the church, which they joined in the US. By the early 2000s, it spread quickly through Gambella's refugee camps and villages and into Sudan, to become one of the more popular churches

[47] Ibid.; Keller, *The Road to Clarity*.
[48] I interviewed and had informal conversations with Nhial on multiple occasions between February and August 2019.

among eastern Nuer communities.[49] At the time, Nhial joined the church with his family. 'I was forced by my parent to go with them,' he told me. 'You know, at that time people do not read the Bible as much as possible, but they depend on their parents. I went there because they told me we can go there, and I accepted.'

In the early 2000s, Nhial became severely ill. He sought help in different clinics and the hospital in Gambella, but no solution was found to his condition. He decided to leave for Khartoum, which, for decades, represented the most reliable option for Nuer in Gambella who sought medical services. As he lingered in the Sudanese capital, he also started studying for his first undergraduate degree, and came across Nuer Seventh-day Adventists. 'They told me about Sabbath,' he recounted. 'We read in the Bible and we thought that Sabbath could be the day of worship sanctified by God himself.' Nhial was persuaded and decided to join the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Before long, however, members of the Church of God also appeared in Khartoum. 'You know, at that time I was in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, so these people [Church of God members] they used to visit those places.' The encounter led to joint Bible study sessions, and these in turn led Nhial to leave the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

> We arranged for further meetings until we reached to the conclusion. I decided to join through the doctrine that they preached to me. […] I also evaluate the Seventh-day Adventist and Church of God doctrines. When I found that Adventists originate from America and have no connection with Jews, and they also allow women to be leaders and they allow them also to teach in the church while the Bible prohibits this one—does not allow that one—I joined Church of God because of these reasons. The headquarters of the church should be in Jerusalem; women could not be allowed as preachers in the church and could not be leaders or pastors, as the Bible said. That was the reason why I left Adventist. I found that Adventist was not teaching the right doctrine.

After he decided to join the Church of God, Nhial became increasingly embedded in the organisation. While he was still in Khartoum, a decision was passed that the local

[49] Interview with David Wurieng, leader and founder of the Evangelical Covenant Church of Ethiopia, 23 December 2018.

congregation needs a deacon. A lot was cast (a biblical practice, use by the apostles),[50] and Nhial was chosen to be ordained as deacon and the chief representative of the Church of God in Khartoum. The Church of God rejected the hierarchical leadership structures of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and other Protestant groups, and certainly those of Orthodox and Catholic Christians. These were all seen as inspired by 'the Roman [Catholic] tradition of church hierarchy,' whereas the Church of God claimed to draw its structure from the Bible. 'Scriptural church authority is like this: Jesus Christ is our high priest in heaven, our father in heaven is God himself, so here on earth we are supposed to have only some church helpers,' I was explained. 'Only "elder" and "deacon" are the titles to be used.' In practice, the Church also had a board comprising of 12 individuals and led by an overseer, but these were primarily understood as administrative positions rather than roles that are part of a hierarchy mediating between humans and God. The rejection of hierarchy is important: the responsibility to know God's truth was an individual one and could not be relegated to mediators.[51]

Once a member of the Church and a deacon, Nhial was responsible for spreading the knowledge that had led him to the Church of God among those still misinformed. Since members in Khartoum did not live in the same place, he had to travel around the city often. In addition, since the congregation in Khartoum did not have an elder, Nhial was responsible for overseeing various administrative issues, such as manging the congregation's properties and finances and representing it in meetings in Ethiopia and South Sudan. It was only in 2015 that Nhial returned to Gambella. He settled in Newland, started working as a teacher and married, but his wife passed away shortly afterwards, while giving birth. By the time we met, he was also studying for another bachelor's degree in Gambella University and serving as a deacon in the Church in Newland. I often met him sitting with other committed members of the Church of God outside the university or under the tree in one of the teashops frequented by the Church's elders.

Particularly among members of Sabbatarian groups, small gatherings in which people interrogated the Bible and debated church doctrines—the sort of gatherings Nhial described to me—were very common in Gambella. Sometimes they occurred spontaneously. Picture, for instance, a group of teenagers debating how the Battle of

[50] Acts 1:26.
[51] In contrast to Ethiopian Orthodox Christians: Boylston, *The Stranger at the Feast*, 56-71.

Armageddon will unfold as they take a shower and wash their clothes in the Baro River. Between friends and relatives, conversations about churches and their doctrines often evolved at home, as people were sitting or sleeping outside in their compounds or sharing a meal. But Messianics from different groups often also visited each other—at church or home, upon invitation or not—in order to chat about doctrinal matters, read the Bible, watch videos of sermons, or go over religious tracts. The objective, it seemed to me, was to persuade others to join their church just as much as it was to silence any personal doubts they may have had about the accuracy of their own knowledge. As such, engagement in such discussions was an important part of being a committed born-again Messianic and an activity Messianics carried out with considerable satisfaction.

Figure 18. Studying the Church of God's Bible chart in the street after sunset.

To a great extent, what enabled such dialogues and debates to persist was the access Adventists and Messianics in Newland had to a range of secondary Christian publications from around the world. These were usually, but not always, in English, and had to be sought out in creative ways. Earlier generations of Christians relied on tracts and booklets which often found their way to refugee camps through Evangelical groups or Christian humanitarian organisations. In Newland, some materials, such as the study books mentioned above, were shared with congregations by the groups with which they were affiliated abroad and were thus read in church at specific times and with institutional guidance and supervision. But in many cases, books also circulated between friends, were brought especially from Addis Ababa or Nairobi, or, in recent years, accessed through

the internet. And while each group had its own trusted sources and websites,[52] materials also circulated and changed hands. It was not uncommon to see members of a specific group reading materials of another, though not, it seemed to me, without paying attention to the institutional and religious background of their authors. Since access to education (and therefore literacy rates) among women was significantly lower than among men, Bible study was to a great extent a gendered activity. This may also partly explain the fact that there was a higher rate of male members in Adventist and Messianic groups compared to other Protestant ones.

Figure 19. Some Adventist, Messianic and Jehovah's Witnesses reading materials in Newland.

Nhial's story was therefore not unique, at least not among male Messianics. Almost all members of the Church of God that I interviewed described their decision to join this Church as a direct consequence of reaching intellectual maturity and gaining the ability

[52] For example, Adventists often used materials from the popular Adventist Evangelical website Amazing Facts (www.amazingfacts.org). Church of God members turned to the Church's website (http://www.cog7day.org) but Messianics also drew on materials from the websites of other groups that were not represented in Gambella, like Jewish Voice Ministry (www.jewishvoice.org). See also the discussion of Nazarene Judaism below.

to read and write and therefore to study the Bible independently. One after the other, members narrated how they joined other churches as children under the influence of older family members—unaware that they were not following the right doctrine—before discovering 'the truth' by reading the Bible and through discussions with friends and relatives. It was the process of becoming 'informed' through the act of reading and engaging in intellectual discussion that led individuals to join the Church of God. Deciding to join the Church was, in other words, an assertion of agency. 'I really become informed about what is going on in different churches,' one member who was previously a Catholic told me about his decision to join the Church of God. 'I can differentiate, because that time I start to read my Bible. When I try to read the Bible, I can judge exactly which church is preaching the truth based on what is written in the Bible.'[53]

Revelation: The role of the Holy Spirit

Originally from Lare, Gatluak was the leader of one of the Seventh-day Adventist churches in Newland that many of my acquaintances used to attend. I already knew him for a long time before he first told me his life history. A talkative man in his 30s, his sermons were always exceptionally long but full of dramatic demonstrations and jokes that captured the audience. Like many of his agemates in Gambella, Gatluak spent a few years as a small child in Itang refugee camp though he moved with his family back to Lare when the Derg fell in 1991. He started his primary school in Lare, but then moved to Pugnido refugee camp for a short period as it was said that in the camp the quality of education in English was better. Later he was sent by his family to study in Gambella town. After finishing high school successfully, the national system allocated him to a university in Axum, in northern Ethiopia. He completed his first degree there in 2014.

Since there were not many jobs readily available for fresh university graduates, becoming a tutor in Gambella University was a popular path. It represented an attractive opportunity, because after a year of tutoring, one was automatically sent to study for a master's degree in another government university. This is what Gatluak did. By the time we met, Gatluak already finished his master's and returned to Gambella to continue teaching. He was allocated a small cottage—one in a long line of houses—inside the

[53] Interview with Gatluak, 10 February 2019.

university, where he lived with his wife and three children. This was where we sat down to talk. It was not a large house, but as a concrete building with two flours, it was far more sophisticated than any of the houses in Newland. The furniture inside, however, was just as frugal as it was in most Nuer huts and mud houses in the town: a few plastic chairs, a small table, a television (playing an Ethiopian channel in loud volume), a mattress, some suitcases. The walls, painted in pale beige, were covered with dirt, encapsulating years of children spending their time playing and eating in the building.

Gatluak's family was not Christian when he was born, but in 1999, he told me, he joined the Presbyterian Church, Makane Yesus, in Lare, where he was baptised 'by cup' (that is, not by immersion, as the Adventist doctrine requires). He decided to go to church because his older brother and sister did, and because he heard the message about Jesus Christ, that 'Christians will go to heaven and those who are not Christian will die. This was my first message, I hear it. And then I would like to start to be a Christian, at that time.' In the early 2000s, however, Gatluak's uncle, who was residing as a refugee in Kenya, was granted a place for resettlement in Australia, and the family wanted to send Gatluak along. He travelled to Pagak, South Sudan, just across the border from Gambella, 'to wait the airplane which could take me to Kenya and then to Australia after the process finished.'

'But at that time another thing happened.' While in Pagak, Gatluak was exposed to the Seventh-day Adventist message. 'I heard the massage from Adventists in the school. They say that Adventists is the true church of God. It is the true church, which is biblical-based teaching.' His friends from class, he recalls, asked him: 'If you are protestant, why do you worship on Sundays? Sunday is not a day of worship.' Gatluak 'became excited to search this point, if it is true or not.'

> I went to the Bible to study and ask other people, and I got more comments from other people, they say that 'No, Adventist is not good. We are from our ancestors and grandfathers we are Protestants, why do we need to go there?' One of my friends told me. But I said that if the Bible says so, so we can accept the Bible. If the Bible tell that Sunday is not the day. I myself… I acknowledge that Sunday is not the seventh day but the first day of the week. I accept this one. And also, they also tell you that the way the people are baptised, since I

> was baptised by cup, Adventists use immersion. They use baptism by immersion. And also… baptism by immersion is in the Bible, and baptism by cup is not from the Bible. So, Adventists, they convinced me with the Bible.

The trip to Australia never materialised, but by the time Gatluak returned from South Sudan, he intended to join the Seventh-day Adventist Church. However, he was not yet 'deep rooted in Adventist,' as he puts it, when members of the Church of God appeared in the village too. They told him that Adventists follow the teaching of Ellen G. White, a woman, which is biblically unacceptable, and that her claim that all saved souls will go to heaven in the end times is wrong, for according to the Bible, it is Jesus who will come to Jerusalem, on earth. Gatluak could not make up his mind. 'For two months I joined Church of God, but I was not baptised. I was not baptised in Church of God and also I was not baptised in Adventist.' When some of Gatluak's Adventist friends realised he may be joining the Church of God, they tried to persuade him against it. The teaching of the Church of God, they told him, 'is based on the Jewish tradition, not Jesus Christ's teachings.' They also, he recounted, gave him a list of 16 verses that indicate that in the end times people will go to heaven rather than to Jerusalem.

For several weeks, Gatluak and an Adventist friend of his used to meet regularly and study the Bible. 'When I support that Church of God is the true church and Adventist is the true church, I became confused,' he told me. And this confusion, his description suggested, clearly had to be resolved. Ultimately, however, it was not the Bible alone that helped him make up his mind. In a highly stylised narrative, he described to me how the Holy Spirit did:

> I kneel down and pray on the road when I return back to my village after we finished the discussion, in the area where no people live, on the road to my village. I kneel down and pray God: 'Show me the true way! If it is the Church of God, let me go to Church of God. If it is Adventist, let me go to Adventist.' Suddenly, when I arrive at my home, I open the Bible. God direct me to Matthew chapter 24, verse 24, [where Jesus says that] 'at the end times, the false Christs will happen. Those who will say 'I am the Messiah' will deceive many people. But if you are my disciple, you will know that I have told you before: 'don't be deceived by these false teachers.'

> At that time, I heard that, from my colleague, the one who tried to convert me to Church of God, he used to claim that the name, our name should be not Christian but Messianic. So, when I read this verse, 24 Matthew 24, it says that there will be those who call themselves Messianic, so […] I acknowledge that God has answered my prayer with this Bible. He shows me that Church of God are Messianic, which means that they are false teachers, because they don't support the name Christians. […] And then my heart has been converted to Adventist Church, at that time, in 2004, winter 2004.
>
> At that time, I went to the one who convert me, the one who convert me to Adventist. I tell him that 'I have accepted the Adventist faith. Give me the doctrine and I will read again with the one who tried to convert me.' And then he gave me the Adventist doctrine and I went there to Teluth and I met that guy who tried to convert me to Church of God. I tell him: 'Why you cheat us? Why you deceive us?' […] I say that, 'Our people, they cheat us, those of Church of God, they cheat us, my brother.' So, he said: 'What about you?' I say that 'Adventist—true faith. If you are not believing, we can read!'

In chapter 24 of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus sits with his disciples on the Mount of Olives and, prompted by a question from them, lists some of the signs that will appear before His Second Coming. It is an apocalyptic prophesy—often known as the Olivet Discourse and also recounted in Mark 13 and Luke 21—describing wars, natural disasters, and the violent persecution of the followers of Messiah. One of the signs that the disciples are to expect, Jesus says, is the rise of false messiahs that will lead people astray. This theme was often highlighted by Messianics and Adventists in Gambella, who were greatly concerned with identifying these false Christs and avoiding their deception. 'Watch out that no one deceives you,' Jesus warns (24:4). 'For many will come in my name, claiming, "I am the Messiah," and will deceive many' (24:5, and see also 24:11). In the Nuer version of the verse that Gatluak mentioned ('For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect'), the word *mɛthiani* is used for 'messiahs' ('*Kɛ ɣöö bi mɛthiani kɛnɛ göök kg̱g̱cni rɔ jiɛc…*'). Hence Gatluak's conclusion that the Church of God ('Messianics') were teaching a false doctrine.

The practice Gatluak described to me—opening the Bible at a random page after a prayer and finding a solution to a difficult dilemma in the first verse read—is one that strict fundamentalists would not endorse. It is certainly foreign to the rabbinic Jewish notion that the interpretation of the Scriptures is 'not in heaven' but solely the responsibility of humans.[54] But as Crapanzano notes in his work on American Christian fundamentalists, it is certainly not unheard of.[55] Although they rejected the sensual emphasis of Pentecostal churches and focused on the Scriptures, neither Messianics nor Adventists in Gambella dismissed the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding one through the potential ambiguities of the Word of God.[56] Christian conversion, as Keane observes, always features a complicated, even paradoxical, tension between divine and human agency.[57] This tension was manifested in the stories I was told in Newland in the relationship between the human actions of reading and interrogating the Bible and the role of the Holy Spirit in determining the course of one's spiritual path to God.

Even among fundamentalist literalists who insisted that the 'speech' of God was the ultimate index of divine truth and rejected more experiential manifestations of the Holy Spirit, it was not always the Bible alone that served as a vehicle through which divine truth was revealed. 'We talk to God in hymns and prayers, and He replies us through the Bible, dreams or visions,' Nuer members of the Church of God explained in one of the leaflets they produced.[58] On at least two other occasions, Messianics described to me how their decision to join the Church of God was inspired by a dream they had after a long (and confusing) process of studying the Bible with friends and relatives. In both cases, the dream indicated to them which church they should choose. Stories about dreams, voices and visions did seem to be more common in Pentecostal churches in Gambella and in the conversion narratives of their members than they were among Messianics. But the tension between the accessible nature of the Bible and the potential need for divine guidance in determining its precise meaning was inescapable.

[54] A point most famously made both by Moses (Deuteronomy 30:11-14) and later in the famous Talmudic tale of the oven of Akhnai. See, for example, the discussion in: D. Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia, 2004), 162-82.
[55] Crapanzano, *Serving the Word*, 127.
[56] Compare: Kirsch, *Spirits and Letters*.
[57] Keane, *Christian Moderns*, 56.
[58] Luke and Lul, 'Were we part', 26.

I do not know whether Gatluak's friend was persuaded to return to the Adventist fold, but after the meeting in which Gatluak told me his own story, he invited me to meet in person again in order to study the Bible together. As already noted, the Jewish belief in the Old Testament but not the New Testament was seen as inexplicable by Christians in Newland, particularly members of Sabbatarian groups. Gatluak himself expressed the hope that I would decide to be baptised and become a 'pure Christian' (by which he meant, an Adventist) several times earlier, so I knew what to expect. When we sat to study the Bible, Gatluak asked me to read several verses in the Old Testament, and then referred me to verses in the New Testament which should have cleared any doubts that I may have had about Jesus being the son of God. Before we departed, however, he also led a short prayer, thanking God for the opportunity and asking Him to lead me, too, in the right direction. The course of my life and my ability to know God, it seemed, was similarly caught in the ambiguous zone between my own agency and God's will.

Doubt: On searching and not deciding

Matthew was born in Dima refugee camp in the mid-1990s to a Gaa-jak family from Lare. His mother was a member of the Lutheran Church in the camp by the time he was born, and hence he was given a Christian name and came to be known by it. He grew up in the camp and started primary school there but returned to Lare in the mid-2000s. His father was a 'chief' in South Sudan, and Matthew moved to Pagak (on the Sudanese side of the border) to complete his primary school there, before coming back to Lare and finishing high school in Ethiopia. After high school, he was sent to Gambella University and by the time I met him, was living in the University's dorms. His family was still in Lare, so he used to travel there sometimes over the weekends, but otherwise spent his time in Newland and around the university, often in the company of fellow Messianic students.

As was often the case in Newland, when Matthew and I did finally meet for an interview, it started with me being interrogated rather than asking the questions. We were sitting in one of the cafeterias inside Gambella University, and it was clear that Matthew was hoping that I will be able to answer some urgent questions that were preoccupying him. At first, he sought my views about the debate around the ties (or better, lack thereof) between the Church of God in Gambella and 'Jews' in Jerusalem. What was my 'analysis' of this? When I was not immediately sure how to respond, he had another question, one

that I was already familiar with. ‘I used to read some orthodox books that say that the Messiah did not fulfil all the criteria to be the real Messiah, but in my view and analysis he did fulfil them,’ he explained. ‘And the majority of the Jews do not believe. Why?’

Although Matthew’s family was Lutheran, when he travelled to Pagak as a primary school student in the late 2000s, he joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Within months, however, he was persuaded to move to the Church of God, whose doctrine, he was impressed, was more in line with the Scriptures. Adventists ‘say that all those who do righteous things will go to heaven, but in the Church of God they say that the Kingdom will be on earth,’ he told me, when I asked what made him change his mind. ‘This is what is there in the Bible, and it says: “Don’t add or remove anything from the Bible.”’ Matthew joined the Church of God with his elder brother, who since then became ill and returned to the village. His other brothers, meanwhile, remained in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, while his mother and sisters never left the Lutheran Church. ‘If I am independent, if I have a wife and a job, I will support them, and they will join my congregation,’ he explained. ‘Here in Africa, if you support somebody, they will join you most of the time.’

But it was not entirely clear, to either Matthew or me, which congregation they would join. I met Matthew multiple times before we first sat down together for an interview. We knew each other through mutual friends in Newland, and he was the one to first introduce me to Ahavat Yeshua Messianic Congregation, where he used to pray since early 2019. Matthew left the Church of God for Ahavat Yeshua because the latter, unlike the Church of God, had links with Jewish people in Israel. But he was equally interested in exploring other Messianic groups and was also the one who first showed me how to reach the kibbutz of the Congregation of Yahweh—using my presence, I sensed, as an excuse to visit the camp himself. Though he prayed in Ahavat Yeshua, he was not a baptised member, neither was he baptised before in the Church of God. He had doubts about the doctrines of these group, and he was seeking answers and clarifications.

Matthew and several of his friends, I learned, were hoping to start a new congregation in Gambella which was to follow the doctrine of ‘Nazarene Judaism’. They were influenced by the writings of a certain Rav Sha’ul—an American Evangelical leading a ministry called The Sabbath Covenant, and the author of numerous religious books dedicated to

the interpretation of the New Testament. Rav Sha'ul (Sha'ul being Paul's Hebrew name) was running a website, www.SabbathCovenant.com, where he regularly published blogs with testimonies and lessons. 'Nazarenes', Matthew explained to me, was the name of the first followers of Yeshua according to Acts 24:5. 'The Bible tells us that Paul was the *ringleader of the Nazarenes*, but in Ahavat Yashua they call themselves Messianic. The word messianic is not there.' The doctrine of the movement was laid out in another website that Matthew recommended I visit: www.nazarenejudaism.com.

While coordinating with his colleagues the future establishment of the congregation, Matthew continued to attend prayers in Ahavat Yeshua, but with an uncomfortable sense of hesitation and reluctance and without fully endorsing their practices and doctrine. Meanwhile, he also met with the representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses who were regularly sitting with students, distributing reading materials and holding private consultation sessions in a small café outside Gambella University. I had the sense that Matthew was simultaneously embarrassed and proud of his inability to make up his mind about any messianic doctrine and his aspiration to establish a congregation of his own. Embarrassed, because his doubts seemed to torture him and prevented him from being incorporated into any existing group, because it was unclear whether the new group he was trying to form will succeed, and because Messianics in older congregations were beginning to ridicule the proliferation of new Messianic congregations and portray their members as indecisive, confused or opportunistic. But he was also proud, because his insistence to question kept alive a sense of agency and independence he was seemingly unwilling to forego.

The stories of Nhial and Gatluak already indicated that confusion, scepticism and doubt were central to people's spiritual journeys. Any project of conviction, knowledge and faith, in fact, also features such 'negative' experiences. As Fabbian observes, 'all human action is *intrinsically* constituted by positive *and* negative moments: it is affirmation and negation, acceptance and rejection, belief and doubt.'[59] This point has also been emphasised in recent ethnographic works on doubt and on Christianity. Doubt, Pelkmans observes, is 'activated uncertainty' that has an 'energizing quality': it can motivate action just as much as it can repress it. Doubt is therefore inherent to projects of faith because it

[59] J. Fabian, 'Text as Terror: Second Thoughts About Charisma', *Social Research,* (1979), 169. See also Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 333.

'pushes for resolution,' even though this resolution 'may be haphazard or offer only temporary clarity.'[60] As Engelke adds, 'certainty is not a precondition for the production of religious knowledge and authority; indeed, uncertainty is often a constitutive element of both.'[61] Conviction requires doubt to be managed or sidelined, while doubt as such presupposes the possibility of certainty and conviction. The two are inherently linked. It is in this sense that to 'believe' is not so much to 'know' but to have 'trust' (*ŋäth*).

It was unclear whether Matthew will succeed in establishing another Messianic congregation in Gambella, be persuaded to abandon Nazarene Judaism and join any of the existing ones, or simply be caught up in other issues—marriage, school, work—that will push aside his religious concerns. When I spoke to some other Messianics from the Church of God about Nazarene Judaism, they seemed unimpressed. Matthew was also too young and lacking in resources and contacts to attract a considerable number of followers to his new venture, and unlike Ahavat Yeshua, that maintained ties with large and well-known Messianic organisations in Israel and the US, Nazarene Judaism was a rather negligible digital movement. The point here, however, is not to analyse the potential or merits of Nazarene Judaism, but to highlight the powerful role of doubt and uncertainty in driving people's quests for biblical authenticity. For it was always the itching sense that they may have gotten things wrong that pushed individuals to continue to investigate and justify their membership in a certain Messianic group. And this sense of doubt, though it could be sidelined, never entirely went away.

Lost and found

Ci bath! ('You lost!') was probably the most popular greeting in Newland, particularly among young people. In theory, such a statement seemed fitting when two people met after not seeing each other for some time. In practice, it was so widely used that I was often told I was 'lost' by people who did not see me for merely a few hours. But the verb *bath* was also used to describe those individuals who were 'confused' in Christian terms and were therefore, as in the common born-again terminology, spiritually 'lost'. For

[60] M. Pelkmans, 'Outline for an Ethnography of Doubt', in *Ethnographies of Doubt: Faith and Uncertainty in Contemporary Societies*, ed. by M. Pelkmans (London, 2013), 29.
[61] M. Engelke, 'The Early Days of Johane Masowe: Self-Doubt, Uncertainty, and Religious Transformation', *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 47 (2005), 784.

instance, on several occasions when I mentioned that the Jews do not believe in Jesus, I was told that they are, surely, 'very lost'. In another case, while discussing the same topic, a young man suggested that perhaps it is the Nuer who are 'lost'. All 'lost', naturally, were in need of 'saving' by those who were not 'lost'. Individuals who were members of a church but went 'back to the world' were described by active members as 'lost', while Messianics and Adventists often described all Sunday worshippers as 'confused' or 'lost' as well. 'People are lost, they go like the wind that is blowing,' one Messianic who stopped going to church, told me, lamenting the confusion caused by the proliferation of Messianic and other born-again groups in Gambella. 'They don't know where they are going.'[62]

Nhial, Gatluak and Matthew never doubted that the words in the Bible were God's, and that the Scriptures should be read as a guide to the truth, but they were not always sure what was the correct way to act upon it. By interrogating it, they sought to make sure they 'know where they are going'—that they were not 'lost'. They did not become Messianic because they wanted to adopt a 'modern', western lifestyle. (In fact, for Messianics, places like America and Europe often represented moral decay and evil influence.) They also did not become Messianic because their community or lineage dominated any Messianic congregation. Family members were certainly influenced by one another, and women were sometimes pressured by their husbands to join their church. But conversion also often occurred during migration, away from home, and led many youths to abandon the churches their parents or siblings attended. Finally, they also did not become Messianic because they sought to access scholarships, jobs or other resources. This is not to suggest that being a committed Messianic did not come with any pragmatic benefits such as a supporting community, but such benefits were equally and usually even more available in other churches.

What does it mean, then, not to be 'lost'? Keller argues that it was the 'intellectual excitement' associated with the process of studying the Bible that explained Adventists' commitment to religious work. Adventists in Madagascar invested a great amount of time studying the Bible, she claims, because they found the very act of interrogating it satisfying. It made them feel in control.[63] Dulin's work on Messianic Jews allows us to

[62] Notes, 30 April 2019.
[63] Keller, *The Road to Clarity*.

take this point a step further. Drawing on the work of Keane, Dulin argues that the Messianic 'drive for an authentic view of the real'—a view Messianics seek to achieve by studying the Bible—can be understood as what Latour called the 'modern work of purification'. By studying the Bible, he argues, Messianics seek to separate 'what is socially conditioned, and therefore arbitrary, from what is seen as a causal result of the conditions of the cosmos.'[64] In other words, they strive to separate socially constructed symbols and representations from natural (divine) indexes, using the Bible as their guide. However, as we have seen in this chapter, this effort never fully achieved its end in Gambella, and therefore, like other born-again Christians, Nuer Messianics remained 'locked… in ceaseless struggle with the threat of falsity, counterfeit, doubt.'[65]

Like the 'sons of Newland', Messianics aspired to be fully 'on top of it' in a frontier zone rife with confusion and threats of deception. The words of the Bible were their guide for distinguishing and navigating between divinely created institutions and laws, and human made ones. Because of its association with education and literacy, Christianity has often been described in the literature on South Sudanese society as an urban phenomenon and part of the bundle of institutions associated with the sphere of the *kumɛ*. Indeed, this chapter also highlighted how people's understandings of the Bible were closely linked to the spread of schools and the rise of an educated elite associated with towns. But as the clear distinction between the 'day of the *kumɛ*' and the 'day of God' suggested already, the authenticity Messianics aspired to identify and achieve transcended the imaginary urban-rural divide. 'Tradition', history and Nuer identity and worshiping practices were analysed and evaluated through a biblical lens, but so were the institutions and authority of the *kumɛ* and the value of Western practices and ideas. We return to the re-evaluation of all of these later in this thesis. The following chapter, however, examines how differences between churches were also articulated through their songs and styles.

[64] Dulin, 'Messianic Judaism', 44; B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, 1993); Keane, *Christian Moderns*.
[65] Comaroff, 'Pentecostalism', 222.

Chapter 4

Aesthetic encounters: Songs, styles and shared spaces

As much as choosing between churches and evaluating their doctrines and histories were matters of great concern among Messianics in Gambella, one's efforts not to get 'lost' did not come to an end when one became a member of a church. Studying the Bible was one important practice that shaped religious identities and communities and upheld the moral visions and historical narratives of churches. It was one means through which people were able to seek, engage with, and debate, divine truth. Singing was another, across all religious groups in Gambella. As a communal oral practice accompanied by specific bodily dispositions and techniques, the act of singing enabled engagement with the divine that was not dependent on one's ability to read and write. It was therefore more egalitarian than Bible study—more accessible to women and children—and less spatially bounded. While there is a long history of scholarly interest in Nuer songs, hardly any attention has been paid to Nuer Christian hymnody.[1] This is a striking omission given the centrality of Christian hymns in contemporary Nuer communal life. Building on recent scholarship on religious media and the role of aesthetics in the making of religious communities, this chapter explores how Messianics in Newland evaluated, negotiated and authorised the sounds, styles, and presence of their faith in the public sphere.

This topic is of broader relevance to our understanding of the role of sound and music in configuring religious communities and mediating divine truth. The chapter situates Gambella's Messianic Jews and their practices, styles and concerns within the broader history of Nuer Christian hymnody, starting with the colonial period, when Christian hymn-singing was first introduced by missionaries, and through the proliferation of Protestant and Pentecostal churches since the early 2000s. This historical perspective allows us to see how different musical styles emerged and evolved out of different understandings of the way the divine is made present through words and affective experiences, and different views of the sensibilities and virtues born-again believers must

[1] One recent contribution that does make a small reference to Nuer Adventist hymnody in Gambella is S. Bishop, *Music, Ethnicity, and Violence on the Ethio-South Sudanese Border*, PhD thesis (The Ohio State University, 2020).

cultivate. It also demonstrates how different religious groups evaluated their media and articulated their styles through a constant conversation with one another and a critique of each other's practices. While much of the literature on Christian media in Africa focuses on Pentecostal churches, this chapter deals with the way other groups have responded to the growing public presence of Pentecostalism, rejecting some of its influences while endorsing others. Before turning to a more detailed review of the relevant literature and a historical account of Nuer hymnody, however, it opens with a vignette.

A conference in Zion District

Twice a year, the Church of God organised a conference. Members of the church from various parts of Gambella region and its refugee camps gathered, and for about a week they prayed together, praised together, ate together, and went out to preach to the local population. In Nuer, this was also called *tiim*, from the English word 'team'. In July 2019, such a conference was held in Newland. Preparations began weeks in advance. Sacks of grain were bought in the market, processed in the grinding mill of one of the members of the church, dried in the sun and stocked in the compound in Zion District. A small hut was constructed near the church, for cooking. Youths worked to clear the compound of grass and dug a small well, and large plastic tanks were placed outside the church to collect water for the participants. Members paid a contribution to cover the associated costs, and t-shirts were printed (a different colour for each age group), decorated with verses from the Gospel of Matthew, the church's logo and a menorah.

In the weeks leading to the conference, tensions between Anuak and Nuer communities repeatedly paralysed public transport in the region, particularly due to insecurity along the road between Itang and Gambella town. It was decided not to cancel the event, however, but shorten it, in order to make sure guests did not end up stranded in the town without food. When the first day of the conference finally arrived and guests began to fill the church compound, walking in groups through the long dirt road from Newland's centre, Zion District turned into a bustling, lively camp. Soon, a group of women settled under one of the large trees in the compound and was busy with the never-ending task of cooking meals for the crowd, while singing hymns. The meals consistently comprised of asida, the Sudanese corn flour porridge, with shiro, an Ethiopian powdered chickpeas stew. Nearby, young men were preoccupied with chopping firewood, for the cooking.

Another group of youths was responsible for collecting water from the newly dug well and distributing it to the guests.

The English term 'conference' (Nuerised as *kɔnpɛrɛn*), I was told, only gained popularity in Nuer in recent years. Previously, church gatherings were called *mat* (unity) or *mat kɛɛl* (unity together), or simply referred to as 'evangelism'. Spreading the 'speech' of God was, at least nominally, the ultimate purpose of the event. The conference in Gambella hardly had a clear programme, however, and to the extent that any such programme existed at all, it was on paper only. In practice, most people seemed to be spending their time simply hanging out together in the Church's compound—chatting or practicing church hymns. In several afternoons, after much preparations and repeated delays (partly due to rains), youths did organise themselves and marched together in a large group from Zion District to the centre of Newland, singing hymns and carrying with them the Bible chart. On other occasions, smaller groups of youths went to discuss the Bible chart in people's compounds or out on the streets.

Figure 20. Drying maize flour for the conference.

No activity during the conference, however, generated the same levels of enthusiasm or drew as many participants together as singing and dancing after the sunset in the church's compound. Almost every evening, after dinner, a synthesiser was placed outside on a plastic table, and church members spontaneously gathered to praise together. First, some children appeared, clapping and signing as the synthesiser was being installed and tested.

Then some youths assembled. By the time it was dark, all conference attendees joined in. Standing in long lines, surrounding the synthesiser, and according to groups (men, women and children), they moved in unity from side to side with the beat of the songs—a step to the right, then back to the left—clapping and singing popular church hymns. One member with a microphone and a smartphone stood at the front, facing the crowd, dictating the pace by waving his hands from side to side, announcing which songs are to be sung next, and reminding everyone of the lyrics by quickly reciting the first sentence of every verse before it began.

Figure 21. Singing while cooking at the Church of God conference. Some of the women on the right hold the Church's hymnal.

Figure 22. Church of God youths marching from Zion District towards Newland with the Bible chart, singing hymns.

In the first night of the *tiim*, the dancing and singing went on into the night. All participants were full of energy, and the battery of the synthesiser and amplifier, too, was still sufficiently charged. The moon, the main source of light at night in Zion District, was almost full, and although there were some clouds in the sky, it did not rain. The echoes of the celebration could be heard more than a kilometre away—I heard them as I was walking home later that night—across the neighbouring kibbutz of the Congregation of Yahweh and Newland's eastern quarters, even if the words of the songs were no longer discernible.

Yiɛn nɛy diaal yiɛn jɪ wec-muɔɔn diaal, bia guɔɔrnɛ nɪ ŋuɔt Kuɔth. Mathi-yaa ɛ jɛn käändan diaal, thiɛlɛ kään mɪ dɔŋ wii-muɔɔn.	You all the people, you the people of the entire world, we shall follow the laws of God. Messiah is the saviour of us all, no other saviour in the world.
Thuɔk ja ni? Jɛn ɛ kä I-thɛ-ruɛl, thiɛlɛ guaath mɪ dɔŋ wii-muɔɔn. Cɪ Kuoth jɛ lat nɪ walkä; ɛn ɣöö ba thuɔk jek thin.	Where is the truth? It is in Israel, no other place in the world. God has made it long ago; we shall find the truth there.[2]

Communities, sounds and aesthetic encounters

The binding of people for God during a conference, this brief description sought to demonstrate, rested on three activities: collective work, commensality, and collective singing. This chapter focuses on the third. The rising popularity of some Nuer pop and hip-hop artists in other countries notwithstanding, church songs (*diit luak kuɔth*), or, as they were more formally called, God-praising songs (*diit puɔnyä kuɔth*), were by far the most popular musical genre in Newland. Church songs were not only sung in church on Sunday or Saturday by devoted members. They were sung by children and women at home, listened to by students and youths as they read or relaxed by the river and regularly played in Newland's restaurants (often along with other Nuer music). Any smartphone or old laptop in the neighbourhood had a collection of church songs saved on its memory—

[2] The first verse and the chorus of hymn 160 from the Church of God hymnal (Addis Ababa, 2016), 86-7. The hymn was sung in the first night of the conference (Notes, 15 July 2019).

some more professionally produced, others casually recorded in church—and these files flowed freely through Bluetooth and USB flash drives. Few houses in Newland possessed televisions, and there were no clubs in the neighbourhood where non-religious live music was played. Churches were the main producers of popular media.

Recent works on Christianity in Africa emphasise the central role of media—television shows, films, images, radio—in the dissemination and articulation of religious experiences in public spaces, particularly in urban locales.[3] What this body of scholarship highlights is not only the growing engagement of religious movements with new technologies of communication but also the central role new technologies play in forging and negotiating religious communities and in the articulation of shared religious experiences and ideas. Indeed, as Meyer suggests, 'one of the reasons why religion remains a vital, appealing force lies exactly in its propensity to transform by incorporating new media and addressing and linking people in new ways.' Thus, she proposes to think of religious communities as 'aesthetic formations', stressing 'the importance of taking into account the role of bodies, the senses, media, and things in the making of religious subjects and communities.'[4] However, what is also clear is that not all faiths agree on what things can legitimately communicate divine messages, and how. To use Keane's term, again: they do not share the same 'semiotic ideology'.[5] The question, then, is what renders certain media meaningful, to whom, and how and why they transform over time.

[3] J. K. Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Of Faith and Visual Alertness: The Message of "Mediatized" Religion in an African Pentecostal Context', *Material Religion,* 1 (2005), 336-356; M. De Witte, 'Altar Media's Living Word: Televised Charismatic Christianity in Ghana', *Journal of Religion in Africa,* 33 (2003), 172-202; M. De Witte, 'Modes of Binding, Moments of Bonding: Mediating Divine Touch in Ghanaian Pentecostalism and Traditionalism', in *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*, ed. by B. Meyer (Basingstoke, 2009), 183-205; M. De Witte, 'Television and the Gospel of Entertainment in Ghana', *Exchange,* 41 (2012), 144-164; B. Meyer, '"There is a Spirit in That Image": Mass-Produced Jesus Pictures and Protestant-Pentecostal Animation in Ghana', *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 52 (2010), 100-130; B. Meyer, *Sensational Movies: Video, Vision, and Christianity in Ghana* (Berkeley, 2015); K. Pype, *The Making of the Pentecostal Melodrama: Religion, Media and Gender in Kinshasa* (New York, 2012). This is, inevitably, a partial list. Much of the literature on African Pentecostalism that does not deal explicitly with religious media also demonstrates these trends, albeit indirectly.

[4] B. Meyer, 'From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations: Religious Mediations, Sensational Forms, and Styles of Binding', in *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*, ed. by B. Meyer (New York, 2009), 2.

[5] Keane, *Christian Moderns*.

Sounds, music and the human voice, despite their temporality and invisibility, are also media through which religious subjectivities and communities are negotiated and made,[6] and it has been demonstrated that sound plays an important role in the 'sensational appeal' and public presence of African Pentecostalism.[7] Several authors highlighted the tendency of Pentecostal movements to 'sacralise' urban spaces with the sounds they produce: Loud prayers and preaching, nightly vigils and live religious music are common features of contemporary urban soundscapes in many parts of Africa, and scholars described the 'conflicts' that often evolve between charismatic Christians and African 'traditionalists' or Muslims due to these interventions, particularly in West Africa.[8] However, as Grant highlights in a recent analysis of Pentecostal and Catholic understandings of the role of sound and silence in religious practice in Rwanda, 'aural conflicts' also take place between Christian groups. And as she argues, focusing on these 'conflicts' offers 'new ways of understanding how Pentecostal churches define their boundaries, and how other kinds of Christians push back against them.'[9]

This chapter examines the history of Nuer hymnody and the diverging musical practices of Messianics vis-à-vis those of Adventists and the wider Protestant community in Newland. The focus is on songs and sound, but the discussion takes into account, more broadly, the practices, styles, objects and experiences associated with the production of music, the acts of singing and listening and the audible presence of religious activity in the public sphere.[10] The argumentation over religious sound I describe here moves beyond the tension between sound (or, noise) and silence or between the Evangelical thrust to spread out and the liberal notion of religion as a private matter. All groups discussed here sought to 'go public' and project their aesthetics and moral visions into

[6] For example: A. J. Eisenberg, 'Islam, Sound and Space: Acoustemology and Muslim Citizenship on the Kenyan Coast', in *Music, Sound and Space: Transformations of Public and Private Experience*, ed. by G. Born (Cambridge, 2013), 186-202; Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*; Engelke, *A Problem of Presence*.
[7] B. Meyer, 'Aesthetics of Persuasion: Global Christianity and Pentecostalism's Sensational Forms', *South Atlantic Quarterly,* 109 (2010), 742; O. U. Kalu, 'Holy Praiseco: Negotiating Sacred and Popular Music and Dance in African Pentecostalism', *Pneuma,* 32 (2010), 16-40.
[8] M. De Witte, 'Accra's Sounds and Sacred Spaces', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research,* 32 (2008), 690-709; R. Van Dijk, 'Contesting Silence: The Ban on Drumming and the Musical Politics of Pentecostalism in Ghana', *Ghana Studies Review,* 4 (2001), 31-64; B. Larkin, 'Techniques of Inattention: The Mediality of Loudspeakers in Nigeria', *Anthropological Quarterly,* 87 (2014), 989-1015. In the Ethiopian Orthodox context, see also: Boylston, *The Stranger at the Feast*, 131-43.
[9] A. M. Grant, 'Noise and Silence in Rwanda's Postgenocide Religious Soundscape', *Journal of Religion in Africa,* 48 (2018), 58.
[10] I. Weiner, 'Sound', *Material Religion,* 7 (2011), 108-115.

the wider community,[11] and all deployed songs and music in order to do so, and in order to cultivate faithful subjects, delineate religious spaces and articulate religious communities. However, each of the movements had a different understanding of the ways in which sound, music and songs can serve as religious media and a different vision of the ways in which religion should and can legitimately forge communities and subjectivities.

What the dynamics between different groups described here demonstrate is the extent to which religious practices and styles are articulated not as a solitary exercise but through the constant interaction between different religious groups—through their aesthetic encounters and their critique of each other's practices. As Hirschkind notes in his discussion of Islamic cassette sermons, in order to trace the boundaries of the publics (or, counter-publics) configured by religious media, we need to take into account 'the practices of exchange and argument that constitute the arena'.[12] Drawing on Meyer's concept of 'aesthetic formations', this chapter proposes that it may be more productive to approach the dynamics described here not as sonic 'conflicts', 'battles' or 'clashes',[13] but as interactive processes of negotiation, change and exchange. What I want to emphasise is the creative power these encounters generate, rather than their destructive consequences. Like Handman, I prefer to see the musical practices of different Christian groups as part of a 'history of critique'.[14] The focus of this chapter is not on how religious movements seeks to eliminate each other from the landscape, but how, like the literacy practices described in the previous chapter, their interactions configure a sphere of constant deliberation.

A brief history of Nuer hymnody

There is a long history of communal identities in Nuer society being centred around, and configured through, the collective and individual acts of singing, both in contexts that may be defined today as 'religious' and in everyday 'secular' life. Some popular Nuer songs recount the histories of migration and geographical dispersion of communities. One

[11] Meyer, 'Going and Making Public'.
[12] Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*, 137.
[13] De Witte, 'Accra's Sounds'; Grant, 'Noise and Silence'; M. Oosterbaan, 'Sonic Supremacy: Sound, Space and Charisma in a Favela in Rio De Janeiro', *Critique of Anthropology,* 29 (2009), 81-104.
[14] Handman, *Critical Christianity* (chapter 7).

of the most famous songs among eastern Nuer is the Song of Latjor (*Diit Latjɔɔr*), recounting the life and activities of the leader of the Jikäny migration to the east in the nineteenth century.[15] Other 'personal songs' (or simply *tuaari*, 'songs'), are lengthy and often self-laudatory poems aimed at attracting 'the attention and admiration' of girls.[16] Yet other songs, as we shall see, appeal to God or invoke His 'speech'. The dramatic changes, over the past century, in the way songs were stored, circulated and produced or in the themes that inspired them notwithstanding, the social and political significance of this oral form has been remarkably resilient: The circulation of songs has continued not only to disseminate information and historical narratives but to produce spaces of dialogue, membership and communal reflection.[17] What I want to sketch here briefly is the historical process through which Christian hymns came to perform a similar role in Nuer society.

Songs and verbal expression have long been central to people's relationship with divinities and God, something already alluded to in the previous chapter. Congregational hymn-singing often accompanied rituals of sacrifice before the introduction of Christianity. It was known as *pal* (prayer) or *pat* (clapping), as singing was often accompanied by clapping.[18] The human voice also featured in these rituals in the act of invocation (*lam*),[19] in which individuals addressed the spirits, either aloud or briefly whispered, though not in the form of song.[20] Cattle, a central medium for interaction with God, were also the subject of songs.[21] Beyond the confines of any specific Nuer lineage and community, the songs of Nuer prophets, which came to them directly from their divinities in dreams or when under possession, circulated widely.[22] It was through songs

[15] Stringham presents a detailed analysis of this song (*Marking Nuer Histories*, 116-20). Most Nuer in Newland were familiar with the song from a version recorded by famous Nuer singer Gordon Koang Duoth. A youth who shared with me the song (as an mp3 file, via his smartphone and along with several other church songs) recommended it as a useful source on 'Nuer history'.
[16] Svoboda referred to these as 'improvisations': Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 151-3; Svoboda, *Cleaned the Crocodile's Teeth*, 9.
[17] On similar traditions in Dinka society, see the discussions in F. M. Deng, *The Dinka and Their Songs* (Oxford, 1973); Z. Cormack, *The Making and Remaking of Gogrial: Landscape, History and Memory in South Sudan*, PhD thesis (Durham University, 2014), 44-9.
[18] Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 208-10.
[19] The verb also refers to the act of cursing, when it is a human rather than a spirit that is directly addressed.
[20] See also Lienhardt's observations on the supporting role of songs in Dinka sacrificial rites: Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience*, 241-5.
[21] Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, 46-7; Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 251. On cattle as a spiritual medium, see also Chapter 6.
[22] Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 47; Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 101.

that the achievements and prophesies of these individuals were broadcasted, remembered and reinterpreted, both during their own lifetime and, particularly in the case of Ngundeng Bong, throughout the twentieth century and until today. Songs recounted the histories of spirits and prophets and were used to spread their teachings, and their circulation and dissemination played a central role in constituting a wide moral community.

In her book, American missionary Eleanor Vandevort describes a sacrificial ritual she attended in Nasir. It is an illuminating record of her perspective on the practices that missionaries hoped to uproot. The ritual she describes was organised by Man Lul, an elderly lady who attended Bible classes at the mission and was already baptised but 'scarcely grasped the teaching of Christianity.'[23] It was organised after two relatives of Man Lul were killed by lightning, and it went on from the evening and until the following day. Vandevort describes how the 'song leader' directing the prayer at night was 'prancing back and forth' in front of the men and women who gathered for the event. 'His singing was irregular,' she writes. 'The rhythm was quick, the melody haunting. The words were mumbled and difficult to follow. There was no end to the song.'[24] Later in the evening, when someone else 'began to sing and dance,' Vandevort is told that he is praying 'the way you do in the house of God.' This prompts a telling reflection: 'It was a frustrating parallel,' Vandevort tells the reader, 'since what the man was doing was a far cry from what we did in the church.'[25] Later, the 'prophetess' leading the sacrifice is described as snapping and jerking 'sharply, as though she were being shocked with bolts of electricity.'[26]

Vandevort repeatedly stresses in her account her sympathy towards the 'earnest' worshippers, but concludes that theologically, 'they were thousands of years behind.'[27] That is so, it seems, not only because they did not 'understand' (despite the efforts of the missionaries) that God was no longer interested in cattle sacrifice and that the practice had 'no merit', but also because of the way they used language in order to communicate with God. Like the Protestant missionaries Keane writes about, Presbyterians in Sudan saw the shift from 'heathenism' to Christianity as necessitating 'an evolutionary process,

[23] Vandevort, *A Leopard Tamed*, 151-2.
[24] Ibid., 153.
[25] Ibid., 154.
[26] Ibid., 155.
[27] Ibid., 167.

over the course of which the magical and ritualistic functions of language had gradually been eliminated.'[28] At the ultimate end of this process was the acceptance that the Christian Word of God has no material significance in and of itself—that it refers to external ideas and targets one's inner self. This is the ideology underpinning Vandevort's concerns: It is the *heart*, she writes, that the Word of God has to enter, so that it 'says something' to the believer.[29] Resort to rituals indicated failure to understand, failure to have faith in God solely on the basis of the *meaning* of His Word.

But as in other missionary environments, this inner transformation missionaries hoped to achieve, had very concrete material implications: from clothes (white robes or khaki uniforms and leather shoes in government schools), tastes (tea with sugar, vegetable oil), furniture (chairs, tables), architecture and the organisation of the landscape (demonstrated by the missionary compound, its buildings and garden), through books and pencils, to the body postures and attitude associated with worshipping and evangelising.[30] 'From beads to books,' Vandevort summarised the change associated with the process of 'climbing up the social and spiritual ladder of the mission.'[31] The rejection of the ritualistic use of language therefore did not mean the rejection of the act of singing as such. On the contrary: As the emphasis on education and literacy in the operations of missionaries suggests, verbal forms were central in the world they worked to create. Among the first practices they introduced to their students and fresh converts, already in the 1920s, was the singing of hymns,[32] a practice situated, as Keane writes, at the delicate boundary 'between nonverbal ritual and purely verbal propositions.'[33]

A series of photographs taken by Evans-Pritchard around the American Mission in Nasir during a short visit to southern Sudan in 1935 attests not only to the link between Christian hymn singing and literacy but also to the visual features, style and sensibilities of the Christian believers the missionaries were working to construct. In all images of this series, male youths are seen wearing the white body cloths associated with the missionaries, and in several of the images they seem to present to the photographer booklets and to

[28] Keane, *Christian Moderns*, 110.
[29] Vandevort, *A Leopard Tamed*, 58.
[30] Compare: B. Meyer, 'Christian Mind and Worldly Matters: Religion and Materiality in Nineteenth-Century Gold Coast', *Journal of Material Culture,* 2 (1997), 311-337.
[31] Vandevort, *A Leopard Tamed*, 51, 55.
[32] Werner, Anderson, and Wheeler, *Day of Devastation*, 272. See also, Vandevort, *A Leopard Tamed*, 34.
[33] Keane, *Christian Moderns*, 110.

demonstrate their ability to read from them. One of these booklets is a collection of Christian tracts titled 'Christ is the defeater of all our fears' that was locally translated and published by the American Mission in 1931.[34] In one of the images in which it appears, a boy is shown reading from it. In another, a group of four youths seems to be performing a hymn from it. Standing tall, in a line and with their matching white cloths, they seem to perform (again, perhaps upon the request of the *turuk* with the camera) the identity of the ideal reflective Christian that missionary education sought to forge out of the 'heathen' native. Indeed, a 'far cry' from the 'prancing song leader' and 'jerking prophetess' Vandevort describes in her book.

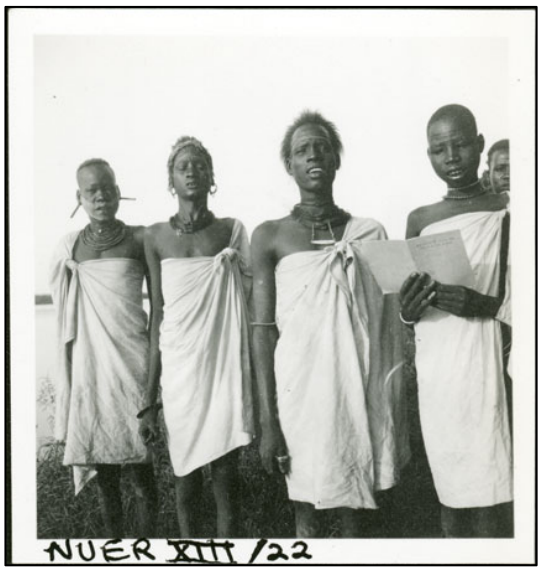

Figure 23. A photograph by Evans-Pritchard of youths singing at the American Mission in Nasir, 1935.[35]

If at early stages hymns were primarily translated by missionaries with the assistance of Nuer students, gradually some converts began to compose original hymns. One of the first celebrated composers of Nuer hymns was Matthew Koang Jing (*Kɔaŋ Jiŋ*), who is said to have first converted while being treated at the mission in Nasir. He went on to become an evangelist in the mission in Adura and is still remembered for the many hymns he wrote.[36] Patients who attended the clinic in Adura were also taught Christian hymns

[34] '*KRAITHT E JUUC KE DWALKƆN DIAAL*'. I thank Christopher Morton for helping with access to a high-resolution version of these photographs in order to identify the booklet.
[35] Pitt Rivers Museum, 1998.355.611.2.
[36] More than a dozen hymns by Jing appeared in the standard Nuer hymnal used in all Protestant churches in Newland. On Jing's somewhat mythical life history, see: Gatdet Tang, *The Rise of Christianity*, 25-7.

while treated, and it is said that a tape recorder playing biblical stories was used both at the station and by evangelists at the time.[37] Some early hymns were simply verses picked up from the Bible. For example, it is said that Psalm 23:1-3 ('The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing…') was a popular hymn among Nuer Anya-Nya soldiers during Sudan's first civil war.[38] But there were also, increasingly, original compositions. One of the implications of the spread of Christianity from the 1970s and particularly during Sudan's second civil war was a massive expansion in the local production and performance of hymns—a direct consequence of the growing involvement of youths and women in church activities and thus also in both writing and performing songs.[39]

As further discussed below, the strict aesthetic regime the missionaries sought to enforce was gradually eroded with the spread of Christianity, as styles of worship and musical practices changed dramatically. But regardless of age or church affiliation, the act of singing assumed a central role in Nuer Christian life, and Nuer hymns came to form a rich collective archive. This archive was primarily an abstract one, carefully maintained in the memory of the communities that created it. But it was also physical, as songs were written down and compiled in hymnals, which were occasionally updated and re-issued. The latest version of the Nuer hymnal, which was probably just as widely disseminated and cherished as the translated Bible, was published by the Evangelical Covenant Church of South Sudan in 2010 and included no less than 749 hymns composed and translated over several generations. Most people, regardless of the church they attended and the level of their religious commitment, knew dozens of hymns by heart. It was also common, in all churches, to introduce new songs that were not (yet) included in the hymnal, thus allowing this communal archive to continue to evolve and expand.

Bodies and synthesisers in Newland's Pentecostalised soundscape

Christianity was everywhere in Newland's aural and visual landscape, its sights and sounds setting the rhythm and texture of everyday life in the neighbourhood. As already

[37] Ibid., 24.
[38] Hymn 306 in the Nuer Hymn Book (Malakal, 2010). On the reference to Anya-Nya, see: Werner, Anderson, and Wheeler, *Day of Devastation*, 272.
[39] These processes were not limited to eastern Nuer society: writing on Dinka Christianity, Jesse Zink describes an 'explosion' in the composition of hymns during the Second Civil War. See J. Zink, 'Dinka Christians in South Sudan: Songs of Exile and Faith', *Christian Century,* 131 (2014), 24.

described in the first chapter, churches were so central to the neighbourhood's infrastructure and organisation that different areas in it were named after them. Colourful posters publicising religious conferences regularly decorated Newland's busiest junction, and there was hardly a weekend without at least one conference taking place in the neighbourhood. The sounds of such conferences, as the sounds of regular church programmes and smaller Pentecostal prayer groups that gathered in private houses—singing, vocal preaching, ecstatic praying and speaking in tongues—would not only spread through the labyrinthine paths between Newland's crowded compounds but casually slip into them, engulfing wide areas of the neighbourhood indiscriminately and blurring the already vague boundaries between public and private spaces. It was never too difficult to know when a religious programme was taking place nearby.

Figure 24. Christian Temple Church conference advertisement.

Figure 25. Nazarene Youth International (NYI) conference advertisement.

Figure 26. Apostles Fellowship International Church conference advertisement.

For decades, Nuer churches used either drums or no instruments at all during services. Since the mid-2000, however, synthesisers became increasingly popular in Pentecostal and other Protestant Nuer churches, dramatically transforming the soundscapes of Nuer Christianity. Ironically, it was none other than the Catholic Church that facilitated this revolution. As opposed to western Nuer, who adopted Catholicism to a large extent because their homelands fell under the responsibility of Catholic missionaries in colonial Sudan, the Catholic Church had very little influence among eastern Nuer. A Catholic Church was established in Lare only in the late 1990s—following the activities of the Catholic humanitarian NGO Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) in the area.[40] In Gambella region as a whole, Catholic missionaries were more focused on Anuak communities,[41] and though a branch of the Catholic Church with a primary school was also opened in Newland, Catholicism remained marginal among Nuer in the region. In any case, in the early 2000s the Catholic Church opened a youth centre, outside Newland, in its large compound in the centre of Gambella town. Among other things, the centre offered training in playing the keyboard.

From the small group of Nuer who first learned how to play the instrument at the Catholic youth centre, the knowledge spread quickly. Since synthesisers were relatively expensive and required electricity or at least a portable battery, and ideally also amplifiers, small churches could not afford them and continued to use drums, particularly in rural areas. It was generally more difficult for churches to obtain a synthesiser (and the resources

[40] Separate interviews with two fathers in the Catholic Church in Gambella (24 and 29 April 2019).
[41] S. Cenerini, *First Evangelization of the Anyuak* (Addis Ababa, 2018).

required to operate it) than to find a devoted member with at least some knowledge and will to play it. All major 'Sunday churches' in Newland possessed synthesisers, however, and some even had a small generator to make sure power cuts do not interfere with their operation during services. What made them so influential and appealing was not only their volume but primarily their auto-accompaniment feature, which allowed the DJ (as they were often called) to play the melody of a song while being accompanied by the synthesiser's automatic background 'band', including a whole set of drums and percussion. The amplified electronic beats of these instruments became the paradigmatic aural mark of Nuer Protestantism. They pounded across Newland on weekends and during church conferences, and the rhythms and wholesome sounds they produced were powerful means of drawing people together through shared affective experiences.

Figure 27. A youth choir of the Church of the Nazarene from Pugnido refugee camp performing in Newland.

The combination of loudness and sharp rhythmic beats the synthesiser produced played an important role in moulding together individual and communal experiences of spiritual empowerment and healing. Singing and dancing in church—and, where it was acceptable, speaking in tongues, ululating, whispering, crying—were highly personal matters, relating to one's relationship with God. A friend with whom I occasionally attended Sunday services in Christian Temple Church once told me that in church he feels that he is 'dancing with the Holy Spirit'. Although people usually attended church in groups,

they clearly did not dance *with each other* at it. And yet personal spiritual interactions were only possible due to the sensory experiences generated by one's presence in a certain sound-filled (and often intensely decorated with colourful fabrics, lights and objects) space with other believers. Church choirs, when performing, were united not only by the act of singing and their matching uniforms, but also by repetitive rhythmic movements of the body that always accompanied their songs, with the accompanying beats of the synthesiser drawing the audience in as well, and indeed, everyone within a certain distance of the church. When choirs performed famous hymns, the audience often joined in, and elderly ladies march around waving their wooden crosses.

Figure 28. Christian Temple Church on a Sunday morning.

The role of sound in forging the sense of a community was not limited to the church halls, however. Following the proliferation of synthesisers and computers, a few small and very basic recording studios were also established in Newland. These were mostly run by youths who learned how to operate recording, mixing and editing equipment elsewhere in East Africa or in Addis Ababa. A small local industry of music production emerged, as artists began to record gospel music in Gambella and to produce music videos. This industry was not particularly lucrative. There was largely no way to earn money out of gospel music or videos, and studios struggled to survive. But the songs they produced became remarkably popular across eastern Nuer communities, and were regularly played in businesses around Newland. Dominating this industry, as noted earlier, were singers

associated with Christian Temple Church, who invested a great deal in producing professional recordings and video clips and whose songs were the most widely circulated. Though not an economically viable career path, being a gospel singer was a highly respected status, as the ability to compose and perform songs of praise was seen as a gift of the Holy Spirit.

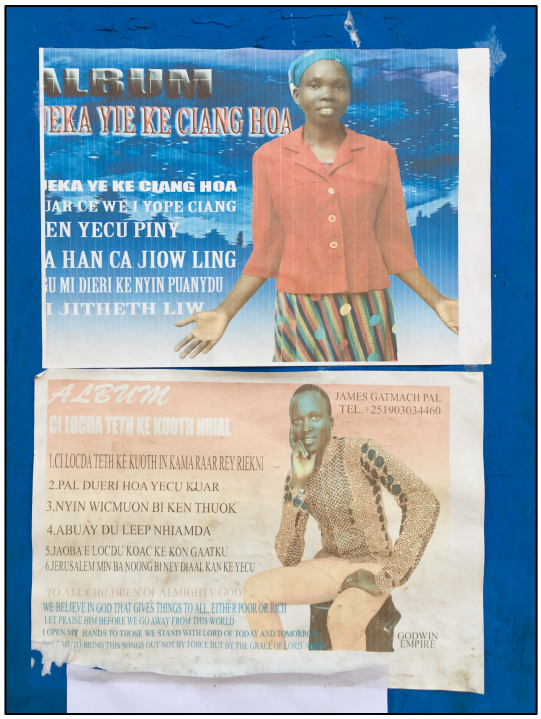

Figure 29. Advertisements for new locally produced gospel music outside the Church of the Nazarene, Newland.

A whole range of stylistic inputs from across the region and world shaped the local Nuer gospel scene, reflecting Gambella's global connections and position as a frontier zone. Many Nuer youths studied in Ethiopian universities outside Gambella, particularly in the southern and south-western parts of the country where Evangelical Protestant and Pentecostal churches flourished. Many of the 'highlanders' who resided in Gambella were Pentecostal, thus infusing the local soundscape with gospel music imported from other parts of the country. Although 'highlanders' hardly attended Nuer churches, some of their churches were located just outside Newland and occasional collaborations between Pentecostal groups did occur. But smartphones and laptops in Newland were also filled with aural and visual fragments—clips and songs that were passed through friends or downloaded, when possible, from the internet—from much further afield, from

Kenyan, Nigerian and South African to American and South Korean Pentecostal music and sermons. Consuming these materials not only shaped local styles and wove them into a global landscape of spiritual activity and moral commitment but also helped believers build their relationship with God and fashion their own Christian identity.[42]

Newland's Christian public sphere was therefore upheld not simply through music and song but also through a range of daily collective practices and personal engagements with objects and technologies that made the production and circulation of these media possible in the first place. Youths could spend hours practicing songs and instruments in church throughout the week. During services, many pulled out their phones to record songs and sermons, in order to listen to them later, privately. Listening to such recordings and gospel music was a common practice of individual self-fashioning that complemented the activities undertaken collectively in the church. One member of Christian Temple Church, Jing, described to me how he decided to join the church after he was very sick and underwent an operation in his stomach. Once his 'heart started to love God', he not only broke up with his multiple girlfriends but immediately revised the playlist on his mobile phone:

> I joined the church, and I delete everything. Because my phone… I had different kind of music. I can write even all the artists, I can list them, more than 100 names, like, Lil Rome, Lil Kim, Lil Mama, Lil Wayne [Names of American rappers]. I know their names. I can list them. Because I hear their music all day. When I heard the preaching that God does not need all those things, I just delete them. Even all the pornography, I delete them, and also, I delete the sex films, because I have them on my phone at the time. And then I put only the songs of God.[43]

Drawing lines—between the past and the present, between 'the world' and the church, between God's and Satan's domains, between the truth and the false—is a common concern in all born-again movements. And as Jing's story about the music on his mobile phone suggests, media played an important role in setting these boundaries. It has already been observed in other settings that the expansion of contemporary born-again faiths often

[42] Compare: Grant, 'Noise and Silence', 48-50.
[43] Interview with Jing Nhial, 12 July 2019.

entails the deployment of technologies and media that can be considered 'worldly', and requires 'a continuous balancing act between reaching out and staying apart, between embracing the world and staying aloof, between addressing and appealing to the public and imposing some kind of boundary through which believers are set apart.'[44] This struggle to reach out and yet remain separate—to create communities through shared experiences, styles, objects and media and yet guard the sanctity of these communities, their exclusiveness and their authenticity—became even more explicit and complicated in the case of sectarian remnant groups like Seventh-day Adventists and Gambella's Messianic Jews. The following sections examine their interventions in Newland's Christian soundscapes.

Adventists: The sound of the self-possessed Christian

Newland's soundscape was not only infused with Christianity. It was the site of a constant conversation between different Christian identities and moral visions. Just as much as Adventists and Messianics set themselves apart through their church institutions and doctrines, they constantly worked to negotiate the boundary between their communities and 'the world' (all other 'Sunday churches' included) through the media they engaged with and the experiences and styles they deemed legitimate. While all 'Sunday churches' used the same songs and the same hymnal, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Church of God and the Congregation of Yahweh each developed its own separate book (though they shared some of the hymns between them) and separate musical practices and styles, thus excluding themselves from the communal archive described above, which bonded together most of Newland's residents.[45] Their members were not unfamiliar with the songs of 'the Protestants'. Many of them were previously members of 'Sunday churches', and even if not, these songs were so popular that it was unlikely that anyone growing up

[44] Meyer, 'From Imagined Communities', 21. See also: M. Oosterbaan, 'Purity and the Devil: Community, Media, and the Body. Pentecostal Adherents in a Favela in Rio De Janeiro', in *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*, ed. by B. Meyer (Basingstoke, 2009), 53-70.

[45] Beyond the 'Ngundeng Church', in which the prophet's songs featured regularly (accompanied by drums), another group that had its own distinct set of hymns and musical practices was the Gospel of God Church ('Baba Johane'). Most 'Baba Johane' songs were in Shona (as the group originated in Zimbabwe) and sung to southern African harmonies. They were received directly from the Holy Spirit. No instruments were used in the church. Members of this group were known for their loud worshipping practices. They prayed every three hours—including at night—which was partly the reason many of them lived in their own area of the neighbourhood. A detailed discussion of this church's practices is beyond the scope of this dissertation. This is just to note that Messianics and Adventists were not the only ones to diverge from the mainstream Protestant style.

within a Nuer community would not know them. But these songs had no place in their worshipping programmes. Not unexpectedly, disagreements between Christian groups often revolved around accusation of 'idol' worshipping and 'paganism'. However, underpinning these disagreements were also different visions of the sensibilities and traits a true born-again believer had to hone, each articulated in relation to its surroundings and informed by a range of global and local cultural inputs.

The demonisation of all musical genres that may arouse passion or unruly excitement—from Western and African popular music, through lively Protestant church songs to the use of drums—was a salient theme in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Popular music was associated with sexual promiscuity, drugs and all sorts of moral ills. Drums, dynamic rhythms, and any dance moves that resembled 'traditional' Nuer ones (namely, jumping in church), were associated with 'paganism'. Both represented Satan's seduction—the dangerous realm of passion, irrationality and loss of control.[46] Some Messianics, particularly if they were previously Adventists, also subscribed to these views. Seventh-day Adventists did not entirely rule out the use of synthesisers, but these were not regularly used in their churches. While in earlier decades Nuer Adventist churches were using drums, throughout the early 2000s they adopted the adungu—a stringed wooden instrument traditionally used by communities in the Equatorias, in the southern parts of South Sudan, and in and northern Uganda.[47] The Seventh-day Adventist hymnal included more than 500 songs, mostly locally written but also translated from the official English Adventist hymnal and from Arabic. Translated hymns were sung with their original calm, slow and harmonious melodies. The music of songs written by Nuer Adventists was commonly composed in a similar style and using similar Western scales and chord progression patterns, thus allowing skilled adungu players to support various hymns using the same chords.

While it was recognised as a 'traditional' African (though not Nuer) instrument, the adungu was not deemed unsuitable for producing Christian music. On the contrary, both

[46] Though I did not hear any explicit reference to this text in Gambella, the point has been expressed by Ellen G. White in a text from 1901, which she originally wrote in reaction to the ecstatic worshipping practices a group of Seventh-day Adventists in Indiana had adopted at the time: 'The Holy Spirit never reveals itself in such methods, in such a bedlam of noise. This is an invention of Satan to cover up his ingenious methods for making of none effect the pure, sincere, elevating, ennobling, sanctifying truth for this time.' E. G. White, *Selected Messages Book 2* (2017 [1958]), 37.
[47] See also: Bishop, *Music, Ethnicity, and Violence*, 107-8.

the sound it produced and the act of playing it reflected, necessitated and cultivated the sensibilities and traits Adventist emphasised as essential to the true born-again believer and a proper Christian community. First, as opposed to the synthesiser, which required a single player (though many more could be involved in taking care of the logistics involved in making it work), the size of Adventist adungu bands was flexible. More than five or six youths could play together at a service, and church members would also meet during the week to practice sets of chords, for hours. There was therefore a great deal of social activity surrounding the use of the instrument, and one's skills as an adungu player were a good index for one's commitment to the church. For a competent adungu player—and these were predominantly but not exclusively male youths—had clearly spent a great amount of time patiently honing his skills. Second, the use of adungu also impacted the volume and architecture of the Adventist intervention in Newland's soundscapes. Adungu bands were not amplified, and Adventists did not try to take over the public space with their sounds. On the contrary, being overwhelmed by the echoes of Pentecostal synthesisers from nearby churches or the popular music being played in shops and restaurants along the street resonated with the Adventists' carefully constructed image as a marginalised community in a world of satanic manipulations and moral decay.

Figure 30. Adventist youths playing adungus and singing in Eden Church.

All this should not suggest that Adventist songs and sounds did not leave a mark on Newland's soundscapes or that they did not recruit the bodies of believers and bond them

through collective affective experiences. They did, but in ways that upheld a line between them and 'this terrible world' (*ɣɔaa jiääkä ɛmɛ*), through styles and aesthetics that manifested self-possession, calmness, patience, and modesty. No dancing ever took place in Seventh-day Adventist churches. The only occasions I saw Adventist youths clapping and singing with excitement was during baptism events—out of the church, by the river. When singing, Adventists usually stood straight, self-possessed and calm. Adungu players either sat or stood in lines, like the choirs. For special events, pathfinders (children's study groups) practiced military-like marching drills, which they presented wearing uniforms or at least matching shirts and trousers or skirts. During evangelisation campaigns, members marched the streets of Newland as well, taking over the public space not through exciting electronic beats but as a coordinated army—the army of Christ—in which little to no space is left for unsupervised expressions of excitement.

Figure 31. Adventist Pathfinders marching in an event in Olive Church.

On 'showing off' and invisible prayer

The public visibility of praise and prayer was a salient concern in the Church of God, underpinned by a (typical Protestant) fear that any emphasis on material and form can turn into a hollow self-centred performance or a 'pagan' ritual. Prayers in the Church of God were carried out in the beginning and end of each programme, with congregants either standing, with their hands raised, or kneeling. One or two members led each prayer

while all other congregants remained silent, with their eyes closed. Zion District and the Church of God were at the outskirts of Newland, far from the main path. It was unlikely that anyone would see or hear the prayer taking place inside the church. And yet before any prayer, the door and windows of the church, which were otherwise left open during other parts of the programme, were closed. Once the prayer was over, they were opened again. This practice was based on the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, as described in chapter 6 of the Gospel of Matthew (verses 5-8):[48]

> And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

For Messianics, 'Sunday worshippers' were the 'hypocrites' (*ji mɛɛtdä*, 'people of deception') praying 'on the street corners' and 'babbling like pagans' only 'to be seen'. Church of God members and most Messianics did not seem to be as preoccupied as Adventists were with the satanic nature of music, and in general were open to much more rhythmic tunes in their churches. They regularly used drums and clapped when singing, for instance, and even if they did not dance as wildly as some Pentecostals did, they also did not rule out the practice altogether. As opposed to Adventists, they did not view music, including lively or more 'traditional' and 'African' beats and melodies, as *intrinsically* satanic. Their position emphasised the agency and attitude of worshippers: 'Sunday' Christians, they argued, were not genuinely trying to praise God but rather to impress others and attract attention. Their gatherings were merely social events which youths attended in order to 'show off' with their new suits, dresses and dance moves. 'Have you ever been to Youth Malä?' one Messianic asked me when I inquired about the difference between 'Sunday churches' and Messianic attitudes towards music and dance,

[48] The reference to these verses was mentioned in the church, when a member asked about the origin of the practice of praying with closed windows (Notes, 16 February 2019).

as if the answer to my question was obvious. 'Sunday churches nowadays are fashion places.'

The notion that prayer and praise must not become a public performance impacted other practices Messianics adopted. For example, while committed Seventh-day Adventists and Pentecostals prayed before eating even when they were sitting in a public space (as a restaurant) or in their church compound, Messianics did not, arguing that such public prayers are a manifestation of arrogance. When members of the Church of God and other Messianic groups ate together in church on Sabbath or during conferences, they also did not pray before eating. Instead, as I was often reassured, the food was blessed inside the hut where it was organised before being distributed. A Messianic friend whose family was Protestant told me how he often tried to pray 'in his heart' without showing any visible sign of his prayer when he ate with them, or simply pray quickly in his room before joining them when food was served. This attitude could not be more different from that of Seventh-day Adventists, who often not only insisted to stop everything and pray even when eating with non-Adventists and in public, but gracefully asked them to join.[49]

It should be noted that the Messianic view that churches have become places of social activity rather than worship resonated with the sentiments of many non-Messianic Christians in Newland as well. At least until the 1960s, dry-season celebrations known as *dom-piny* were important occasions for courtship among eastern Nuer communities. In these parties, youths gathered to sing and dance throughout the night to the sounds of the *dom-piny*—a unique instrument that was constructed especially for the occasion. A hole was dug in the ground and covered with the skin of a cow, and then a cord was stretched over it, tied to two cattle-pegs on each side of the animal's skin and held above it by a stick (like the bridge of a violin). Two players then played the *dom-piny*—one hitting the cord with a stick and one beating the skin with his hand—as young men and women danced and chanted around it.[50] These parties lost their popularity, it seems, by the 1970s.

[49] In the same vein, as opposed to the practices in other churches, in the Church of God offerings and tithes were paid anonymously. In 'Sunday churches' it was not unusual for names of members to be read during service, and when members made special donations to the church—for instance, in order to buy new equipment or hold a special event—this was be publicly announced. In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, tithes were paid using special envelopes which were not anonymous. Seventh-day Adventist and other protestant churches also regularly held public fundraising events that included games, lottery and auctions (of food, animals and other objects), which Messianics did not.

[50] A. N. Tucker, *Tribal Music and Dancing in the Southern Sudan (Africa), At Social and Ceremonial Gatherings* (London, 1933), 13-8.

But as far as many critics were concerned, church and Youth Malä conferences came to replace them. 'Today, instead of *dom-piny* they play in the churches,' Jok Kier once told me, reflecting an opinion I heard on several occasions from other elders as well. 'They meet and then they steal themselves to play sex. No one can control them. It is the same! Instead of *dom-piny* they make a conference in church.'[51]

Singing the 'speech' of God

Despite the explicit rejection of the overt public visibility of 'Sunday Churches', as the account of the conference in the beginning of the chapter suggested, singing played a central role in binding people together through a range of daily practices and collective affective experiences in the Church of God. Every programme in the Church—Friday evening, both Sabbath morning sessions, and Sabbath afternoon—began and ended with shared congregational songs and prayers. In addition, during the second morning session on Sabbath, after the first Bible lesson, church groups (children, youths, and women) came up one after the other to sing in front of the congregation. Most congregational songs were from the Church of God hymnal, which included more than 500 hymns, though newer ones were also regularly introduced, particularly by the children and youth groups. Some members had a copy of the hymnal, often worn-down. Some had it on their smartphones. Most members knew many of the songs by heart. Some children and youths carried with them small notebooks to write the words of new songs and practice them. During the week and on Sabbath morning, small children were taught songs through repetition: guided by an older youth, they would sit together and repeat each sentence of a song again and again, only continuing to the next sentence once the previous one has been properly memorised.

The participation of women (and children) in the production and performance of hymns is particularly important. It has already been mentioned that women were not allowed to preach or ask questions in the Church of God, and that generally their access to the written Word of God was limited as a result of lower literacy rates. All Messianic groups in Gambella also emphasised patriarchal ideals of social order and the subordination of women: All had strict rules relating to head covering and the styling and decoration of

[51] Interview with Jok Kier, 4 July 2019. See also: Svoboda, *Cleaned the Crocodile's Teeth*, 74.

women's hair, for example, and while men usually occupied all administrative positions in the church, it was women's role to cook for Sabbath services and conferences. The situation, it should be noted, was not radically different in non-Messianic churches, where such roles or rules were not necessarily enshrined in doctrine. However, crucially, women were allowed to both perform and compose songs in the Church of God (activities most Orthodox Jews see as strictly forbidden by the Bible) and this was an important sphere in which rigid gender roles and inequalities were set aside. It was something men, women and children did *together*: a sphere in which all could have equal access to the divine.

Figure 32. Reading through a notebook with hymns in the Church of God.

Figure 33. Praising during a Church of God conference.

If Nuer prophets sang what they were given by spirits and Pentecostals sang under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Church of God songs, too, were ultimately created by God: their content was either copied from the Bible or strictly regulated in order to guarantee that it represents what was understood as God's intention. Church of God elders checked and approved new hymns, particularly if these were 'imported' from Adventist or (rarely) 'Sunday' churches. They verified that songs do not contradict the Church of God's doctrine: that they do not include any references to Christmas, Easter or any other 'pagan' holidays or symbols, such as the cross. One of more popular ways of composing songs, however, was simply copying verses from the Bible. This practice has a long history in Protestant hymnody,[52] and it existed, among Christian Nuer and other communities in the region, for decades.[53] But Messianics seemed to be much more careful and consistent in following it, and often emphasised that their songs were 'from the Bible'. This was not, I was told, mandatory according to the Church's doctrine. But it was preferable. One Church of God member who composed hymns compared the Bible, in this context, to a note from a doctor with instructions on how to take a certain medicine. It is safer to follow them.

Figure 34. Children praising during a Church of God conference.

Consider, as an example, the following song from the Church of God hymnal. It should be noted that as opposed to the Adventist and 'Protestant' hymnals, the Church of God

[52] A. Pettegree, *Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion* (Cambridge, 2005), 54-65.
[53] On the same practice among the Uduk, see: James, *War and Survival*, 234-5.

one did not include the names of the authors of songs, so as not to encourage, I was told, the arrogance and pride of individual members. This was a contested issue in the church, and not all members agreed about this approach. Therefore, even though the Messianic friend who taught me this song was able to tell me who wrote it, I avoid naming the author here. The song itself comprises of four verses, of which the first two are quoted here. It was sung in a very slow tempo, a cappella. The first verse is based, with several small additions (marked in bold), on verses 1-4 of Psalms 99. The second is verses 1-4 of Psalms 103. In the Church's hymn book, the word *Kuoth* was used for 'God' and in the Nuer Bible it was *Kuoth Nhial*. In practice, however, Messianics shifted to using to word Yahweh instead of *Kuoth* in their songs, hence it is this word I use here:

Liakɛ *Yahweh* ***kɛ ɣöö*** *ɛ Kuäär, kä a naath diaal lathɛ kɛ dual! Jɛn cɛ nyuur wi̱i̱ kɔaamdɛ, wi̱i̱ pua̱nyni̱ tin te kɛ gɔ̱k.* ***Yahweh—ɛŋa päär kɛ jɛ mɔ?*** *Yahweh di̱tdɛ kä Dhayɔn kä liak jɛ ɛ döör dial, a kɛ liakɛ ciötdu min di̱i̱t. Kuäär mi bum nhɔ̱ɔ̱k cuŋni,* ***ji̱n ti̱i̱ tiɛɛl kɛ ca̱r mi jieek****.*	**Praise** the Lord **for he** reigns, let the nations tremble; he sits enthroned between the cherubim ['bodies that have wings']. **Yahweh—who equals Him?** Great is the Lord in Zion; he is exalted over all the nations. Let them praise your great and awesome name. The King is mighty, he loves justice. **You resent bad thinking.**
Liak Yahweh lö tieeydä, ji̱n pua̱nydä kɛɛliw liak, ciötdɛ min rɛl gɔɔydɛ rɔ, liak Yahweh lö tieeydä kä /cu gɔɔydɛ päl ruëëc; jɛn pälɛ ɣä dueerkä diaal kä jakɛ liawkä kä gɔw, kä cɛ tëkdä luɛl kɔ̱ɔ̱k, cɛ ɣä kum kɛ nhökdɛ, min thiɛl pek kɛnɛ kɔ̱a̱c lɔaac.	Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion.

Despite their literalist interpretive approach to biblical texts, it was not uncommon for Messianics to introduce modifications to verses when these were transformed into hymns. Authors, it seemed, did not perceive such changes as corrupting the truthfulness and merit

of the original text. It was also not problematic to construct hymns from non-consecutive verses (again, as done above), and although Psalms was a popular source for hymns, it should be noted, verses from other books were also very commonly used. The important thing was that the content of the song would still be 'based on the Bible', I was told. For instance, the song quoted in the beginning of this chapter ('Where is the truth? It is in Israel') was not copied from the Bible, but when I asked what it is based on, I was immediately referred to several verses that are understood as establishing that the truth comes from Israel (e.g. Isaiah 2:1-4) or talk about the obligation to observe the God's laws (e.g. John 14:15, Isaiah 24:5).

The written Word of God in the Nuer language—unlike, for example, the Qur'anic word in Arabic, commonly understood to possess an intrinsic divine value in and of itself—was somewhat elastic. This point seems to support the notion, described in the previous chapter, that the Bible in Nuer only served as a reference to the 'speech' of God that exists outside it, and was therefore not treated as a divine object in and of itself. However, Messianics of all groups in Gambella did express great interest in studying Hebrew, and increasingly incorporated Hebrew terms in their rituals, as exemplified by their use of the word Yahweh. On Sabbath, members often greeted each other in church with '*shabbat shalom*' ('Sabbath of peace') to which the local response was commonly '*shalom shabbat*', an expression that is in fact not used in Hebrew. The use of the term *'elohim* (God) was also common. A few Messianic youths learned some Hebrew vocabulary, letters and songs of praise using the internet, and during my time in Newland, I was repeatedly asked to teach Hebrew vocabulary and songs and to confirm how certain words or names such as Yeshua or Yahweh should be correctly pronounced and spelled. If divine indexicality existed, it was in the 'original' Hebrew Word of God, not in the written Nuer version.

Global connections and the reassessment of the Messianic style

Church of God elders accepted none of the crying, jumping, yelling and shouting that characterised Pentecostal churches, and neither was there room in the Church for the extravagant decorations that characterised these. Otherwise, however, the styles of songs in the Church were diverse. While the paradigmatic congregational hymns that came before prayers (as the song quoted above) tended to be slower and calmer and were

usually sung a cappella or accompanied by drums and clapping, in conferences and during the group songs on Sabbath morning there was room for much more upbeat tunes (as the one quoted in the beginning of this chapter), accompanied by a synthesiser and more spontaneous bodily movements. Moreover, it appeared that Messianic youths were also gradually 'catching up' with some of the Pentecostal media trends and began producing their own music videos and recordings. Due to the wide range of global influences Messianics were drawing on and the fragmentation of their movement during the 2010s, local practices and aesthetics were not fixed. They were constantly evaluated, debated and reinvented.

The Church of God (Seventh Day) had historically emerged in the late nineteenth century, like the Seventh-day Adventist Church, as a fundamentalist Protestant movement. But the groups that came to dominate the increasingly entwined global religious landscapes of Messianic Judaism and Evangelical Christian Zionism since the 1970s grew out of different Protestant traditions. Although they shared a millennialist emphasis on the return of the Messiah, as opposed to nineteenth century Adventists, many Messianic Jews and Christian Zionists followed Pentecostal and neo-Charismatic faiths with an explicit focus on exuberant worshipping practices and experiential spirituality. Particularly among American Christian Zionists there has been a growing interest in recent decades in Jewish paraphernalia, rituals and music, and it is American Messianic Jewish groups—Evangelical movements led by individuals of Jewish descent that accepted Jesus Christ as their Messiah—that came to serve as the main source for 'authentic' Jewish objects and forms for Evangelical 'gentiles' wishing to 'recapture' the 'Jewishness of their faith'.[54] The implication was a growing convergence between these movements, with some of the objects and practices deployed by Messianic Jews—Israeli folk dances (often performed in colourful orientalist clothes), the use of *tallitot* (prayer shawls) and *kippot* (skull caps), or the celebration of Jewish festivals—gradually being endorsed by Christian Zionist 'gentiles'.

If the computers and smartphones of committed 'Sunday worshippers' in Newland were filled with music videos and sermons of Pentecostals from across the globe, Nuer Messianic youths were increasingly influenced by the materials and practices produced

[54] Westbrook, *The International Christian Embassy*, 232.

through the fertile conversation between Messianic Jews and Christian Zionist 'gentiles', primarily in the US and Israel. The international Messianic Jewish organisations with which Messianics in Gambella increasingly sought to associate themselves were remarkably media savvy. Like many Pentecostal groups, they ran popular YouTube channels and produced impressive volumes of digital audio-visual materials that were enthusiastically consumed around the world, in addition to self-help books and pro-Israel propaganda. Organisations like One for Israel, Chosen People Ministries and Digital Harvest led elaborate online evangelisation campaigns, with videos of testimonies, lectures and songs. Revive Israel, Tikkun and King of Kings broadcasted online some of their worship programmes from Israel, which regularly featured bands playing emotional Israeli-style praise songs. While nominally the prime target audience of these groups were 'normative' Jews, whom they sought to convert, in reality they appealed to many Evangelical Christians across the world.

Crucially, some of the groups shaping these styles and discourses had at least some physical presence in Ethiopia. Messianic Jewish missionaries have been drawn to Ethiopia because of their interest in evangelising members of communities understood to be of Jewish origin. The Beta Israel—the Jews of Ethiopia, previously known as 'Falasha'—are considered by many (Jewish Orthodox rabbis and the Israeli state included) to be one of the 'lost' tribes of Israel, and thus, Israelites 'by blood'. Most members of this community had been resettled in Israel by the early 1990s, but thousands of 'Falash Mura'—individuals who claim to be descendant of Beta Israel Jews who converted to Christianity—remained in Ethiopia, mostly in the northern parts of the country and in Addis Ababa.[55] Much to the dismay of Israeli authorities, these communities, as well as Beta Israel communities already living in Israel, have attracted the attention of various Messianic Jewish organisations. This led to the emergence of numerous Ethiopian-led Messianic Jewish congregations in Ethiopia and Israel, with which some Messianics in Gambella have been eager to forge ties.

Exposure to Messianic Jewish materials from around the world and interactions with Messianic congregations in other parts of Ethiopia led Messianics in Gambella to rethink

[55] They aspire to migrate to Israel as well, but their eligibility to do so has been a contentious issue and their transfer to Israel has been deliberately slowed down and undermined by successive Israeli governments. See Gidron, *Israel in Africa*, 128-30.

the austere sensory regime of the Church of God and their relationship with religious objects and symbols. Some of the African Messianic Jewish congregations—in Ethiopia and elsewhere—working with American Messianic groups had choirs, bands and costumes that resembled those of Pentecostal churches. They subscribed to Renewalist theologies, emphasising healing and the experience of the Holy Spirit, and in their rituals, they regularly deployed Jewish paraphernalia and symbols and Israeli flags. A preacher of Ethiopian origin from Kenya who visited Gambella upon the invitation of Ahavat Yeshua Messianic Congregation—a certain 'Rabbi' Joash, the head of Tikkun Africa, who claimed to be a 'very authentic Jew by blood' and preached while wearing a *kippah*—told members of the congregation about various miracles he conducted at his home congregation in Kenya by deploying *ruaḥ hakodesh* (the Holy Spirit, in Hebrew), including raising a child from the dead.[56] 'The Falasha Messianics worship like Protestants, like Pentecostals,' one member Ahavat Yeshua who visited other Messianic congregations in Addis Ababa and Gondar told me with an apparent sense of excitement and inspiration, 'but they have heard the objective of Messianic [Judaism] more than anyone!'[57]

Figure 35. Praising with a *tallit* and a keyboard in Ahavat Yeshua Messianic Congregation.

[56] Notes, 11 April 2019 (Rabbi Joash speaking before Ahavat Yeshua Messianic Congregation in Newland).
[57] Notes, 31 July 2019.

Church of God members rejected most of the paraphernalia deployed in 'Sunday churches', like the colourful gowns of choirs, the decorated head covers women wore (with a colourful illustration of Mary) and the wooden crosses deaconesses often carried and waved when singing. These were all labelled as 'pagan'. Their stance with regard to objects drawn from the Jewish world was much more ambiguous, and my impression was that it was gradually transforming as the sources of inspiration they were drawing on changed. Jewish *tallitot* and *kippot*, for instance, were increasingly recognised and sought as authentic Jewish objects. Some Church of God members initially told me that they had no interest in these, and even that their use was discouraged. But it seemed that under the influence of Ahavat Yeshua and their American Messianic Jewish partners, these objects were gaining popularity, if not among Church of God elders, then at least among Messianic youths. When I travelled to Israel for a visit, several members of both the Church of God and Ahavat Yeshua asked that I bring back *kippot* and *tallitot*. Others managed to gain access to such objects via Messianic Falash Mura congregations in other parts of Ethiopia. But somewhat like branded goods, that had to be brought from the imagined 'developed' world, the closer the origin of these objects was to the Jewish world, the more legitimate they were.

Figure 36. Still images from a wedding song video produced and performed by Church of God members in 2020 and uploaded to YouTube.[58]

[58] 'Wedding Song', Cushite Saints, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aA53DHbMIuc.

In the Congregation of Yahweh, practices and styles were more strictly supervised and regulated. But there, too, new objects and symbols were adopted following the split from the Church of God and under the influence of the group's elders in Israel. While hymns were usually accompanied by youths playing adungus, tambourines were also used, and before Sabbath morning services, an elder walked around the kibbutz blowing a *shofar* (horn), calling members to concentrate for the service. The main synagogue in the kibbutz was decorated with a Jewish Menorah and the municipal flag of Jerusalem (two horizontal blue stripes and in between them, the city's emblem: the lion of Judah against the background of the Western Wall and surrounded by olive branches). Some male members of the Congregation attached blue and white *tsitsiyot*—the tassels that are attached to the corners of the Jewish *tallit*—to their trousers.[59] This was not mandatory and not all members could access these tassels, which were brought from Israel. But it meant that those elders of the Congregation of Yahweh who did possess them were easily identified when they walked to town.

Aesthetic encounters

When I returned to the Church of God compound in the morning of the second day of the *tiim* described in the beginning of this chapter, I learned that a small controversy took place the previous night after I left. Several people from the Congregation of Yahweh—according to some accounts, mostly women—spontaneously joined the praising crowd in Zion District. Since the two movements were once one, many of their members knew each other well. The two groups also shared some of their songs. However, soon after the kibbutz members joined the nightly praising session, someone from the Congregation of Yahweh arrived at the scene and instructed them to return to the camp. A small dispute ensued, and some Church of God elders decided to call the leaders of the Congregation of Yahweh and ask whether they had prohibited members of the group from joining the Church of God event. They were told that the instruction did not, in fact, come from the

[59] Tassels as such, it should be noted, do appear in the Bible, whereas the practice of wearing a whole *tallit* is a post-biblical tradition. In Numbers 15 God tells Moses to instruct the People of Israel to attach tassels to the corners of their garments, so that these would serve as a constant (visual) reminder of His laws: 'You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the Lord' (39). There are countless rabbinic interpretations and rulings—which Messianics usually are not concerned with—on how, when and where a *tallit* should be worn, and what fabric it should be made of.

Congregation of Yahweh's leadership, and therefore the members of their group were allowed to return to the conference.

What precisely took place during the first night of the conference, I do not know. The disagreement can certainly be understood as a relating to questions of authority and the closed and somewhat authoritarian nature of the Congregation of Yahweh. But it also highlights the central role of religious media and experiences not only in the making of communities but also in the constant negotiation of their boundaries. As Meyer argues, the communities that are being articulated through shared aesthetics and styles are necessarily dynamic, always in the process of being formed and performed.[60] The styles, practices and discourses described here point to the centrality of aesthetic encounters and negotiation in this process: the act of rendering the media of a certain religion 'invisible', that is, evaluating it as an authentic and legitimate vehicle through which God is made present,[61] often entailed emphasising the 'visibility' of another religion's media. Put slightly differently, establishing the divine indexicality of certain styles and media involved emphasising the 'manufactured' or 'fake' nature of others. Ironically, setting boundaries between religious communities also means bringing them into a productive conversation with one another. Out of this conversation, new practices and styles emerge. Like the search for the truth in the Scriptures, described in the previous chapter, the search for the authentic style is always a work in progress.

The differences between the practices and aesthetics of the churches described here did not represent insignificant variations in musical taste but very different logics for both the authorisation of religious media and its spread into the public sphere. The electric beats of the amplified synthesiser, the quiet melodies of the adungu, and the audibility of the 'speech' of God represented different understandings of the ways in which the divine is made present and of the sensibilities and virtues the born-again believer must cultivate. The Pentecostal prioritisation of excitement was based on the view of 'passion as… a force that evades dissipation or corruption because it is unmediated by conscious manipulation or control.'[62] The Adventist emphasis on self-possession and tranquillity was based on the diametrically opposed view: passion and excitement are the forces

[60] Meyer, 'From Imagined Communities', 7.
[61] Meyer, 'Mediation and Immediacy'.
[62] Comaroff, 'Pentecostalism', 241-2.

through which Satan recruits human bodies and souls, and thus only the constant suppression of such attitudes can keep one close to God. Meanwhile, the Church of God's focus on the relationship between hymns and the Bible and its adoption of Jewish practices, objects and styles (including the occasional use of Hebrew words) reflected the focus of its doctrine on the biblical text as the ultimate source of divine authenticity.

Nonetheless, the boundaries between the styles described here, and the ideologies they represented, were hardly stable. As much as members of various religious groups constantly highlighted the ways in which their own practices differed from those of others, they also carefully drew inspiration from their 'rivals' when articulating their own styles. I was often surprised to hear, for example, members of Pentecostal and other 'Sunday churches' expressing their admiration of Adventist singing and preaching practices, suggesting that perhaps there is, after all, something safer and more genuine in their manifested calmness ('Those Adventists, they *really* know how to worship!'). Meanwhile, the Adventist and Messianic urge to take over the public space, be it through military marches or biblical hymns—despite their concerns with 'showing off' and satanic influences—also indicated a certain fascination with the potential power and sensational allure of the styles and aesthetics Pentecostals deployed. In the small space of Newland, different groups were engaged in a constant, inconclusive, dialogue. However, to better understand the Messianic view of Jewish aesthetics as bearing an indexical connection to the divine, we also have to examine how the Bible informed their understanding of world history and the place of the Jews in it. This is the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Placing the Nuer nation: History, genealogy and genes

'We shall find salvation in Yeshua, we were blessed through Abraham, we are all descendants of Noah, who was saved in his ark.'[1] So went the chorus of a popular song in the Church of God. With a clear reference not only to a shared purpose and future but also a shared past, it serves as a useful reminder: religious practices, hymns and styles articulated publics, spaces and communities in Newland, but also situated them within much larger and globally dispersed communities of believers, with long histories and shared moral commitments. As Mbembe observed, 'Africans used Christianity as a mirror in which to view their own pasts, presents, and futures.'[2] While the literature on born-again Christianity often emphasises this faith's explicit promise to help converts 'break with the past', start anew and transform,[3] its theology also invites—indeed, urges—believers to rethink their place in the world in relation to biblical and Christian history.[4] As such, this chapter shows, Evangelical Christianity can also have a significant impact on the way genealogies and descent are imagined and notions of indigenousness and autochthony are reconstructed.

One of the main points of disagreement between Messianics in Gambella related to the way Nuer identity had to be understood in relation to biblical genealogies and the story of creation. While some argued that Nuer are gentiles, descendants of the biblical Cushite nation, others suspected or even insisted that Nuer are Israelites, descendants of one of the Lost Tribes of Israel who were dispersed in the eight century BCE. Many Nuer Messianics who subscribed to the latter claim aspired to have their DNA tested in order to establish it. The purpose of this chapter is not to substantiate or refute these claims but to try to explain what their emergence tells us about the way Nuer Messianics thought about history, genealogy and their own identity. In the limited literature on African

[1] '*Banɛ kɑ̱n jek kɛ Yacua, ca kɔn puɔth kɛ Ab-ram, kɔn diaal kɔn kuay Nowa, te känɛ rɛy riɣay.*' The song was new. It was not included in the Church's hymnal.
[2] A. Mbembe, 'On the Power of the False', *Public Culture,* 14 (2002), 638.
[3] B. Meyer, '"Make a Complete Break with the Past": Memory and Post-Colonial Modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostalist Discourse', *Journal of Religion in Africa,* 28 (1998), 316; Marshall, *Political Spiritualities*.
[4] M. Engelke, 'Past Pentecostalism: Notes on Rupture, Realignment, and Everyday Life in Pentecostal and African Independent Churches', *Africa,* 80 (2010), 177-199.

Judaising movements, claims of Israelite descent have commonly been interpreted as attempts to adopt an empowering identity—as a form of discursive resistance against marginalisation. In this chapter I want to make sense of such claims from a more emic perspective and explain them as genuine attempts to accurately situate bodies, lineages and communities within time and space. In order to do so, we need to examine the changing characteristics of Nuer identity and the way Christianity in general and premillennial theologies in particular have impacted it in recent decades.

Interestingly, researchers have had little to say about the influence of Christian theologies on the formation of what scholars and policy makers today often call 'ethnicity' and everyday Africans usually call 'tribalism'. A dominant thread in the literature understands 'ethnic' identities as a colonial construct. During the colonial period, the existence of fixed, clearly bounded and culturally static African 'tribes' was often taken for granted by both officials and ethnographers. The British policy of Indirect Rule, implemented in southern Sudan from the 1920s, was explicitly based on this assumption, even if administrators on the ground soon realised that it hardly corresponded with local realities.[5] In what became, since the 1980s, a particularly popular scholarly approach to understanding the impact of colonial rule, historians began to emphasise the extent to which colonial officials have in fact consolidated or even 'invented' identities and traditions in Africa through the governing strategies, institutions and epistemologies they introduced.[6] Missionaries, some have pointed out, were also part of this process, particularly due to their efforts to standardise and record local languages.[7] More recently, anthropologists and historians have also linked the emergence of concerns with autochthony, primordialism and indigenousness in Africa, particularly since the 1990s, to violent conflicts, nationalism and processes of democratisation and economic liberalisation.[8]

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[5] Leonardi, *Dealing with Government*.
[6] The extent to which 'ethnicities' were 'invented' rather than forged through interactions between Africans and Europeans has been widely debated. For a review of the literature, see: T. Spear, 'Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa', *The Journal of African History,* 44 (2003), 3-27.
[7] T. Ranger, 'Missionaries, Migrants, and the Manyika: The Invention of Ethnicity in Zimbabwe', in *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, ed. by L. Vail (Berkeley, 1984), 118-50.
[8] See, for example, P. Geschiere and F. B. Nyamnjoh, 'Capitalism and Autochthony: The Seesaw of Mobility and Belonging', *Public culture,* 12 (2000), 423-452; R. Marshall-Fratani, 'The War of "Who is Who": Autochthony, Nationalism, and Citizenship in the Ivoirian Crisis', *African studies review,* 49 (2006), 9-44.

I certainly do not intend to dismiss the influence of colonialism, the nation state and violent conflicts on the construction of identities in the Ethiopian frontierlands. What I want to show is how premillennialist theologies and notions of history and genealogy have also been entangled in these processes, influencing the way people think about 'race' and descent. While the Christian publics configured in Newland all understood themselves as part of a global Christian community, this chapter demonstrates that their members related to this global community not through their national identities as South Sudanese or Ethiopian, but primarily as Nuer. Underpinning the genealogical claims of Messianic Nuer, and the increasingly widespread assumption in Newland, scientifically accurate or not, that these claims could be validated through genetic testing, was the notion that one's 'tribal' identity is fixed and engrained in one's body and blood. This notion was radically different from earlier conceptualisations of Nuer identity as a performative one that could be acquired and lost. However, as we shall see, it resonated with premillennialist theologies that construct Israelite and gentile identities as pre-determined, inalienable and primordial.

From discursive resistance to new genealogies

There is a long history of colonised and oppressed peoples, not only in Africa, appropriating the Bible and seeing in biblical narratives of suffering and salvation a reflection of their marginalisation and a model for their liberation. Sugirtharajah demonstrates how such discursive practices were deployed in various colonial contexts as a form of resistance: a local attempt to read the Bible, in the face of colonial domination and often against the teachings of European missionaries, as an empowering book. If missionaries used the Bible as the tool for the civilisation of the 'natives', the colonised 'employed it as a weapon of reprisal. Rather than seeing it as unsettling their way of life, the invaded turned it to their advantage.'[9] Through the appropriation of biblical narratives, the oppressed could rearticulate their identity, reframe their political circumstances and thus reclaim lost dignity. These discursive forms of resistance were, ironically, an outcome of the 'scriptural imperialism' of European missionaries, because they were underpinned by the notion that the Bible is a source of divine truth whose authority has nothing to do with the missionaries who first brought it to Africa, and therefore, that it

[9] Sugirtharajah, *The Bible*, 108.

can be locally reinterpreted and pointed back against them or the political order they represented.[10]

Such strategies for the articulation of Bible-based political discourses of resistance had a unique history in southern Sudan, where they were deployed not so much against Europeans but, after Sudan's independence, for the configuration of a distinct southern Sudanese identity and the reframing of the conflict between southern Sudanese armed and political movements and the Sudanese government. As Tounsel shows in his study of southern Sudanese political theologies, southern Sudanese elites, educated in missionary schools during the late colonial period, began to draw comparisons between their circumstances and those of the Old Testament's Israelites already before the beginning of Sudan's first civil war. This comparison continued to dominate the southern Sudanese liberation theology that evolved over the following decades, along with several obvious discursive implications: if South Sudanese were framed as God's chosen, northern Sudan's Arabs were framed as God's enemies, and South Sudan's liberation was understood as God's will and therefore the guaranteed ultimate outcome of the conflict.[11]

These discourses certainly spread beyond elites to wider populations. Pleading with Jesus and God for help on behalf of the people of southern Sudan was a common theme in Christian hymns during the Second Civil War, with some hymns making references to Sudan (*Thudan*) or 'the South' (*Jinup*, from the Arabic *Janub*) or explicitly drawing parallels between local events and biblical narratives.[12] The following, for example, is the chorus of a song by Elizabeth Nyanguok Lok, a member of the Presbyterian Church, which, I was told, was written sometime in the 1990s. It is said that the song was written in Dima refugee camp, but Nyanguok herself also lived in Newland later. The hymn was still very well-known and occasionally performed by the women's choirs of 'Sunday churches' in Newland when I was there, not least because since the outbreak of civil war in South Sudan in 2013, it once again resonated with fresh experiences violence and displacement:

[10] Engelke, *A Problem of Presence*, 46-78.
[11] Tounsel, *'God Will Crown Us'.*
[12] See for example, hymns 314, 395, 524, 556, 594, 618, 626,625, 629, 645, 711, 749 in the Nuer Hymn Book (Malakal, 2010). On similar comparisons with Old Testament Israelites among displaced Uduk, see also: James, *War and Survival*, 249-50.

> Visit our land [*guil wecda*], why are you bad [*ɛŋu ci jiääk*], our king, our king, our king? Visit our land, why are you bad, king? […] In our house, in our way, you shall wash it with white light, visit our land. Visit our land, visit our land, we are exhausted [*ci nɛy cuuc*] like the children of Israel, visit our land. Father of Jesus, we are asking for the way, the way of life is the way of heaven [*röödl nhiaal*]. You will bring us salvation [*kan*] like the salvation you brought Noah. We remember you every year, every year that you give us. We stand with the flag, the flag of heaven, you will give it to us. You will bring us salvation like the salvation you brought Noah.[13]

The appeal of comparisons to the Children of Israel notwithstanding, no biblical passage has ignited the imagination of generations of missionaries, anthropologists, and religionists in South Sudan as the 'Prophecy Against Cush' of Isaiah 18. This short and enigmatic poem describes a remote, exotic and militant nation, somewhere 'along the rivers of Cush', whose people are 'tall and smooth-skinned… feared far and wide, an aggressive nation of strange speech, whose land is divided by rivers' (1-2). This nation, Isaiah prophesises, will undergo great torments and be defeated in battle, but it will ultimately rise and bring gifts to God on Mount Zion.[14] The first American missionaries working in southern Sudan in the early twentieth century interpreted the prophesy as referring to the hardships Sudan suffered under the Mahdi (1885–1898), the violence of its reoccupation by Britain, and its potential reconstruction and evangelisation under British colonial rule.[15] For them, preaching the Word of God in Sudan meant advancing the fulfilment of the prophesy. More recently, and particularly from the 1990s, South Sudanese themselves—from political elites, through church leaders, to everyday Christians—increasingly framed Isaiah's prophesy as foretelling Sudan's civil wars and South Sudan's independence.[16]

Scholars have consistently understood the emergence of Judaising identities and claims of Israelite ancestry among African peoples as a natural outgrowth of the attempts of

[13] Hymn 708 in the Nuer Hymn Book. Repetitions were omitted.
[14] Scholars commonly understand the prophesy as referring to the regional geopolitics of the eighth century BC, and the attempts of the kingdom of Cush to forge an alliance with Judah. Isaiah appears to advocate against such an alliance. See: J. B. Couey, 'Poetry, Language, and Statecraft in Isaiah 18', in *Biblical Poetry and the Art of Close Reading*, ed. by J. B. Couey and E. T. James (Cambridge, 2018), 167-183.
[15] J. K. Giffen, *The Egyptian Sudan* (New York, 1905), 243-8; Watson, *The Sorrow and Hope*, 20, 193.
[16] Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 316-7; Tounsel, *'God Will Crown Us'.*

Africans to read the Bible 'against' Europeans. In other words, as a form of discursive resistance. This thesis was introduced by Tudor Parfitt, the leading scholar on emerging Judising movements in Africa and the 'global south'. What it proposes is that drawing on popular myths about lost Israelite tribes or dispersed Semitic or Hamitic populations, colonialists came up with theories about the potential foreign origins of various African communities presumed to be racially superior. Some African groups consequently 'internalised' these ideas. Drawing on European discourses or directly on biblical narratives, Parfitt argues, African peoples have developed their own histories that associate them with the ancient People of Israel (and very often, also the modern state of Israel) as part of an effort 'to counter oppression, gain approval, re-create lost history, revolt against white authority, and forge new, more-useful identities.'[17] For Africans, therefore, the 'Israelite trope was a means' used to 'turn the Bible back on their colonial masters.'[18]

We find similar approaches to understanding the emergence of African Judaising movements in other publications. Devir, writing on Judaising groups in Ghana and Cameroon, writes that their members often 'see Judaism as a redemptive antidote to the evils of colonialism.'[19] They find it appealing, he suggests, because of their frustration with 'the institutionalized Church (often-times equated with the colonial regime) over its exclusion of traditional native practices,' and because experiences of discrimination make them 'see themselves as Jewish in symbolic terms.'[20] Bruder, who similarly emphasises the role of Judaic identities as an anti-colonial counter-discourse, does note that 'political antagonisms' should not be understood as the sole factor behind the adoption of Judaising identities in Africa, and that at least for some of the African Judaising groups she studied 'the adoption of a Jewish identity… appears as both an intellectual event and a sociological transformation.'[21] However, she ultimately also understands this transformation in instrumental terms. 'At a time when identities are sharply affected by the modernity crises,' she writes, 'subtle gradations of Jewish identities indicate various

[17] Parfitt, *Black Jews*, 133.
[18] Ibid., 103.
[19] Devir, *New Children of Israel*, 3.
[20] Ibid., 223.
[21] Bruder, *The Black Jews*, 191.

attempts by Africans to bring creative and innovative responses into a bewildering and complex field of human behavior.'[22]

It is one thing to argue for instrumentalist incentives for the invocation of biblical identities and narratives when this is carried out by political leaders and elites who may be calculating the value of such discourses and affiliations in a marketplace of negotiations, persuasion and transactions. Tounsel's study of South Sudanese liberation theology, for instance, is explicitly concerned with the ways in which Christianity has been 'used by Southern Sudanese to criticize the government, legitimate revolution, script futures, and forge new identities.'[23] However, if we take seriously people's religious commitment and their attempts to understand their own identity, history and circumstances in biblical terms, instrumentalist explanations that see religious identities primarily as a political tool or a coping mechanism are insufficient. Just like the utilitarian approaches to religious conversion discussed in the introduction and third chapter, these explanations are not only etic but analyse religion, to return to Marshall's argument, 'as performing a second-order process of adjustment' in relation to non-religious forces.[24]

This chapter is driven by the conviction that when Messianics state that they are 'all descendants of Noah' or claim to be Israelites or Cushites, this cannot be understood simply as a politically motivated discursive intervention, even if this claim does have political implications. In what follows, I try to make sense of people's appropriation of biblical identities and narratives not merely as a counter-discourse but also as a genuine claim about their origins and place in the world. In order to do so—in order to understand how knowledge of biblical history made Messianics in Gambella reconsider Nuer identity and origins in relation to longer Judeo-Christian history—we must first consider how Nuer identity and origin myths have evolved over the past century, and how people in Newland came to think of themselves as members of both a global Christian community and a Nuer 'ethnic' community, in a world divided into nation states.

[22] Ibid., 192-3.
[23] Tounsel, *'God Will Crown Us'*, 20.
[24] Marshall, *Political Spiritualities*.

Migration, assimilation and the Nuer expansion

The people known as Nuer today commonly referred to themselves, at least until the colonial period, as *nei ti naath* (people of people) or simply *naath* (people). Since the early twentieth century, different versions of two Nuer origin myths have been recorded by scholars and colonial officials. One concerns the 'beginning of people' (*tuk naath*) in general: the origin of all Nuer. It focuses on a tamarind tree called Koat-Lic which was located, until it was burned down in 1918, somewhere around present-day Bentiu, and where humans are said to have originated. Under this tree, Ɣaak and Gɛ̈ɛ̈, the sons of the first man, known as Ran (literally, man, and often described as the son of God), cut an animal into two and agreed to forbid their offspring from marrying one another. From there their descendants spread in different directions to form the Nuer nation. The second famous Nuer origin myth deals specifically with the roots of the Jikäny Nuer. It focuses on their shared ancestor, Kiir, who is said to have been found inside a gourd. Although the Jikäny do not usually claim to have originated from Ran, Ɣaak or Gɛ̈ɛ̈, in some versions of the Jikäny myth Kiir is adopted by Gɛ̈ɛ̈, thus linking the Jikäny into the wider kinship structure of Nuer society,[25] and some Jikäny Nuer today trace their genealogy all the way to Ran.

While both myths focus on shared ancestors and lineage heads, demonstrating the centrality of patrilineal descent in the organisation of Nuer society, they also encapsulate the political logic that ultimately made Nuer society remarkably adept to territorial expansion and the assimilation of strangers. As Dereje writes, the story of Kiir, in particular, 'provides evidence of complex forms of relatedness among the Nuer that go beyond the belief in common origins and common descent.'[26] Several recordings of this myth from the colonial period suggest Kiir was found and initially raised by Dinka communities, while Jal documented, in the 1980s, a version of the myth in which Kiir is a descendant of an Anuak.[27] In another recent analysis, Stringham points out that a dominant theme in both origin myths is the forming of kinship through exogamous marriage, that is, by marrying outside the immediate lineage. Both the cutting of the gourd

[25] Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, 236.
[26] Dereje, *Playing Different Games*, 57-8.
[27] C. H. Stigand, 'The Story of Kir and the White Spear', *Sudan Notes and Records,* 2 (1919), 224-226; Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, 231; Jal, *The History*, 16.

in the story about Kiir and the cutting of an animal under Koat-Lic, he points out, reflect and resemble rites commonly conducted by Nuer in order to sever incestuous relationships (*ruaal*) and prevent the deadly pollutions they are believed to cause.[28] Although the definition of what constitutes incest has been somewhat relaxed over the past century, particularly among eastern Nuer communities, it remains one of the most strictly observed prohibitions in Nuer customary law.

It was the commitment to assimilating foreigners, primarily through marriage, that enabled the famous migration of Gaawäär, Lɔu and Jikäny communities throughout the nineteenth century from the western side of the Nile and towards the Ethiopian frontier. During this expansion, those Nuer vanguards who departed from their ancestral homelands assimilated thousands of Dinka and Anuak, using Nuer women and cattle to systematically attract and bind 'foreigners' into their communities. 'What underwrote the dramatic expansion of Nuer communities,' Hutchinson writes, 'was the rapidity and completeness with which they made ethnic outsiders feel like insiders.'[29] This led, as Dereje observes, to a shift in the way eastern Nuer understood and articulated their identity, 'from an ideology based on descent—and, by extension, ethnic purity—to one based on assimilation.'[30] Dereje refers to the resulting Nuer identity as constructivist. Hutchinson refers to it as performative. What both emphasise is that Nuer identity came to be understood as something that can be acquired, primarily by adhering to a set of norms and practices, rather than something that is guaranteed by one's blood.

This is not to say that lineage and descent were no longer important in Nuer society. On the contrary. A Nuer community, or *cieŋ*, typically comprised of a mixture of members of a ruling lineage (*diel*, or, 'aristocrats'), Nuer immigrants or 'guests' (*rul*), and non-Nuer captives and immigrants known as *jaaŋ* (sing., *jaŋ*, literally 'Dinka').[31] Members of the ruling lineage were usually a minority within their community, but the community would nonetheless be clustered around them, and named after their lineage. The extent to which this system enabled the creation of an egalitarian society, as Evans-Pritchard

[28] Stringham, *Marking Nuer Histories*, 33-46. See also Chapter 6 on *ruaal* rituals.
[29] S. E. Hutchinson, 'Nuer Ethnicity Militarized', *Anthropology Today,* 16 (2000), 9.
[30] Dereje, *Playing Different Games*, 59.
[31] Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, 211-7.

famously suggested, has been debated.[32] But this system nonetheless allowed individuals to move relatively freely, attaching themselves to a new community as they pleased by entering into a relationship with the dominant lineage of this community. Membership in any local community residing in a specific territory was not defined according to blood or ancestry, therefore, but according to willingness to adhere to a set of shared norms set by a divine moral and social order. One's original lineage continued to play a role only in the context of specific rituals and ceremonies as well as in the context of incest prohibitions, while the wider Nuer lineage structure served as a 'system of values' that linked local communities to one another and provided 'the idiom in which their relations can be expressed and directed.'[33]

Much of the flexibility of Nuer identity and kinship structures and the vitality of the lineage system was guaranteed by an ideology that positioned cattle, rather than human blood, as the prime media through which kinship ties were forged. The image that emerges from Evans-Pritchard's famous ethnographies of Nuer society in the 1930s, as Hutchinson observes, is one of 'oneness of cattle and people', where the acts of transferring or sacrificing cattle have the capacity to remake a wide range of human relationships and address all sorts of misfortunes.[34] For instance, an infertile woman was able to become a 'husband' of another woman and therefore produce heirs, by paying cattle bride-wealth. Though her wife still had to be impregnated by another man, the children were recognised as her own. Similarly, a male Dinka captive could be adopted to become part of a Nuer lineage—that is, be given agnatic affiliation (*buth*)—through the ceremonial sacrifice of cattle. This fusion was 'complete and final' to the extent that it was 'almost impossible without a prolonged stay in a Nuer village or camp to discover who are and who are not of pure Nuer origin.'[35] This capacity of cattle to serve as a binding media in human relationships clearly served cattle-wealthy men who were able to bolster their political influence, while marginalising women and cattle-less men who were dependent on the generosity and patronage of the former.[36]

[32] S. McKinnon, 'Domestic Exceptions: Evans-Pritchard and the Creation of Nuer Patrilineality and Equality', *Cultural Anthropology,* 15 (2000), 35-83.
[33] Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, 212.
[34] Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 59-63.
[35] Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, 222-3.
[36] Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 61.

Nuer rootedness and the nation state

Over the past century, engagements with states and violent conflicts gradually eroded the performative and constructivist tendencies of Nuer identity and led to a growing emphasis on biological descent and notions of cultural and territorial rootedness. The imposition of administrative boundaries and the system of Native Administration under colonial rule already represented an attempt to separate, physically and culturally, between different communities in southern Sudan, and consolidate 'tribal' (or, 'ethnic') identities as distinct and rigid.[37] Although the notion that Christianity and African identity unite South Sudanese as a nation (vis-à-vis the Arab Muslim north) has been propagated by generations of Southern leaders, South Sudanese national identity has also consistently emphasised 'tribal' membership as the ultimate test for one's belonging to this nation. Thus, being South Sudanese never eliminated one's identity as a Nuer or a Dinka or a Shilluk but rather came to be seen as based on it. This stance is explicitly enshrined in South Sudan's 2011 Nationality Act, which defines a citizen as any person who 'belongs to one of the indigenous ethnic communities' of the country.[38]

Political violence in both Ethiopia and South Sudan played an important role in the rigidification of 'ethnic' categories in recent decades. Hutchinson describes how the ideology of 'cattle-over-blood' was slowly being replaced with a focus on blood throughout the 1980s.[39] Though tensions between Dinka and Nuer characterised the southern struggles since the outset of Sudan's second civil war, in 1991, after the fall of the Derg, the SPLA split into two when a group of high-ranking generals led by Riek Machar, a Nuer from Leer (Unity State), defected from the movement and established what came to be known as the 'Nasir faction' and later the SPLA-United.[40] This split instigated a wave of Nuer-Dinka violence that also led to the adoption of increasingly primordialist ways of understanding Nuer identity among fighters.[41] The conflict that broke out in South Sudan in December 2013, largely along the same fault lines of the

[37] See, e.g., D. H. Johnson, 'Tribal Boundaries and Border Wars: Nuer-Dinka Relations in the Sobat and Zaraf Valleys, C.1860-1976', *The Journal of African History,* 23 (1982), 183-203.
[38] F. D. Marko, 'Negotiations and Morality: The Ethnicization of Citizenship in Post-Secession South Sudan', *Journal of Eastern African Studies,* 9 (2015), 669-684.
[39] Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 203-9.
[40] Nyaba, *The Politics of Liberation*.
[41] Hutchinson, 'Nuer Ethnicity Militarized', 10.

Nuer-Dinka violence and intra-SPLA disputes of the 1990s, only enhanced these tendencies.

Meanwhile in Ethiopia, the federal structure that was established by the EPRDF following the fall of the Derg in 1991 nominally decentralised the distribution of political authority in the country, and more importantly, conceptualised Ethiopia as comprising of numerous 'nations, nationalities and peoples.' As a political system that is based on the premise that these 'peoples' are 'indigenous' to certain territories and possess collective rights as such, it fuelled discourses of indigeneity and led to a growing competition between communities over resources and political influence within state institutions. This has been particularly so in the case of Gambella, where it meant not only an intractable conflict between Nuer and Anuak communities over resources and political power in the region but also competition between different Nuer communities.[42] Ultimately, just as South Sudanese national identity came to be based on one's supposedly pre-existing identity as a Nuer, so was—if not de jure then at least de facto—Ethiopian national identity.

Since Ethiopian IDs were distributed at the kebele level, it was up to local Nuer officials to decide who was eligible for them. In rural areas, that would normally be anyone associated with the local community (*cieŋ*) dominating the kebele. In urban areas, the ultimate authority assessing one's application for a national ID was the *sefer shum*. An applicant had to approach the *sefer shum* and ask for a 'recommendation letter', addressed to the *kebele* chairman, certifying that the applicant indeed is a member of a certain Nuer community known to be residing in Ethiopia and therefore eligible for citizenship. The ability to persuade the *sefer shum* to provide such a letter (at the price of 20-30 Birr) greatly depended on one's connections, because newcomers were expected to show up with a relative who could support their claim. 'You don't say that you are a refugee but just that you came from the *wereda* [i.e. from a rural area],' one young man who was born in Ethiopia as a refugee in the 1990s but ultimately became a citizen, explained. 'If the *sefer shum* is a highlander, they will investigate you more. If they are Nuer, they don't care.'

[42] Dereje, *Playing Different Games*, 71-4; F. Dereje, 'Electoral Politics in the Nuer Cultural Context', in *Contested Power in Ethiopia: Traditional Authorities and Multi-Party Elections*, ed. by K. Tronvoll and T. Hagmann (Leiden, 2011), 31–60.

Thus, Nuer who left their rural homeland and migrated to other countries, refugee camps or urban areas retained not only their lineage affiliation (as any Nuer did in the past) but also their association with a specific cieng. Refugee camps in which there were significant Nuer populations were usually divided into zones that correspond with Nuer ciengs. In towns and the diaspora, Nuer communities often organised through associations, and the scale of the segments these organisations represent generally depended on the proximity to the Nuer homelands and the size of the local Nuer community. The Ethiopian Nuer Development Association (ENDA), for instance, represented all Nuer in Gambella, as did the Gambella University Nuer Student Association (GUNSA). In Uganda, all Nuer organised under the Nuer Community in Uganda Association (NCU). But there were also numerous organisations, in Gambella as elsewhere, representing smaller segments of Nuer society. While Lou Nuer organised under a single association in Ethiopia, for example, various sub sections of the Eastern Jikäny community established their own associations. Such associations operated, as one Nuer student in Kampala told me, 'like a government'.[43] Their authority, influence and level of bureaucratisation varied greatly, but they were important platforms for the sharing of resources, the organisation of community events and the settlement of conflicts.

Both sides of the Ethiopian-South Sudanese border were locally considered part of 'Nuerland' (*röö̈l Nuärä*), inhabited by the Nuer 'nation' (*dɔ̱r*). The fact that each side was administered by a different government was a mere technicality. 'I am a citizen of the place where I live. When I go to Sudan, I will be a citizen of Sudan. Here I am a citizen of Ethiopia,' one Messianic friend told me.[44] Although Ethiopia formally did not allow dual citizenship, nothing prevented many of the South Sudanese who came into the country as refugees from registering as Ethiopians. The distinction between 'refugees' and 'host communities' in Gambella was always vague. In Nuer, the English word 'refugees' (*rɛpug̱i̱̱th*) simply referred to those living inside Gambella's refugee camps as well as to the camps themselves. Knowledgeable elders and church leaders estimated that the vast majority of the Nuer citizens of Ethiopia were registered as refugees in Gambella's camps but lived outside them. Many people who crossed the border due to

[43] Notes, 30 August 2019 (Kampala).
[44] Notes, 10 July 2019. See also F. Dereje, 'Alternative Citizenship: The Nuer Between Ethiopia and the Sudan', in *The Borderlands of South Sudan: Authority and Identity in Contemporary and Historical Perspective*, ed. by C. Vaughan, M. Schomerus, and L. D. Vries (Basingstoke, 2013), 109-131.

the conflict in South Sudan registered as citizens in order to move freely and access education.

Within Nuerland, different communities were associated with specific territories and administrative structures: Lare Wereda was the place of Cieŋ Thiang, Jikow Wereda was shared by Cieŋ Wau and Cieŋ Cany, Makuey Wereda belonged to Cieŋ Nyijaaŋni, and so on. Smaller segments of these communities controlled the *qebellés* within these *weredas*. Gaa-jak communities had greater influence within Ethiopia than Gaa-jiok. Easter Jikäny as a whole, as already noted, were more embedded in Ethiopia than Lou. One's status in a certain area therefore had more to do with one's personal connections or relationship with the cieng dominating the area than with any formal national status, which could easily be changed. In short, therefore, while eastern Nuer related to the 'national order of things' primarily on the basis of their identity as Nuer,[45] they related to the Nuer nation primarily through their identity as members of specific communities, each associated with its own territory within Nuerland. The following section examines the intersection of these associations with people's identity as Christians.

Global Christianity and the Nuer nation

In February 2019, Don Esposito paid a two-day visit to the Congregation of Yahweh camp outside Newland. He was accompanied by another (American) elder from Israel and two elders from Kenya who came to see the kibbutz of the Congregation before initiating a similar project in their home country. In the Congregation's kibbutz, a large shade made of wood and grass was constructed prior to the visit, outside the synagogue, and hundreds of plastic chairs were placed underneath it. A colourful poster welcoming the guests decorated the site, and several smaller signs were posted in advance in Newland, inviting people to attend Esposito's sermon. 'We would like to inform you that, we have some Missionaries from: Israel, America and Kenya,' it stated. 'Their Mission, is to preach the good news from ISRAEL to the nations, Isa 2:2-3.' The sunny morning Esposito was due to speak, hundreds of excited members of the Congregation of Yahweh gathered in the kibbutz to see and hear the respected elder from Israel.

[45] L. H. Malkki, 'Refugees and Exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things', *Annual Review of Anthropology,* 24 (1995), 495-523.

Esposito addressed the crowd in English, but one of the elders of the Congregation, standing next to him at the front of the shaded space, translated his sermon into Nuer. The shade was constructed, like the Congregation's synagogue and the nearby Church of God, facing northwards, towards Jerusalem, more than 1,600 miles away. After greeting the audience and leading a short prayer, Esposito began his talk by complimenting the audience for the kibbutz they established. He read the final verses from the fourth chapter of the Book of Acts, which describe how the first Christians shared their possessions and were 'one in heart and mind' (4:32), and compared this harmonious state of unity among believers with the lifestyles of both the Israeli kibbutzim which were established by early Jewish settlers in Palestine, and the kibbutz established by members of the Congregation of Yahweh in Gambella. He then reassured the audience:

> We are all here with one mind. And one soul. And one faith. And one congregation. And I am so happy to see the unity that I see here today. At times, you may feel like you are all alone out here in the wilderness. And that's a good thing! Your kibbutz is very sanctified, and the spirit of Yahweh is here. But never feel you are alone, because your brethren *all over the world* are looking at what you are doing. Your brethren *all over the world* want to know what is happening in the kibbutz in Ethiopia![46] […] You are such a good example for *all your brethren around the world*. You have such good judicial order, good structure of leadership, following the good doctrine, and love one for another. So, I will take this with me back and share with all the congregations the good work you are doing here. And I thank you.

Newland was an important hub for Nuer communities from across the world, but it was its churches that put it on a global map that transcended Nuer networks. The presence of a few Indian lecturers inside Gambella University and a small number of foreign aid workers inside UNHCR's compound at Newland's edge notwithstanding, the only non-Nuer foreigners to ever set foot in the neighbourhood came there on church affairs. And given the large number of churches in Gambella and their various international connections, visits of church leaders and missionaries from abroad took place on a fairly regular basis. In Gambella, preparations for such visits often began weeks in advance, and, depending on the organisation involved, at least some of their costs were covered by

[46] Notes, Don Esposito speaking before the Congregation of Yahweh, 27 February 2019.

church members in Gambella. Missionaries were usually hosted in a hotel outside Newland, and their visits often revolved around some kind of a 'project' or at least the planning of a future one: a mobile clinic, an orphanage, a new church building, a Bible school programme, an evangelisation campaign, and so on.

Figure 37. A poster in the Congregation of Yahweh welcoming Don Esposito and his team.

As a proselytising faith with universal aspirations, Christianity inscribes its believers into a global public, configured around institutions, practices and expectations that are understood to be universally relevant. We have already seen the various global connections and frontier engagements that led to the establishment of church institutions in Gambella, and the range of external influences that shaped local Christian aesthetics and styles. For local Nuer communities, visits of foreign missionaries and the sharing of resources (by both sides) that they involved were similarly important events that both constituted and demonstrated their membership in an imagined global community of believers. In addition to material resources, the sharing of knowledge was also an important part of these interactions. Visiting preachers were received with great admiration, and the information they came to share was enthusiastically sought. The leaders of the Congregation of Yahweh did not put up signs announcing Esposito's visit in the centre of Newland for nothing: it was not unusual for people to go and hear the sermons of visiting preachers in churches other than their own.

When a preacher from Australia visited the Seventh-day Adventist Church, for instance, its main branch in Newland was flooded with hundreds of curious listeners, evening after evening, who came to hear his sermons. Pastor John, as he was called, was greatly admired throughout Newland, having visited Gambella several times in the past. He accompanied his talks with slides, with colourful illustrations and even some animation videos, bullet points and quotes, and regularly covered issues such as the Last Days, the Second Coming of Christ, the Millennial Kingdom and eternal life. Pastor John would speak about these topics in great detail, with remarkably concrete descriptions, for example, of the way Jesus would appear in the sky with millions of angels, or the wonders and specific comforts of life in heaven. Speaking in a deep authoritative voice, he punctuated his sermons with a combination of constructive warnings ('Be wise, don't go running after women, having sex, or you will end up having AIDS and you're gonna die!') and popular Christian children's hymns in English, which the audience eagerly learned to repeat ('Read your Bible, pray every day, and you'll grow, grow, grow!'). His talks did not attract only Adventists. I was surprised to hear members of both the Pentecostal Christian Temple Church as well as the Messianic Church of God complimenting his skills as a preacher.[47]

For obvious reasons, among Messianics, it was links with Israel that were most keenly sought, and, perhaps even more importantly, with Jews 'by blood'—authentic members of the Chosen People. The Church of God ('headquarters in Israel', as its full title insisted) was, of course, at a great disadvantage in the local economy of international visits, something that, I believe, caused a certain degree of unspoken anxiety among its members. Its main partners were in Kenya, and its claim to have links with any concrete institution in Israel were disputable. Its elders repeatedly mentioned before me their plan to send representatives to Jerusalem, but given Israel's remarkably strict visa policy, the costs of flights and the fact that the Church of God had no wealthy supporters, these plans seemed fantastically unrealistic. Groups that defected from the church therefore took great pride in their links in Israel, and the visits these enabled in both directions. The leaders of Ahavat Yeshua Messianic Congregation, who defected from the Church of God in 2015, were so eager to have 'real' Jews visit their new congregation that when a group of Messianics representing the organisation Revive Israel came to Ethiopia to visit

[47] Notes, 1-6 February 2019.

congregations in other parts of the country, the leaders of the congregation in Newland volunteered to cover the costs of their trip to Gambella for two days.

Figure 38. Welcoming guests from Israel in Ahavat Yeshua Congregation.

In his study of Christian citizenship in Guatemala, O'Neill highlights that despite their global aspirations and claims, Pentecostals do not question the division of the world into nation states. On the contrary. Their 'international theologies of Christian citizenship' see believers in various countries as relating to the Christian world through their national identities. 'Through an international Christian imagination, neo-Pentecostals have come to imagine the world as nations sewn together,' he writes. 'The neo-Pentecostal logic, at its most basic, begins with me: I change; then my nation changes; then the world changes—all for Christ.'[48] We find similar tendencies among West African Pentecostal mega-churches, who not only readily engage with political elites and seek to extend their influence on state institutions,[49] but frame the nation state as a distinct entity which citizens can and should transform through their personal religious devotion.[50] When Nigerian mega-pastor T. B. Joshua, for instance, urges the thousands of worshippers at his Synagogue Church of All Nations (SCOAN) in Lagos to pull out the flags of their countries and ask the Lord to take care of them, he is clearly making a statement about

[48] K. L. O'Neill, *City of God: Christian Citizenship in Postwar Guatemala* (Berkeley, 2010), 176, 182.
[49] See, for example, E. Obadare, *Pentecostal Republic: Religion and the Struggle for State Power in Nigeria* (London, 2018).
[50] Marshall, *Political Spiritualities*.

the forms of political association his faith recognises as legitimate and through which its believers are expected to understand their place in the world.[51]

The view from Newland, I would like to argue, was different. Local communities did not relate to the Christian world through their identity as Ethiopian or South Sudanese, but rather, primarily as members of the Nuer nation. Given the evolution of Nuer identity over the twentieth century and its primacy vis-à-vis national identities, this is hardly surprising. But this is a point that has to be emphasised if we want to take seriously the role of these institutions in local political life. Organisations with names like Nuer Christian Youth for Peace and Development, Nuer Christian Missionary Network, or even the proposed Nuer Messianic Youth for Salvation, indicated very well what sort of community they aimed to configure and unite. These were all extra-territorial pan-Nuer organisations which, like the churches they represented, connected an archipelago of Nuer communities from across the region and the world with one another, with little regard of national borders. Just like songs and styles, resources also constantly circulated between these communities through church institutions.[52]

Many of the churches that were established in Gambella since the late 1990s were Nuer churches: They spread through Nuer communities in various countries, rarely incorporating any significant number of members from other groups. Even churches that were formally part of larger bureaucratic structures that included other communities in Ethiopia—the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Church of the Nazarene, Mekane Yesus—ultimately assumed a distinctively Nuer identity in Gambella. Mekane Yesus used to have one main compound in Gambella town in which both Nuer and Anuak worshipped together, but it split into two in the early 1990s due to disagreements. Nuer and Anuak Mekane Yesus churches in the entire Gambella region came to operate under separate synods of the Bethel Church, each having its own compound in Gambella town. To the best of my knowledge, the only church in Newland where services were regularly attended by any notable number of non-Nuer was a small Seventh-day Adventist Church near Gambella University whose members included a group of Oromo students. While

[51] 'RELEASE YOURSELF!!! | Mass Prayer With TB Joshua 🙏,' *Emmanuel TV*, 28 November 2019, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3PGm0P8CeJU.
[52] See also Carver and Ruach Guok, *The Role of Transnational Networks*, 35-7.

services in this church were still held in the Nuer language, someone often volunteered to translate them into Amharic or Oromo.

Meanwhile, in locations outside what was considered to be Nuerland—Addis Ababa and other urban locales and refugee camps in Ethiopia and East Africa—Nuer congregations were important meeting points for diaspora communities. Nuer from Gambella who travelled to other parts of Ethiopia to study often established their own congregations or fellowships, rather than join the programmes of other local Ethiopian congregation, ostensibly due to language differences. A friend from the Church of God who travelled to Hawassa, a town in southern Ethiopia, to study for his first degree, told me that even though there was a local non-Nuer Messianic congregation there, he preferred to pray with the Nuer fellowship of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In Kampala, Nairobi, Khartoum and other smaller towns, Nuer congregations worshipped separately from other communities, in the Nuer language. Religious conferences regularly brought together, physically, members from various Nuer communities around the region and the world: Gambella's refugee camps, South Sudan, Sudan, Kenya, Uganda, and even the US.

The geography of premillennialist history

Messianic Jews and most Evangelicals today subscribe to premillennialist theologies.[53] They expect the current era to come to an end imminently, with a great war, the Battle of Armageddon, that is expected to take place in the Middle East. It is during this war that

[53] Historians of Christianity and theologians commonly distinguish between two premillennialist traditions: historicist premillennialism and dispensational premillennialism. Historicist premillennialism gained popularity in the early nineteenth century. Its adherents attempted to calculate the precise date in which the Second Coming would occur. The Millerite Movement, which gave birth to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, is associated with this tradition. Dispensational premillennialism evolved several decades later, had much greater influence among American Evangelicals, and is explicitly Zionist in the sense that its adherents see Israel and the Jews as the subjects of biblical prophesies and reject 'replacement theology'. Evangelical Christian Zionism is often conflated today with dispensationalism, though the label is often applied carelessly by outsiders. Not all Christian Zionists or Messianic Jews are dispensationalists. Messianic leaders like Dan Juster and Asher Intrater, while identifying as premillennialists, distinguished themselves from dispensationalists as well on various grounds. I deliberately avoid labelling the specific premillennial theologies different Nuer Messianic groups follow, not least because for people in Gambella these labels did not mean much. They were unaware of them and were drawing on a wide range of influences to shape their views. Of interest here is more what they had in common as premillennialists than the nuances that distinguished them from one another. On the evolution of historicist and dispensational premillennialism and their position towards Israel and the Jews, see: Ariel, *An Unusual Relationship*. On the common conflation of Christian Zionism with dispensationalism, see: Westbrook, *The International Christian Embassy.* On Juster's and Intrater's views, see A. Intrater and D. Juster, *Israel, the Church, and the Last Days* (Shippensburg, 2003).

Jesus Christ will return, bring it to an end, and establish His Millennial Kingdom. This expectation concerning the future, which is based on prophesies made in the past and available to us in the present through the Bible, influences how believers think about history and their position within it. 'In terms of biblical history, the period of time in which we now live may be seen as a plain between two mountain peaks,' writes Asher Intrater, one of the most influential Messianic Jewish authors and the president of Tikkun, in his 2003 book *From Iraq to Armageddon: The Final Showdown Approaches*. A copy of the book, it should be noted, was sent to Ahavat Yeshua Messianic Congregation in Gambella by Revive Israel, another organisation that Intrater was associated with, along with several other Messianic Jewish books. 'The mountain peak behind us is the crucifixion of Yeshua, and the mountain peak in front of us is the Second Coming.'[54]

Mountain peaks are paradigmatic of premillennialist illustrations of time and space. We find a similar metaphor in Charles Larkin's seminal book *Dispensational Truth or God's Plan and Purpose in the Ages* from 1918.[55] Larkin, an American dispensationalist known for his detailed charts and illustrations of biblical prophesies and history, described the current dispensation not as a plain but as a valley: the 'valley of the church'. This valley straddles between two 'mountain peaks of prophesy' representing the first and second coming of Christ. Standing behind the 'peaks' of His first coming, in the 'Old Testament valley', the prophets of the Bible were unable to see the 'valley of the church'. They only saw the peaks of Christ's arrival and return, and beyond them, the Millennial Kingdom. Their prophesies describe these peaks in detail but left us with no clear script for whatever happens in between them, in the valley. Standing in the valley, one's only stable points of reference are the peaks. It is an awfully disorienting space to inhabit.

First, it is impossible to know when exactly humanity will finally arrive at the next mountain peak. Premillennialists, Robbins argues, live with the 'sense of being momentarily abandoned by narrative, of being caught in a middle where things may make sense but they do not make ultimate sense.'[56] There are, of course, various signs that indicate, for Messianics and other Evangelical Zionists, that we are living in the Last Days. Chief among them are Israel's independence and its conflicts with its neighbours,

[54] K. Intrater, *From Iraq to Armageddon: The Final Showdown Approaches* (Shippensburg, 2003), 8.
[55] C. Larkin, *Dispensational Truth, or, God's Plan and Purpose in the Ages* (Glenside, 1920).
[56] Robbins, *Becoming Sinners*, 162.

the return of Jews to the Holy Land, and the decision of some of them to accept Jesus as their Messiah. Due to these developments, a growing number of Evangelicals around the world have been confident that humanity is indeed climbing out of centuries in the 'valley' towards the Second Coming of Christ and the Millennial Kingdom. This is a sentiment Messianics in Gambella very much shared. They followed closely Israeli news—often via online Messianic platforms—searching for signs that reassured them that the next mountain peak is at hand. Observing constant turmoil in the Middle East and international criticism of Israel's policies, they also consistently found such signs. However, when exactly the remarkable transformation they were expecting and whose script they kept revising would take place, was unclear.

Equally unclear, however, is what precisely took place within the valley we currently inhabit since humanity left the previous peak. From the book of Genesis to Revelation, the Holy Bible provides us with a detailed account of the origins of humanity, the coming of the Messiah, and the early evolution of the church. For Messianics in Gambella, as for other fundamentalist Christians,[57] the authority of this account was unquestioned. It was, after all, the Word of God. However, from somewhere in the first century AD, they were left in the darkness. There was no authoritative script that recorded the paths their ancestors crossed on their way from the previous biblical peak to where Nuer Messianics stood in the metaphoric 'valley of the church' and very literal lowlands of Gambella. Therefore, as much as premillennialist views of history left Messianics constantly searching for signs that they may finally be rising from the valley into the comfort and certainty of the biblical narrative once again, it also left them with the urge to figure out what their position was vis-à-vis the peaks, and narratives, left behind.

The obvious challenge in this context was that the territories of the valley were covered solely by man-made histories that did not necessarily reach as far as the point where the Bible ends, and whose reliability and truthfulness could easily be questioned. We have already seen, in the second chapter, that tracing the institutional link between the Church of God in Gambella and the Church of God established by the followers of Jesus in New Testament days was a central concern for Messianics and the cause of much uncertainty and debates. This is precisely why they cherished Andrew Dugger's book *A History of*

[57] Compare: Crapanzano, *Serving the Word*, 161.

the True Religion and constantly interrogated the biographies and affiliations of those religious leaders and institutions outside Gambella they associated themselves with. However, a similar attempt to identify links between the present and the 'real' biblical past concerned the identity of Nuer people themselves. It revolved around discerning who the Nuer were and how they came to be what they were. It focused, therefore, not on institutions but on bodies and blood.

Jews, gentiles and the Lost Tribes of Israel

A brief recap of the biblical narrative upon which the myth of the Lost Tribes is based, as far as it goes, is in order. Noah, himself a descendant of the first human being, Adam, had three sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth. Following the great flood (Genesis 6-9), Noah's sons became the forefathers of all humanity. Abraham, who entered a covenant with God and to whom God promised the Land of Israel, was a descendant of Shem. His son, Isaac, was the father of Jacob, and Jacob had twelve sons, whose descendants became the Twelve Tribes of Israel. These tribes divided into two kingdoms: Israel and Judah. The kingdom of Judah comprised of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The kingdom of Israel, to its north, comprised of the tribes of Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Zebulon, Dan, Issachar, and Joseph. The tribe of Joseph was divided into Ephraim and Manasseh, while Levi was scattered between the other tribes. With the invasion of the Assyrian Empire and the fall of Samaria in the eight century BC (2 Kings 17), the ten tribes of the kingdom of Israel went into exile, disappearing into the fog of undocumented history. At this point, as Parfitt writes, 'the history of the Lost Tribes of Israel stops and the history of the myth of the Lost Tribes starts.'[58]

Throughout the centuries, travellers and scholars came up with various theories on the whereabouts of the Lost Tribes and on the Hamitic or Semitic origins of various African peoples. These speculations and discourses, and the extent to which Africa consistently featured as one of the possible locations in which the Lost Tribes are to be found, have been masterfully documented by Parfitt and Edith Bruder.[59] There is no need to review them here, not least because Nuer in Gambella were not preoccupied with them. Suffice to say that the continued belief in the existence of these Lost Tribes has also led various

[58] Parfitt, *Black Jews*, 14.
[59] Ibid., 13-23; Bruder, *The Black Jews*.

explorers and colonialists in the modern era to speculate that some African peoples they encountered were indeed members of these communities, and that numerous African communities have picked up these discourses and begun to claim an Israelite identity. The Beta-Israel of Ethiopia represent the only African community that has been formally recognised by the Jewish world and Israeli authorities as descendants of one of the Lost Tribes (Dan, in this case). Other African groups that claim Israelite descent include, most prominently, the Igbo of Nigeria and the Lemba of Zimbabwe and South Africa, as well as numerous smaller communities in other countries.

Biblical prophesies (Ezekiel 37:15-27, Isaiah 11:12) associate the ingathering of exiled Israelite communities in the Land of Israel with the coming of the Messiah. The gathering of Jews in the Holy Land over the past century and the emergence of communities that claim Jewish identity in other parts of the world are often understood by Evangelical Zionists as the fulfilment of such prophesies. Therefore, in recent decades, Messianic Jewish groups and other Evangelical Christians—again, mainly American—have shown a growing interest in identifying the Lost Tribes, supporting their immigration to Israel and evangelising them, as a means of speeding up the Second Coming of Christ. This is, to a large extent, the thrust behind the outreach activities of Messianic Jewish organisations like Jewish Voice Ministries, Tikkun and the MJBI not only in Africa but throughout the world. The website of Jewish Voice Ministries, for instance, includes abundant information on 'Lost Tribes' that the organisation has been working with, including, in Africa, Igbo, Lemba and several Ethiopian communities.

This preoccupation with the Lost Tribes must be understood in light of what is arguably the most important tenet of all Christian Zionist doctrines: the rejection of what Evangelicals call 'replacement theology', that is, the notion that God has replaced Israel with the Church after the Jews rejected Jesus. Zionist Christians consider replacement theology a 'pagan' legacy of the Catholic Church that has no biblical basis. The People of Israel, they claim, have not been pushed aside from God's redemption scheme or superseded by the Christian Church. They still have a key role to play in the end times events, and gentiles can only be saved by 'grafting' themselves into the 'tree of Israel'—the covenant which was never abolished between the Israelites and God. The obligation of 'gentiles' who seek salvation through Israel to observe the laws of the Torah is a hotly debated issue. Some, like Esposito, insist that they, too, must obey the laws in order to be

saved. This is also the position of the Church of God. Others, like the leaders of Tikkun and Revive Israel, disagree.

In any case, all of these theologies conceptualise Jewish (or, more accurately, Israelite) and gentile identities as inalienable and primordial. Conversion, baptism or obedience to God's law can enable one to be redeemed, but none of these can alter one's inherent status as either an Israelite or a gentile. This status is understood as predetermined by one's genealogy, lineage and ultimately, blood. One is either from the seed of Abraham, or a gentile; Either part of a natural branch in the ancient olive tree cultivated by God, or part of the 'ingrafted branches' (Romans 11:24). As Rabbi Joash, the Messianic from Kenya who visited Ahavat Yeshua Congregation, reminded his listeners in Newland: 'A Jew never stops being a Jew. And a gentile never stops being a gentile.'[60] However, since such a long period of time has passed since the Bible was sealed—longer than any record of a personal genealogy can possibly reach, even in societies where written documents are usually kept—one can never be *absolutely* certain what his or her status within God's scheme is.

A lost tribe, found?

Members of both the Congregation of Yahweh and Ahavat Yeshua have enthusiastically engaged with Messianic organisations that propagated theories about the Lost Tribes and were manifestly concerned with identifying them. Not surprisingly, therefore, the notion that the Nuer are one of the Lost Tribes of Israel has gained much currency in Gambella and became the subject of a lively debate between Messianics. The main point of contention in Gambella was whether Nuer are descendants of Cush—the eldest son of Ham, who is often considered the forefather of the peoples of Sudan and Ethiopia—or one of the Lost Tribes of Israel, thus descendants of Abraham and Shem who were exiled from Israel in biblical times and ultimately found themselves dispersed in the land of Cush. While both interpretations clearly grounded the Nuer in Gambella within biblical genealogies that go back to the creation of the world, they situated them in different positions within God's overall plan for humanity (in which, they all agreed, Israelites play a much more central role), and in varying proximity to the lineage of Jesus Christ.

[60] Notes, 12 April 2019 (Rabbi Joash in Newland).

It should be noted that some comparisons between the Nuer and ancient Israelites were already made during the colonial period. Although he did not argue that they were Semitic Israelites, British ethnologist C. G. Seligman, writing in 1913, theorised explicitly about the foreign roots of the Nuer and other Sudanese peoples. Using measurements of the physical traits of various Sudanese communities and based on theories that posit 'race' as a biological feature, Seligman confidently argued that there is 'Hamitic blood' running in the veins of the Nuer, Dinka and, above all, Shilluk 'tribes' of southern Sudan (Hamitic, in this context, referring to 'non-Negro' influence originating from outside Africa).[61] Conducting fieldwork two decades later, Evans-Pritchard highlighted that Nuer religion was not 'a typical Nilotic religion'. Like Dinka religion, he observed, it had 'features which bring to mind the Hebrews of the Old Testament.'[62] Ray Huffman, an American Presbyterian missionary based in southern Sudan, wrote that 'the missionary feels as if he were living in Old Testament times, and in a way this is true.'[63] Nonetheless, none of the Messianics I met in Gambella were aware of these colonial discourses. Their theories of Israelite roots were developed in reaction to and as a result of more recent influences.

People's views on the Lost Tribes issue had a lot to do with the divisions in the Church of God and the international connections of its splinter groups. Church of God members insisted that the theory that the Nuer are Israelites is baseless, and that the Nuer can only be Hamite descendants of Cush. The inscription of local realities into biblical history was illustrated well by the church hymnal, which included a short introduction to the history of the Church of God in Gambella. This introduction recounted how 'the people of Cush' (*jɨ Kuc*) found the 'true teaching' (*ŋɨɨc in thuɔk*) in Kakuma, 'in the land of Kenya' (*rɛy röödl Kɨ-nyɛ*) in 1996 and brought it with them back to 'Cush'. Although Kenya was indeed explicitly mentioned in this historical overview as a country, neither Sudan nor Ethiopia were, nor were 'the Nuer' as a distinct people. Moreover, the hymnal itself included multiple songs that referred to the members of the church as 'the people of Cush' (or the 'sons of Cush', *gaat Kuc*, or the 'people of the house of Cush', *jɨ gɔal Kuc*) and the prophesy of Isaiah. As one hymn stated: 'The speech of God that comes from Jerusalem,

[61] C. G. Seligmann, 'Some Aspects of the Hamitic Problem in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland,* 43 (1913), 593-705. On the 'Hamitic hypothesis' in Africa, see also: Bruder, *The Black Jews*, 51-72; Parfitt, *Black Jews*, 24-35.
[62] Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, vii.
[63] R. Huffman, *Nuer Customs and Folklore* (Oxford, 1931), 56-57.

now it has arrived to us in Cush, we shall bring our offerings to Jerusalem, as written by Isaiah.'[64]

Figure 39. A Bible decorated with a Star of David and the word 'Kush' in the Church of God.

The Congregation of Yahweh's leadership, however, inspired by the writing of their leader Don Esposito, fully endorsed the Lost Tribes theory. Esposito's 2004 book *The Chosen People*, in particular, provides a detailed analysis of the dispersion of the Lost Tribes of Israel, emphasising that biblical prophesies indicate that their members will be 'coming out of their ancient pagan backgrounds and realizing the truth about who they really are' in the last days.[65] A copy of *The Chosen People* was available in the Congregation's kibbutz in Gambella, and while Esposito does not make any specific claims about the Nuer in the book (which was written before any Nuer Messianics were linked to his ministry), the leaders of the Congregation saw themselves fitting nicely within the historical analysis it outlines. In conversations with me the Congregation's leaders repeatedly expressed their hope that Israel would recognise them, and even

[64] Hymn 172 in the Church of God hymnal. See also hymns 174, 189 and 196.
[65] D. Esposito, *The Chosen People* (Carteret, 2004), 138.

reassured me that their elders in Israel were already working to advance the matter.[66] Many of the children born in the kibbutz were given biblical Hebrew names like Sarah, Abraham and Jacob. 'They know they are Israelites,' one elder told me.

In one of my first meetings with the elders of the Congregation, I asked what they make of the myth about Ran, the first human being, and the tamarind tree of Koat-Lic, given their assertion that the Nuer are lost Israelites. That the elders dismissed it as a 'theory' was not surprising. There is no doubt that it does not reach far enough into the past in order to reconnect contemporary Nuer with any biblical narratives. However, the elders also explained why they think their ancestors came up with the 'theory' in the first place, emphasising the concern of this myth not with exogamous kinship but rather, with genealogies, and highlighting the distinction it draws between an 'original' Nuer bloodline and other 'tribes':

> By stating Ran they mean genealogies. Genealogies. Just individual persons. Like you may start with this name, for instance. There is actually a point where… a point of stop. In general, saying Ran, there must be a point of stop of all these kindreds. Actually, for us, we consider this as a myth. You understand me? *Just as a myth*. We don't actually recognise that Ran should be our ancestor. Ran simply means human being, in Nuer. And we believe… we had our ancestors lost their connection with Israel and therefore when they told our children, our kindreds from the father, to the grandfather, to the great great great great parents, they got lost […] and they simply ended up […] saying Ran was our ancestor, and even they say we came out of a tree, which we dismiss this one. We believe we came from somewhere which we believe to be Israel because our culture itself shows that we are Israelites. Because we have a cultural connection with Israel. Because in Bentiu area, that's where they came with the theory of Ran. *We actually call it a theory*. […]
>
> We the Nuer, when we came from Israel, we were like… trying to… let me say, not fear but we tried to be separate, and we tried to protect ourselves. Our ancestors did not want to rebuild our identities. And that is why they had to come up telling the children we have Ran as a father or we came from Koat-

[66] My informal discussions with Israeli officials indicated that they knew nothing on the matter or the existence of the Congregation of Yahweh. As noted already, Israeli authorities are not searching for any Lost Tribes neither do they recognise Messianic Judaism as a valid reason for immigration to Israel.

> Lic, a tree, somewhere in Bentiu. Of course, to separate themselves, not to mix with other people. […] The ideology the Nuer had in mind was that they call themselves *naath* or *ran*, considering them to be the only human beings. Why? Because they saw that the other people did not live according to natural principles and that Nuer were instructed from their ancestors, who we believe to be Israel, to be very different from other people. They call other people *jur*, and *jur* in English is gentiles. That is the name we have for every other tribe. And when asked who we are, we say we are *naath*, we are people, that's it.[67]

As this quote suggests, Nuer Messianics often highlighted the similarities between various customs seen as 'traditional' Nuer ones—often, in fact, characteristic of pastoralist societies in general—and those practiced by Israelites in Old Testament times. In this regard, the evidence they brought forward to substantiate the claim that they were one of the Lost Tribes was similar to that brought forward by other African peoples making similar genealogical claims. Examples of such parallels have been mentioned to me again and again in Gambella. They usually included: Nuer food taboos, that can be said to resemble the biblical prohibition against eating 'unclean meat'; the prohibition on incest (*ruaal*); the custom of offering to God the first fruits of certain agricultural products, which resembles a similar Hebrew obligation to do so; the payment of cattle bride-wealth, as well as practices of 'ghost marriage' (marrying on behalf of a man who died without any heirs) which can be said to resemble the biblical practice of *yibum*. As one Messianic told me, 'the ancient Nuer people… observed the Torah even though the Bible did not reach them.'[68]

Genetic testing and the pure past

What all of these claims of Israelite ancestry suggested was that beyond a 'confused' recent past—in which various external influences have penetrated the Nuer nation and mutated its lifestyles and biology—there existed a pure, authentic Nuer community which was Israelite and endogamous. I was repeatedly told that Nuer culture has been polluted in the process of migration in recent centuries, as a result of mixing with other communities and, more recently, urbanisation. In the past, a Messianic student from the

[67] Notes, discussion with elders of the Congregation of Yahweh, 24 December 2018.
[68] Notes, 8 August 2019.

Congregation of Yahweh explained, 'the culture was strong, but when people came to the cities, they adopted some cultures that they did not have before.'[69] Also attributed to the mixing with Dinka communities was the introduction of (satanic) magic and spirits other than *Kuoth Nhial* to the Nuer. As one member of Ahavat Yeshua insisted: 'In the Nuer culture, our grandfathers in ancient times, they did not worship paganism. Recently, we found paganism. This is an adaptation we adopt from Dinka and other nations that surround Nuer people.'[70] The very practice of intermarriage was presented as non-Nuer, something that was merely adopted for strategic reasons:

> When we came, we intermarried with our neighbouring tribes. Actually, they [the Nuer] took land from other people through fighting, to make sure they have a place. Bentiu was the first place to be liberated. And they expanded as time went on. Through this expansion and movement, we also intermarried with the local tribes. So today we are mixed with other tribes through marriage, but we still keep our culture. […] By intermarriage… they actually did not want to intermarry with other people but as time went on… they saw that intermarriage with other people will create relationship and that we would be able to stay with the people with whom we have married. That became part of protection, too.[71]

These claims of distant Nuer indigeneity implied a specific geographic imagination about a Nuer genesis outside Ethiopia and South Sudan and had political undertones that resonated with the sense that the Nuer have been marginalised in both countries. Again, as in the case of some of the other African peoples who claim an Israelite descent—such as Judaising Igbo groups in Nigeria and the Tutsi Havilah movement in Rwanda—oral histories of migration and contemporary experiences of persecution were understood as indicating divine chosenness.[72] Chan, a member of the Congregation of Yahweh explained:

[69] Notes, 2 September 2019 (discussion with two Messianic students in Kampala).
[70] Notes, 8 August 2019 (discussion with members of Ahavat Yeshua, Newland).
[71] Notes, discussion with elders of the Congregation of Yahweh, 24 December 2018.
[72] On Igbo and Tutsi claims of an Israelite descent, see: Bruder, *The Black Jews*, 142-48, 153-58; D. Lis, *Jewish Identity Among the Igbo of Nigeria: Israel's "Lost Tribe" and the Question of Belonging in the Jewish State* (Trenton, 2015).

> The Nuer are not indigenous to Sudan or Ethiopia. They came recently. […] When the Nuer came, all other tribes were already there. Dinka, Shilluk, Anuak, Nuba, Darfur. The Nuer came and liberated those areas. When you talk to Anuak—we pushed them here. Nasir, Akobo, they originally did not belong to Nuer. Even Malakal. It is a Shilluk name. Even Reng is a Dinka name. Akobo is an Anuak name. We don't have names! When you see the movement—every village was owned by another tribe. […] And in any area inhabited by Nuer, they are fighting with the people of that area. In Ethiopia, the Anuak hate the Nuer. The Shilluk don't like the Nuer. Murle don't like Nuer. Maban don't like Nuer. Dinka don't like Nuer. They want them out! The Bible says that Israelites, wherever they go, there will be no love for them.[73]

While the leadership of Ahavat Yeshua Messianic Congregation in Gambella did not formally endorse the theory that the Nuer were Israelite, many members of this group were attracted to it. Some of them claimed that in their communications with the American leaders of the organisation Jewish Voice Ministries, the idea that Nuer representatives can undergo genetic testing was raised, because, as they were allegedly told, 'South Sudanese, mostly, in western Ethiopia, and Great Upper Nile… are from the tribe of Benjamin.'[74] Jonathan Bernis, the president and CEO of Jewish Voice Ministries who reportedly raised the idea, has been one of the most vocal promoters of the use of DNA tests in order to 'confirm' the claims of Israelite ancestry of suspected Lost Tribes in Africa and elsewhere. His organisation's online shop featured a 'Family Finder DNA Kit', marketed as offering 'powerful interactive tools to help trace your lineage through time' in order to discover 'your ethnic and geographic origins'. A special package included the DNA kit together with the Jewish Voice Ministries' 'Lost Tribes Wall Map', showing where 'lost' Israelite communities have been 'identified' throughout the world.[75]

In recent decades, Evangelical Zionists and Messianic Jews in the West have been fascinated by the apparent promise of the technology of genetic testing to provide definite information about people's position within biblical history by uncovering traces of Jewish

[73] Interview with Chang, 20 April 2019.
[74] Interview with Seth, 13 April 2019.
[75] Jewish Voice Ministries International, The Lost Tribes Wall Map + DNA Kit (2188), available at: https://shop.jewishvoice.org/the-lost-tribes-wall-map-dna-kit-2188/.

blood and roots within their bodies. There is no doubt that within the Messianic Jewish world, being recognised as an 'ethnic' Jew is an asset.[76] While it is estimated that most people identifying as Messianic Jews today are 'gentiles', the movement is still primarily concerned with evangelising individuals of Jewish descent. Speaking in public, Messianic Jewish leaders often emphasise their Jewish roots and make an effort to speak in Hebrew, which is rarely their mother tongue. For African communities, meanwhile, being recognised as Israelites 'by blood' means greater attention from American Evangelicals (Messianics and other Zionists), which naturally translates into access to resources in the form of donations, trips to Israel and workshops. Revive Israel and Tikkun, for instance, have been involved in raising funds for an orphanage in Kisii, Kenya, for 'Jewish children', allegedly descendants of Ethiopian Jews. International support to Beta Israel communities in Ethiopia, or Lemba communities in Zimbabwe, for instance, is explicitly based on the fact that these are considered (by American Evangelicals) to be 'lost' Israelite communities.

But besides the access to resources and legitimacy, discussions about DNA also reflect a deeper set of ideas about how identity is constructed. In a recent paper, Imhoff and Kaell refer to the discourses around genetic testing and DNA among Messianic Jews in the US as 'gene talk', a phrase they borrow from Kim TallBear.[77] TallBear, writing on the politics of DNA science and Native American identity, describes gene talk as 'the idea that essential truths about identity inhere in sequences of DNA.'[78] Imhoff and Kaell argue that gentile ('non-ethnic' Jews) believers in Messianic congregations in the US constantly engage in gene talk because the ideas it propagates resonate with their premillennial views that construct Jews (or, Israelites) as descendants of a distinct genealogy who are 'set apart from the rest of the humanity.'[79] Messianic concerns with genes are therefore not driven solely by the hopes of some gentile congregants to discover Jewish roots within their blood and thus gain greater legitimacy as Messianic Jews. Gene talk is prevalent also because it reinforces Messianic theological convictions about the importance of

[76] Harris-Shapiro, *Messianic Judaism*.
[77] S. Imhoff and H. Kaell, 'Lineage Matters: DNA, Race, and Gene Talk in Judaism and Messianic Judaism', *Religion and American Culture,* 27 (2017), 95-127.
[78] K. TallBear, *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science* (Minneapolis, 2013), 4.
[79] Imhoff and Kaell, 'Lineage Matters', 110.

genealogies: 'Messianics who gene talk, whether or not they test their DNA, find a way to participate in the Jewish community by contributing to its authenticating discourse.'[80]

I found similar gene talk to be prevalent in Newland. Despite the fact that, to the best of my knowledge, no Nuer in Gambella has undergone DNA testing, the notion that such tests would be able to reveal the truth about one's biological ancestry and therefore connect current material facts with the authoritative biblical narrative, gained currency across all Messianic groups. 'DNA means that systematically, you must know yourself, who you are,' one member of Ahavat Yeshua told me, explaining why he was so eager to have his DNA tested.[81] Another member of the Church of God, rejecting the assertion of the Congregation of Yahweh that they are Israelites, claimed: 'A person cannot say 'I am [a] Jew by blood' until that person tests. There is DNA that shows the blood of the people.'[82] When representatives of Revive Israel visited Newland, one of the leaders of Ahavat Yeshua who welcomed them reassured them, in front of the whole congregation: 'We love Israel very much, and perhaps we are also Jewish. We will only know if we take a DNA test.'[83]

Whether or not genetic testing can, scientifically, expose the genealogical truths Messianics imagine it can, is beside the point. The actual attempts of other African peoples to verify their Israelite ancestry through DNA tests—Zimbabwean Lemba, Ethiopian Beta Israel and Nigerian Igbos have all been involved in such experiments in recent decades—have resulted in more heated debates and controversies than conclusive answers. I suspect that any attempt to move from talking about genes to actually undertaking genetic tests might only lead to disappointments and confusion in Newland, too. But it is what people *imagine* DNA can reveal, rather than what it scientifically can, that tells us how they think about identity and history. While the Bible does not provide a clear map of the 'valley' humans currently inhabit, genetic testing came to be understood as having the capacity to shed light on biological (and thus, God-made) realities and thereby not only uncover, verify and help restore (imagined) lost Nuer

[80] Ibid., 117.
[81] Interview with Seth, 13 June 2019.
[82] Interview with Thankuei Lul Lual, 1 April 2019.
[83] Notes, 12 April 2019.

authenticity, but also conclusively place it in time and space and in relation to biblical history.

Placing the Nuer nation

The distinction between Israelites and gentiles in Zionist premillennialist theologies naturally creates hierarchies that stand in tension with the Evangelical promise of unity and equality before God. Evangelical Zionists in general, and Messianic Jewish leaders in particular, are acutely aware of this tension. But it is not one that can be easily resolved. When members of Revive Israel visited Gambella upon the invitation of the leaders of Ahavat Yeshua Messianic Congregation, they all mentioned their Jewish ancestry before the local congregation, and yet, perhaps somewhat uncomfortable with the enthusiasm about their Jewishness, also emphasised that salvation is available to all. 'God has a plan for Israel which caused it to be born again as a nation,' Yoni, an elderly 'rabbi' who explained that he grew up as a Christian, later but discovered his Jewish roots, told the congregation. 'One day all Israel will be saved and Yeshua will come back. His throne will be in Jerusalem. But He loves all people the same.' Sarah, a young US-born Jew who accompanied the team, reassured the crowd: 'God has no favourites.'[84] Meanwhile, Esposito, the leader of the Congregation of Yahweh, seemed to neither rule out nor explicitly endorse the idea that the Nuer are a Lost Tribe.

It is easy to dismiss the claims of Israelite descent made by Nuer in Gambella as calculated attempts to attract the attention and resources of international Messianics who were keen to support exotic 'lost' Israelites in Africa. There is also no doubt that such claims were part of an empowering discourse that spoke directly to local grievances about marginalisation and framed 'the Nuer' as a chosen people. The fact that it was only among Nuer communities that Messianic Judaism has gained popularity among all South Sudanese was taken as another indication that they were set apart from their surroundings—that they were morally superior, that they were closer to God, and that despite the suffering they underwent, their salvation was secured. What I hope to have shown in this chapter, however, is that such claims were also grounded in a genuine attempt of local communities to place themselves within time and space, using the Bible

[84] Notes, 12 April 2019 (Yoni and Sarah speaking before Ahavat Yeshua in Newland).

as their guide, and that they were simultaneously shaped by the way Nuer identity was locally understood and the way premillennialist Zionist theologies constructed genealogy and history.

In both political rhetoric and popular discourse on South Sudanese nationalism, Christianity is often portrayed as a uniting layer of identity. South Sudanese, so the argument goes, may be divided by their languages and cultures, but Christianity can unite them as a nation. Throughout Sudan's civil wars, this idea was perpetuated by generations of southern leaders, and it resonated well with their international Christian supporters.[85] However, this idea is also based on the problematic assumption that as a religion with universal aspirations, Christianity has nothing to say about how people think about their own genealogy and roots. The image that emerges out of the debates and sentiments described here from Gambella tells a much more complicated story. Born-again Christianity does not simply create 'world citizens',[86] or South Sudanese nationals, united by faith. While it certainly weaves local communities into an imagined global movement and forges far-flung connections, this does not mean that it renders local modes of belonging irrelevant or obsolete. As we have seen here, Christian premillennialist theologies can also encourage primordial tendencies, concerns with genealogical purity and notions of exceptionalism.

[85] See, e.g., Tounsel, *'God Will Crown Us'*; Salomon, 'Religion After the State', 449-52; Hutchinson, 'Spiritual Fragments', 148-9; F. M. Deng, *War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan* (Washington, 1995), 205-11.
[86] De Boeck and Plissart, *Kinshasa*, 112.

Chapter 6

Reinventing tradition? Secularisation, cattle and 'Nuer customary law'

As the discussion in the previous chapter already suggested, there were some aspects of Nuer 'tradition' or 'culture' that Messianics in Gambella proudly endorsed and, at least some of them, invoked as proof of their Israelite origin. Other aspects of their ancestral 'culture', however, were deemed unbiblical, 'pagan' or satanic and as such were fiercely rejected. But the line was not always clear. For example, while Nuer prophets and spiritual healers operating independently were considered dangerous agents of Satan, there was no conclusive Messianic position with regard to those rituals of sacrifice that were incorporated into 'Nuer customary law' as practiced in government courts. Messianics were generally unconcerned with these rituals. There was no consensus about their meaning, and they related to issues that were not supposed to impact true born-again Christians. Meanwhile, the 'traditional' Nuer bridewealth system, based on the payment of cattle by the family of the man to the family of the bride, was seen as biblically authentic. Messianic groups took pride in the fact that they obeyed Nuer 'tradition' in this context more than most Nuer in Gambella, rejecting recent popular practices of supplementing cattle bridewealth payments with cash and gifts.

Being a born-again Messianic meant more than acquiring knowledge or following certain practices in church on Sabbath. It entailed living a righteous life (*ciaŋ cuŋni*): following a set of rules and moral codes and cultivating bodily dispositions that impacted one's priorities and social interactions on a daily basis. Those 'traditional' practices associated with Nuer lifestyle (*ciaŋ Nuärä*), therefore, had to be assessed and evaluated, too, through a Christian prism. As further discussed in the following section, anthropologists have emphasised that African born-again movements tend to demonise indigenous 'traditions'. They have also shown that the 'traditions' demonised are very often something born-agains construct by projecting Christian ideas and values on indigenous cosmologies. To understand the process by which some Nuer 'traditions' came to be endorsed by Messianics as legitimate while others demonised, however, we need to take a few steps back from the 'ethnographic present' and consider the longer history of the transformation

of Nuer justice over the past century, the role of cattle, spirits and God in it, and government attempts to regulate it.

On secularisation, demons and born-again Christianity

The demonisation of 'tradition' is a prominent theme in African born-again Christianity. As Meyer famously put it, this faith promises believers to 'make a complete break with the past', but by labelling certain 'traditional' practices and spirits as 'satanic', it also acknowledges their existence and incorporates them into a Christian cosmology which clearly demarcates and distinguishes between forces of good and evil, progress and stagnation, blessings and damnation. [1] Instead of suggesting that local spirits do not exist or that beliefs in magic and witchcraft are mere superstitions, it recognises them as both real and dangerous. As such, born-again doctrines offer believers to 'break with the past' but also keep a certain version of this past very much alive in the present as something true Christians constantly have to wrestle with and guard against. Ironically, therefore, the spiritual logic underpinning such faiths may also correspond with those pre-existing cosmologies born-again Christians seek to negate. Newell describes how Ivorian Pentecostal churches, while promising their members protection against the dangers of witchcraft, 'are in fact caught up in the same web of power, wealth and the invisible world that witchcraft discourse brings to all interactions with the occult.'[2]

As other scholars have pointed out, however, what Christians seek to break with is often the product of the encounter between Christian and African practices and truth claims.[3] Keller demonstrates how born-again Christians construct the local traditions and spiritual orders they reject. She argues that the Adventists she studied in Madagascar, who refused to take part in any exhumation or cattle sacrifice rituals, had a 'disembedded notion of "religion" because by treating "supernatural entities," in particular the ancestors, as

[1] B. Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh, 1999); Meyer, '"Make a Complete Break"'; B. Meyer, '"If you are a Devil, you are a Witch and, if you are a Witch, you are a Devil": The Integration of "Pagan" Ideas Into the Conceptual Universe of Ewe Christians in Southeastern Ghana', *Journal of Religion in Africa,* (1992), 98-132. On the broader debate about continuity and change in Christian conversion, see also: J. Robbins, 'Continuity Thinking and the Problem of Christian Culture: Belief, Time, and the Anthropology of Christianity', *Current anthropology,* 48 (2007), 5-38; M. Engelke, 'Discontinuity and the Discourse of Conversion', *Journal of Religion in Africa,* 34 (2004), 82-109.
[2] S. Newell, 'Pentecostal Witchcraft: Neoliberal Possession and Demonic Discourse in Ivoirian Pentecostal Churches', *Journal of religion in Africa,* 37 (2007), 486.
[3] Engelke, 'Past Pentecostalism'.

separate from other spheres of life like kinship, this construction is clearly modeled on Christianity.'[4] Thus, Keller claims, when Adventists in Madagascar spoke of their ancestral 'customs' or 'religion', they did not necessarily speak of the same thing as most ordinary Malagasy around them did. In other words, just like African 'traditions' and 'customs'—whose characterisation as static and unchanging has long been problematised by historians—the practices of worship, spiritual healing or witchcraft African born-again Christians demonise are not timeless relics of a fixed pre-colonial past.[5] They are the products of specific social and political circumstances, that should be historicised and put in context.

To properly frame in a historical perspective the way African born-again movements construct and engage with 'tradition', this chapter argues, we must examine their theologies in relation to the circumstances in which both 'customary law' and the notions of 'tradition' and 'religion' took shape and form in the societies in which they operate. In other words: in light of the incorporation of these societies into the modern secular state. For if the colonial policy of indirect rule invented the idea of 'customary law', in southern Sudan as in other British colonies in Africa, through this invention it also sought to redefine and regulate the way people engage with God and the activities of spirit medium. Recent scholarly critiques of the idea of secularism are helpful when thinking about this process, as they usefully expose the gap between the normative claims of the narrative of secularisation and the actual practices involved in the making of modern secular authority. As Asad argues, rather than a separation between religion and politics, secularism involves the constant effort of the state to define what 'religion' is and to regulate its role and reach.[6] And as Agrama observes in his ethnography of Islamic law in modern Egypt, at the heart of this enterprise stands public order and hence, the law.[7]

This chapter starts, therefore, not with the encounter between Nuer communities and Christian missionaries but with the colonial state and the making of 'Nuer customary law'. It then moves on to describe the shift from a spiritually sanctioned order in which

[4] Keller, *The Road to Clarity*, 177. See also: Engelke, *A Problem of Presence*, 36-42.
[5] See also, M. Lindhardt, 'Continuity, Change or Coevalness? Charismatic Christianity and Tradition in Contemporary Tanzania', in *Pentecostalism in Africa: Presence and Impact of Pneumatic Christianity in Postcolonial Societies*, ed. by M. Lindhardt (Leiden, 2015), 163-90.
[6] T. Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, 2003).
[7] H. A. Agrama, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago, 2012).

cattle serves as the ultimate media for communicating with God, to a born-again Christian world in which one's relationship with God is highly individualistic and emphasises interiority and personal commitment to a range of bodily practices. Only then, we move to examine the Messianic position with regard to different Nuer 'traditions'. The activities of the Ngundeng 'church' or Nuer spiritual medium were regarded, it is argued, as another manifestation of Satan's deception and trickery in the Last Days. However, there was also some degree of ambiguity with regard to certain practices of animal sacrifice, whose spiritual dimension has been greatly diminished because of the gradual desacralisation of cattle and secularisation of Nuer law. Finally, the chapter deals with the regulation of marriage. Countering the growing resort of local youths to marry 'illegally' through elopement as well as the skyrocketing bridewealth payments of Nuer from the diaspora, Messianics insisted on the 'traditional' Nuer payment of bridewealth, arguing that it is in line with practices described in the Bible.

The secularisation of Nuer law

The literature on colonial statecraft in Africa has been conspicuously unconcerned with the idea of secularism. In part, this is because most pre-colonial African societies did not exhibit spiritual orders colonial powers associated with any of the familiar 'world religions' and thus with what they considered to be 'religion' at all.[8] It was only where colonial governments encountered 'fanatic' spiritual traditions—that is, mostly Muslim political movements—that they eagerly sought to regulate religion in the name of public order. Sudan was one such case.[9] In its northern parts, any form of political Islam was viewed as a serious threat to public order. But a similar colonial anxiety about charismatic religious leadership, partly fuelled by the fears of a religious insurgency in the north, emerged in southern Sudan, with regard to the activities of Nuer prophets and other inspired individuals.[10] Regulating religion in Sudan was therefore a matter of great

[8] M. Engelke, 'Secular Shadows: African, Immanent, Post-Colonial', *Critical Research on Religion,* 3 (2015), 89; M. Burchardt, M. Wohlrab-Sahr, and U. Wegert, '"Multiple Secularities": Postcolonial Variations and Guiding Ideas in India and South Africa', *International Sociology,* 28 (2013), 621. There are certainly examples, however, of colonial attempts to purge 'tradition' from spiritual or 'metaphysical' practices. See, for instance: V. Van Bockhaven, 'Anioto and Nebeli: Local Power Bases and the Negotiation of Customary Chieftaincy in the Belgian Congo (ca. 1930–1950)', *Journal of Eastern African Studies,* 14 (2020), 63-83.
[9] Nigeria was another: O. Vaughan, *Religion and the Making of Nigeria* (Durham and London, 2016), 39-68.
[10] Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 24.

concern. This was also the reason missionaries, some of whom were keen to proselytise Muslims in the north, were sent by the colonial government to southern Sudan, to work among the 'pagans': It was assumed that southerners, as opposed to Muslims in the north, were not likely to resist the efforts of the missionaries.[11]

Evans-Pritchard famously described 'the Nuer' as having 'no government' and living in a state of 'ordered anarchy' in which there were no institutions that settle disputes, enforce laws or deliver judgments.[12] Despite his assertion that the Nuer lack anything Europeans identified as 'law', elaborate justice mechanisms did exist in pre-colonial Nuer society. They were grounded, however, in a spiritual moral order, in which the ultimate authority responsible for delivering justice and imposing punishments was God. Both transgression of divine interdictions and failure to respect what were considered to be social obligations within the community could amount to a *duer* (fault, wrong, sin, mistake), which could be punished directly by God or 'bring about evil consequences through either an expressed curse or a silent curse contained in anger and resentment.'[13] A curse uttered by a human beings (through invocation, *lam*) was only effective if the person on whose behalf it was uttered had the right, *cuɔ̱ɔ̱ŋ*, in the case. Even without a curse uttered by a human, however, the transgression of divinely sanctioned interdictions such as homicide, incest and cannibalism led to a dangerous bodily pollution—known as *nueer*, or, in the case of incest, *ruaal*—which could result in the death of the person who committed them.

That Nuer moral order was governed by spiritual powers influenced the nature of the earthly mechanisms that were in place to manage it. First, since determining what was right or wrong was not the authority of any individual human being or institution, justice mechanisms revolved around arbitration rather than on judgment by a court or a powerful chief. Disputes were settled through lengthy negotiations, which 'often meant uncovering all reasonable obligations involved and deciding whether and how they could be met.'[14] Second, since the ultimate source of law was spiritual, a spiritual 'expert'—the 'earth-master' (*kuäär muɔn*)—was usually involved in mediating between parties of disputes. He was also responsible for performing the sacrificial rites required to cleanse the

[11] Collins, *Land Beyond the Rivers*.
[12] Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, 6, 162.
[13] Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 17-8, 165-73.
[14] D. H. Johnson, 'Judicial Regulation and Administrative Control: Customary Law and the Nuer, 1898-1954', *The Journal of African History,* 27 (1986), 60.

dangerous bodily pollutions associated with cases of homicide, incest and other transgressions of divine interdictions. 'Earth-masters' came from specific lineages and their relationship with spirits was hereditary. Their authority derived entirely from their role as neutral arbitrators and their ability to mediate between humans and God. They did not possess the authority to rule, nor did they have the capacity to force others to obey their orders.[15]

What came to be known as 'Nuer customary law' was the product of a colonial attempt to disentangle those aspects of pre-colonial Nuer justice that were deemed 'religious' from those aspects that were seen as compatible with the legal system of a modern secular state, and to render 'religion' the subject of authorisation and control of secular authority. Government 'native courts' were established among the Nuer from the mid-1920s and were formalised with the Chiefs' Court Ordinance of 1931. As Johnson shows, in their attempts to implement a policy of 'indirect rule' and govern Nuer through a system of courts, colonial administrators consistently sought to 'secularise' Nuer justice mechanisms and separate 'rational procedures' from the 'religious background'.[16] In practice, they undermined the influence of figures who derived their authority from divinities and strengthened or established institutions that relied on either the popular support of their communities or the force of the government.[17]

First, having perceived Nuer prophets as threatening and unreliable religious leaders and a source of instability, the colonial government launched violent campaigns in the late 1920s in order to remove them from any position of political influence. Guek Ngundeng, the son of Ngundeng Bong, was killed in 1929. Other contemporaneous prophets were exiled or captured.[18] Second, by the mid-1930, drawing on the fresh findings of Evans-Pritchard, administrators also realised that they could circumvent the influence of the 'earth-masters' by making the *gaat tut* ('sons of bulls', sing. *gat tuɔt*) the centre of Nuer 'native' justice mechanisms. Unlike the 'earth-masters', who were instrumental because they had the capacity to mediate with spirits, the *gaat tut* were community elders who

[15] Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, 172-6; Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 289-300.
[16] P. P. Howell, *A Manual of Nuer Law* (London, 1954), 204.
[17] Johnson, 'Judicial Regulation'.
[18] Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 164-241.

assumed a position of authority because of their age and their membership in a dominant lineage (that is, in Nuer, because they were *diel*).[19]

On the Sudanese side of the border, the hierarchy of Nuer 'customary' authorities was standardised by the 1940s, with the adoption of hierarchical judicial system of three levels: a *gat tuɔt*, serving as the bottom-level headman, followed by a sub-chief (*kuäär kaarä*) and a court president (*kuäär bok*). Although these men were initially supposed to be members of the dominant lineage of their community, ultimately a system of elections was adopted, and the position was opened to any taxpaying male.[20] The incorporation of Nuer leaders into Ethiopian state institutions on the other side of the border was slower and less consistent. As noted in the first chapter, during the imperial period, some Nuer were granted official titles, but there was no consistent attempt to articulate the administrative structures of Gambella beyond its formal division into six *weredas*.[21] During the Derg, Nuer villages were gradually recognised as peasant associations, with elders assuming positions within the *qebellé* and, in urban areas from the 1980s, appointed as *sefer shums*. In the following decades, rebel groups (in Sudan) and humanitarian organisations in refugee camps (in Ethiopia), consistently sought to manage their relationship with local communities through such 'customary' authorities.

Prior to Sudan's independence, British colonial administrators actively sought to regulate the activities of 'native' courts and to standardise Nuer law by introducing fixed punishments and compensation rates across all Nuer areas. If the source of Nuer law was previously divine authority, and it was spiritually sanctioned punishments that served as deterrents, as part of the colonial attempt to eliminate the influence of 'religious' authorities, British administrators sought to introduce penalties such as the payment of compensation, imprisonment or death, which relied not on God's intent but on the force of the *kumɛ*.[22] However, the judicial system the government sought to introduce never replaced entirely pre-existing notions of divine justice or *duer* (wrong) and fears of divine pollution. Since Nuer communities, regardless of colonial policies, still viewed various offences as having spiritual consequences that could only be mitigated through cattle

[19] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, 'The Nuer: Tribe and Clan (Part II)', *Sudan Notes and Records,* 17 (1934), 37-41.
[20] Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 118-9.
[21] Tewodros, *Gambella.*
[22] Johnson, 'Judicial Regulation', 75-6; Howell, *A Manual of Nuer Law*.

sacrifice, the *kuäär muɔn* continued to perform the necessary rituals, mostly in cases of incest or feuds. He did so, however, under the auspices of the formal 'customary' authorities. The 'traditional' or 'customary' set of Nuer laws came to be known as the Laws of Fangak (*Ŋuɣt Pangak*), after the place in which they were standardised by government appointed chiefs and colonial administrators in the 1940s.

Nuer justice on the Ethiopian side of the border evolved under the influence of these laws, even if compensation rates for various offences and procedural practices related to dispute resolution continued to vary between different parts of Nuerland. The imperial government in Ethiopia, first to formally recognise some Nuer 'chiefs', discouraged any intervention in local disputes so long as these did not relate to taxation or other state affairs.[23] During the Derg, the *qebellé* administration was nominally supposed to push aside 'traditional' authorities as part of a socialist cultural revolution, but in practice did not interfere in internal Nuer disputes as well and with the invention of the institution of the *sefer shum*, practically recognised people's right to have their disputes arbitrated according to their 'tradition' in urban areas as well. Under the structures of ethnic federalism, 'indigenous' justice mechanisms were further incorporated into the *qebellé* with the establishment of the 'social court' (*mahberawí firdi bét*)—a forum responsible for of arbitrating in complicated disputes that were not solved at the *sefer shum* level. As on the Sudanese side, as we shall see, the role of the 'earth master' was never eliminated in Ethiopia, but certainly overshadowed by the dominance of the *ji kumɛ*—the 'people of the government' that served as 'customary' authorities, whatever their formal title was at any given point in history.

Divine interdictions and the declining spiritual significance of cattle

The deadly pollution known as *nueer* has most prominently been associated, and still is until today, with homicide. Evans-Pritchard described how in the 1930s, a slayer could develop *nueer* after the act of killing if he ate or drank before being purified. As a result of the killing, it was said, between the relatives of the deceased and the slayer was 'a bone' (*cɔaa*): If they or their descendants shared food or had sexual relations, they, too, could develop *nueer* and die. The risk of *nueer* in this context was rooted in the belief

[23] Tewodros, *Gambella*, 47.

that the act of killing involved the dangerous transmission of blood from the deceased to the slayer, and that this blood could avenge the killing if the body of the slayer was not properly and swiftly purified through the sacrifice of a cow by an 'earth master'. However, numerous other behaviours that involve the circulation of blood and food were documented in the past as having the potential to cause death by *nueer*: Cannibalism, for instance, could cause *nueer*, and thus also eating animals that may have eaten a human (such as crocodiles), and drinking from pools contaminated by human corpses; The killing of an elephant (*raan dɔar*, 'person of the bush'), could also cause *nueer*; Incest (*ruaal*), when leading to severe sickness and death, was also associated with this deadly pollution.[24]

Referring to *nueer* as a form of pollution, I am following here Hutchinson's critique of Evans-Pritchard's description of *nueer* as a concept of sin. While Hutchinson endorses the notion that *nueer* is the consequence of the transgression of divine interdictions, she argues that its underpinning logic is rooted in the distinction between 'blood flows that are culturally defined as negative, death-ridden and anomalous from others deemed to be properly mediated, positive and life-promoting.'[25] By 'blood flows', Hutchinson refers broadly to the circulation of both food and bodily fluids. Hence the salient concern with acts of commensality and sexual intercourse in the list of *dueri*, wrongs, that may lead to *nueer*. Hence also, however, the central role of the 'earth master'—a spiritual expert associated with the earth—in mitigating the dangers of *nueer*. The earth (*mun*), into which the blood of an animal soaked during sacrificial rituals,[26] has neutralising powers: 'For ultimately, all blood and food cycles meet and mingle in the earth from which they re-emerge, as it were, afresh.'[27] Sacrificial rituals in which cattle were killed worked, in other words, because they intervened in the circulation of blood and food between humans.

But there is an additional crucial point here, concerning spiritual mediation: Spilling the blood of an ox could amend negative blood flows between humans because cattle were not only 'one' with humans, as discussed in the previous chapter, but also a recognised

[24] For a more comprehensive review, see S. E. Hutchinson, '"Dangerous to Eat": Rethinking Pollution States Among the Nuer of Sudan', *Africa,* 62 (1992), 490-504.
[25] Ibid., 501.
[26] Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 212-3.
[27] Hutchinson, '"Dangerous to Eat"', 498.

vehicle for communication with God. Evans-Pritchard described how a youth entered 'into a new kind of relationship with God' through the ox he received at initiation from his father and would, for instance, occasionally speak to God while petting it. Thus, he wrote, men and cattle were 'things of the same order, so that one can be substituted for the other, namely in sacrifice, or in other words in relation to God.'[28] Before an ox was sacrificed, it was consecrated with ashes, an act that Evans-Pritchard interpreted as identifying the animal with the human on whose behalf it was being killed. And despite the fact that the meat of a sacrificed animal was always eaten after it was killed, cattle and other domestic animals were not supposed to be slaughtered solely for food, except under the circumstances of extreme hunger.[29] Thus, the ideology of 'cattle-over-blood' was complemented by an ideology that posed cattle as a spiritual medium, connecting human beings with God.

Figure 40. Boys and cattle in a village in Lare wereda (2015).

That fears of spiritually sanctioned pollutions proved to be highly resilient and were never fully eliminated despite government interventions and attempts to supress them, should not suggest that they lack history. Over the past century, a range of new practices and materials transformed the ways Nuer communities interpreted the scope of these pollutions and the ways people sought to mitigate them. We have already seen, in the previous chapter, how wars, violence, nationalism and borders eroded the ideology of

[28] Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 260.
[29] Ibid., 263-71.

'cattle-over-blood' and led to a growing emphasis on blood, rather than cattle, as a medium that determines kinship ties. Along with this shift, which increasingly destabilised the relationship between humans and cattle, another debate emerged around the position of cattle as a spiritual medium. The increasingly popular practice of selling cattle in regional markets in Sudan and Ethiopia or consuming it as food in urban areas, coupled with government legal interventions in which cattle was primarily framed in economic rather than spiritual terms (as court fines, tax and tribute), as well as the spread of Christian doctrines that viewed cattle sacrifice as a misguided attempt to communicate with God, all led people to reconsider the value of cattle and its role in the relationship between humans and God.

It is telling that in practices and norms that were developed since Sudan's First Civil War to mitigate the risks of spiritual pollutions in the contexts of new forms of warfare, migration and accelerated urbanisation, cattle played no role. Hutchinson describes in great detail how colonial attempts to change the punishment for murder and the bloodwealth paid following homicide, the growing availability of guns (that increasingly replaced spears and clubs) and the violence of Sudan's first civil war all transformed notions of *nueer* among eastern Nuer communities. She mentions, in particular, the adoption of a new purificatory rite designed to eliminate the risk of *nueer* pollution among eastern Nuer warriors using guns. The rite of *piu thorä*, 'the water of the cartridge shell', as it was known, 'could be performed by anyone, anywhere, at any time, without disclosing the identity of the slayer,' and, without the sacrifice of an animal:

> The slayer, I was told, must pour some water (preferable mixed with a few grains of salt, if available) into an empty cartridge shell and drink it—and that is all. This simple rite would seem to suggest that gun slaying involved a cross flow of 'heat' between victim and slayer (either in addition to or in place of blood) that needed to be negated or 'cooled' by the water of the cartridge shell if the slayer were to survive.[30]

While the rite of *piu thorä* protected the slayer from the immediate contraction of *nueer* following the killing, it did not protect the family members of the slayer and the slain from contracting *nueer* had they eaten together or had sex. In Newland, I encountered

[30] Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 142.

what appeared to be an urban variation of the *piu thorä* rite, which relied not on the cooling capacities of water but the neutralising capacities of salt. Many Nuer in Gambella argued—though my inquiries about the issue suggested that this was not a consensus—that the presence of salt in food prevented the development of *nueer* pollution. Thus, while individuals who 'had a bone between them' due to an old feud between their families were not supposed to eat together, if they did share food but it was salted, they were safe. How salt came to be associated with the prevention of *nueer* is not entirely clear. Evans-Pritchard described how Nuer going on long journeys in the 1930s used to drink water mixed with the burnt skin or a tiang, roots of *thep* tree and charcoal to prevent them from getting sick. The same mixture of substances was used by the 'earth master' during feud settlement sacrificial rituals.[31] One elder I spoke to about this issue in Newland suggested that salt was adopted as a replacement for these substances.[32]

Given that *nueer* pollution was rooted in the dangerous circulation of blood and food between people, one can hypothesise that the dryness or 'bloodlessness' of these substances (as opposed, for instance, to milk and some grains that were perceived as blood-based food) gave them neutralising powers, like the earth.[33] But salt was also a frontier commodity long associated with traveling, foreign traders,[34] and, more recently, the *kumɛ*. I was often reminded in Gambella of the popular phrase '*Kumɛ mi thiɛl kadhɛ /ciɛ kumɛ*' ('A government without salt is not a government'). While people usually mentioned this phrase to highlight just how much modern Nuer appreciated salt and used excessive amounts of it in their food, I was also told that it was originally coined in reference to the British colonial government that, as opposed to the Turkish foreigners that preceded it, did not bring with it any salt. In the past the sentence was also used to refer to the Ethiopian government, which before the 1990s provided few services and goods to the people of the region.[35] Undoubtedly, however, the suggestion that salt prevents *nueer* was also a remarkably instrumental one. As one young man exclaimed, almost laughing, as we were sitting together in a small restaurant in Newland: 'In town,

[31] Evans-Pritchard, 'The Nuer', 49, 53.
[32] Notes, 15 December 2018.
[33] On the association of specific foods with blood and the neutralising powers of the earth, see: Hutchinson, '"Dangerous to Eat"', 493-4, 498-9. On the practice of drinking earth to prevent *nueer*, see also Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 232.
[34] Kurimoto, 'Trade Relations'.
[35] Dereje, *Playing Different Games*, 168.

there is salt in everything!' Therefore, individuals who mixed and did not know that they shared food with someone they were not supposed to eat with, did not get sick with *nueer*.

But not all hazards could be mitigated through rituals and substances that did not involve cattle sacrifice, and Hutchinson argues that as late as the early 1990s, conversion to Christianity continued to leave rural Nuer facing 'ritual and explanatory lacunae', which led many of them to resort to cattle sacrifice despite the campaigns of Nuer evangelists to eliminate the practice.[36] There were simply too many misfortunes that Protestant Christianity as practiced at the time in Nuerland could not explain nor mitigate. Faced with the options of a silent prayer or sacrificial rituals, at moments of crisis, some Christians turned 'back' to the latter. Thus, she writes, at the time, 'eastern Nuer church leaders still appeared to be more concerned with stamping out all vestiges of cattle sacrifice than with developing substitute religious practices.'[37] What I would like to argue in the following sections is that the repertoire of practices and ideas born-again Christianity has brought to the region since the late 1990s was much richer and better suited to either offer alternatives to 'traditional' rituals or explain the relationship between them and the Christian moral order.

Being born-again: Cultivating a *maar* with God

Being born-again entails submission to a new 'regime of practices' and a set of rules that often revolve around self-mastery and the regulation and control of desires.[38] These practices and rules derive their authority from the Bible, that is, from God. Their constant observance not only keeps the believer close to God but allows him or her to experience the power of the Holy Spirit and benefit from His guidance, empowerment and favourable interventions. For a generation of young Christians who grew up in refugee camps and urban areas—away from their families' cattle *rɛy ciëŋ*, in the 'village'—activities such as Bible study, prayer sessions, fasting, nightly vigils, church development work and healing and deliverance programmes filled the 'ritual and explanatory lacunae' Hutchinson described. While different churches in Gambella largely agreed on the general principles and logic behind the born-again commitment to individual self-mastery, variations

[36] Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 325.
[37] Ibid., 334.
[38] Marshall, *Political Spiritualities*, 128.

existed in terms of the specific rules they found necessary to observe, the means they employed as institutions to impose these rules, and their position with regard to the ways in which the Holy Spirit can be sensed, experienced and expected to intervene in one's life.

In Nuer, the relationship cultivated with God through constant work, prayer and self-mastery was referred to as *maar*—the same word used to refer to bonds of kinship 'traditionally' established through flows of either cattle or blood. The intellectual understanding of the Messianic doctrine notwithstanding, the committed born-again had to constantly work to maintain a 'true relationship' (*maar mi̱-thuɔk*) or 'good relationship' (*maar mi̱-gɔaa*) with God, which could be experienced, as the word *maar* suggests, in rather physical terms. The starting point of this relationship was at the moment of baptism (*buɔny*). Being 'buried' and then raised again, believers started a new life (Romans 6:4) when baptised: they were born again (*nyɔk kɛ dap*). Baptisms were conducted, among Messianics, by immersion and in running waters. In Gambella, this meant baptism in the Baro, the only perennial river around the town. During the rainy season, Seventh-day Adventists baptised in Japjap river, which was shallower, inhabited by no crocodiles, and passed near Newland before flowing into the Baro. Messianics rejected this option because Japjap dried out during the dry season.

Figure 41. Baptism in the Baro (Ahavat Yeshua Messianic Congregation).

After baptism, the relationship with God had to be constantly maintained. 'Becoming Born-Again is an event of rupture,' Marshall writes, 'but *being* Born-Again is an ongoing existential project, not a state acquired once and for all, a process that is never fully achieved.'[39] Beyond the common rejection of smoking and drinking alcohol, many of the practices associated with the 'righteous life' in Newland, as elsewhere, focused on the body of the believer and the senses: from studying the Bible and praising (activities which were discussed earlier), through doing 'God's work' (hoeing the church's compound, helping with the construction of new church buildings, going out to evangelise, organising conferences) to disciplining the flesh in order to come closer to God (fasting, avoiding sugar and coffee). The paying of tithes and offerings, a remarkably central aspect of church membership and an important part of the worship programme across all groups, also had a physical facet to the extent that money was both earned through labour and required to satisfy one's bodily needs. One Sunday morning, I attended the service at Christian Temple Church with a friend who gave virtually all the money he had that day to God, thus leaving with no change to eat lunch.

Although among Messianics, and even more so among less 'legalistic' Christians, the consumption of soft drinks, coffee and tea (though not alcohol) was common, fasting was a very popular practice in Newland, across all Evangelical churches, as a means of approaching God and pleading for help. Many churches held prayer programmes that involved fasting on a weekly basis, and some born-again youths occasionally gathered to fast and pray in churches or the mountains around Gambella town. Fasts usually began around sunset and then went on until the evening of the following day, which was spent praying. Although there were no regular fasting programmes in the Church of God, members often fasted individually or in groups when they wanted to approach God and ask for help or guidance, as did the members of other Messianic groups. They often refrained from announcing it, however, in line with the church's stance against public prayer and worship. An independent prayer group led by a several Messianic youths from the Church of God and Ahavat Yeshua Congregation held a weekly programme of fasting and praying from Tuesday afternoon until Wednesday evening, which included Bible studying and group prayer for the special requests of its members. Fasts not only brought believers closer to God by denying their bodily needs.[40] Since eating was always and by

[39] Ibid., 131.
[40] Compare: Meyer, *Translating the Devil*, 149.

definition a social activity that binds bodies together, fasts also physically disconnected individuals from one another (even if they were, in practice, fasting *together*).

Figure 42. Mass baptism in the Baro (Seventh-day Adventist Church).

Figure 43. Mass baptism in the Baro (Seventh-day Adventist Church).

The believer's relationship with God was not only focused on the human body but, by implication, also an explicitly personal one. Of course, some traits associated with being a good Christian also related to the way one behaves in the community and towards others. But ultimately being a born-again and working for one's salvation was an individual project. Following the practices and beliefs of one's community in the name of 'tradition' guaranteed nothing. If anything, it indicated lack of agency, passivity,

ignorance and thus, evasion of responsibility. 'We can inherit sin, but we cannot inherit salvation,' one Adventist youth reminded me,[41] in what was a not-so-subtle attempt to persuade me that the fact that I was born to a Jewish family by no means implied that I should not convert to Christianity, just as many born-again Nuer came from 'pagan' families but found the truth. Doctrinal differences between churches influenced the specific rules their members followed on a daily basis, the styles they adopted, and the sensibilities cultivated. But in no way was one's lineage or family background a relevant factor in determining his or her responsibilities as a Christian or in guaranteeing his or her salvation. In this regard, Christianity required a characteristic 'break with the past' observed among African born-again movements elsewhere.

For Messianics, as already noted, observance of the Ten Commandments was of utmost importance. The most visible aspect of this commitment that set them apart from their wider community and sometimes even from their own families was the observance of the Sabbath. What precisely observing the Sabbath entailed, was not always clear, but it was a matter of ongoing concern. Messianics did not eat anything cooked on Sabbath, even if this meant refraining from eating with their non-Messianic relatives. They also refrained from using money on Sabbath. Some arranged with shop owners in the neighbourhood to pay once the Sabbath is out for anything they buy during the day. In one church service I attended in Newland a lady inquired whether she should attend food distribution in the refugee camp if it takes place on Sabbath (church elders responded that she may). Messianics in Kampala contemplated whether they should use money in order to take a boda-boda to the congregation on Sabbath, with one solution to this concern being preparing the precise amount of money for the trip in advance and handing it to the driver, an act that minimised their interaction with money on Sabbath.

Demonising tradition?

Let us return now, to the blurred line separating the godly and the satanic in 'Nuer culture' in the eyes of born-again Christians in general and Messianics in particular. Since Nuer prophets were considered to be agents of *kuoth*, albeit indirectly and via their own spirits, and since at least some Protestant groups readily acknowledged the ability of true

[41] Notes, 04 January 2019.

believers to be inspired by the Holy Spirit and blessed with the gift of prophesy, many Nuer Protestants in Newland, Pentecostals included, did not rule out the possibility that Ngundeng Bong and other Nuer prophets were inspired by the Holy Spirit rather than Satan. They had no problem, therefore, to reconcile Christianity with belief in Nuer prophets. As one Christian rebel soldier who was spending time in Newland after fighting in South Sudan for several years told me: 'Israel had many prophets, right? Ngundeng, too, was a prophet.'[42] Some Presbyterian elders did express their concern over the influence of the Ngeundeng movement on youths in Gambella, arguing that it represented a threat to Christianity. However, with a significant number of Nuer elsewhere in South Sudan supporting either the Ngundeng movement or other contemporary Nuer prophets, there appeared to be no urgency to reach a consensus on the matter and limited political space for Christian leaders to campaign against these influences.

The issue was much less moot, however, among Messianics and Adventists, who insisted that Ngundeng Bong and other Nuer prophets were deceptive 'false messiahs' and agents of Satan, whose ultimate intention was to draw people away from the truth. I was often reminded, as a proof, that Ngundeng smoked and drank alcohol—behaviours that were understood as incompatible with true divine inspiration commitment. The Ngundeng 'church' was seen as an obvious satanic obstacle to the evangelisation of the community. There also appeared to be a consensus among Messianics with regard to the satanic nature of Wiu—the sacred spear (*mut*) that was kept with the Thiang sub-section of the Gaa-jak in Lare, and was said to have been inherited from Kiir, the ancestor of all Eastern Jikäny. *Mut* Wiu was said to possess the power to elicit divine blessings as well as solve disputes, because of its association with Kiir's divinity of Wiu.[43] Messianics in Gambella did not deny that Ngundeng or Kiir (or his spear) had spiritual powers but claimed that these powers came from Satan. As we have seen in the previous chapter, these claims were often accompanied by the argument that prophets and other practices of worship labelled as 'pagan' were introduced to the Nuer in recent history from other communities and do not represent the 'authentic' Nuer lifestyle.

[42] Notes, 25 July 2019. '
[43] On Wiu (spelled Wiw by Dereje), see also: Jal, *The History*; Dereje, 'Customary Dispute Resolution'; Stringham, *Marking Nuer Histories*, 44-5.

Although all churches in Gambella nominally rejected the sacrifice of cattle, their position with regard to the dangers of *nueer* or *ruaal* pollutions, the cornerstone of pre-colonial Nuer justice, was remarkably inconclusive. Some church leaders told me that they do not believe that these pollutions cause any risk. 'We are just trying to ignore it,' one pastor of Mekane Yesus explained. However, most people, it seemed, were far from confident that simply 'ignoring' such pollutions was a safe strategy, and even if some committed Christians did, it was very unlikely that within a single family there will be a consensus around such an issue. The question was not so much whether or not such pollutions existed or represented a threat. Most people agreed that they did. There was just no clarity with regard to their source and scope, and therefore also with regard to the ways in which Christian practices could mitigate or prevent them. These issues were hardly ever discussed among Messianics in church, neither were they grounded in any strict doctrine, not least because, as one Messianic suggested, the Bible was 'silent' with regard to them. When I inquired about them, even some of the most committed Messianics and Adventists I knew in Newland admitted that they had no conclusive answers.

Partly accounting to the ambiguous position of many Christians with regard to the 'earth priest' and his rituals, I believe, was the fact that his authority as well as the 'religious' aspects of the ceremonies he conducts had been greatly undermined by the secularisation of Nuer law and the eroded spiritual significance of cattle. As such, although it was agreed that his actions represented Nuer 'culture', the logic behind his ceremonies was not necessarily clear to all. As a whole, sacrificial rituals were rare in Newland. The vast majority of the disputes arbitrated by *sefer shums* in the *qebellé* related to elopements and bridewealth debts, further discussed in the following sections of this chapter. These issues did not usually require the intervention of a spiritual expert. *Sefer shum* did, however, also have to deal with cases of incest every once in a while, and, even less often, disputes related to feuds. This most commonly occurred when young lovers who met in town or in any of Gambella's refugee camps without informing their families of their relationship later discovered that they had a shared ancestor and therefore their relationship was considered incestuous, or that there was a history of homicide between their communities and thus their relationship risked triggering a deadly *nueer* pollution.

In such cases, the *sefer shum* led the arbitration process between the families of the couple, but an 'earth priest' who was not formally part of the *qebellé* administration was

called upon to perform the necessary sacrificial rituals, whose main component was the splitting of an animal into two in order to severe the incestuous relationship or terminate the state of feud between the parties. I witnessed only one such ceremony Newland from beginning to end, though I have heard of a few others that took place while I was there. The ceremony involved the splitting of two goats, to 'separate' (*dg̲g̲k*) a relationship that was both incestuous and between youths from families that had a 'bone' between them due to a feud between their communities more than a decade ago. The youths came from South Sudan, but some of their family members were in Gambella. I do not know which church they attended, if any. They have already been 'separated' once in the past, in South Sudan, but resumed their relationship, even though the first child the woman bore died. The woman's family insisted to separate the two again, warning that otherwise the *ruaal* will kill both her and her next baby, and will lead to the resumption of violence between the two families.[44]

Figure 44. *Ruaal* ritual in Newland.

In that case, the ritual took place outside the *qebellé*, in an open field on the way to the Baro, but in the presence of the *sefer shum* and some of the 'militia' and 'police aides' (the *qebellé*'s law enforcement personnel), who volunteered to assist with the logistics.

[44] I did not observe all the discussions surrounding this case in the *qebellé*, though I was present on the day of the ceremony. I also spoke to one of the relatives of the woman separately, on another occasion, and he recounted the longer history of the case to me, at least from his family's perspective.

The ‘earth-master’ cut one animal vertically, from the head to the tail, to terminate the incestuous relationship, and one horizontally, across the belly, to prevent *nueer* pollution as a result of the ‘bone’ between the couple. The two youths observed from the side, unenthusiastically, as the animals were split. When the final cuts were made in each, they came forward to hold the legs of the goat on either sides and pull them apart, an act in which they had to participate for the relationship between them to be properly severed. The ‘earth priest’, wearing shorts and a worn-out shirt, did not invoke, neither did he possess a spear—an object that had great spiritual and ritualistic significance in the past.[45] In fact, he was not even properly equipped with a knife, and before the procedure began some of the curious kids who gathered to observe had to be sent to fetch a machete from a nearby hut. In other words, the spiritual aspects of the ritual, which have already been eroded significantly in the past,[46] were arguably entirely absent from it.

Most Messianics seemed to agree that, at least following baptism, after being born-again ‘covered by the blood of the lamb’, any pre-existing ‘bones’ between people that may put them at risk of contracting *nueer* pollution should they intermarry or share food, became irrelevant. ‘There is no enmity in Messiah,’ one elder explained to me, when I asked about the matter. One Messianic youth described the ‘bone’ as a communal Nuer ‘curse’—rather than a pollution sanctioned by God—that is dismantled with one’s baptism and the beginning of a ‘new life with Christ’. As long as one remains with Christ and does not go ‘back’ to his or her ‘former’ community, he explained, one remains protected from the curses imposed by this community. Another Messianic suggested that the *kuäär muɔn*, when sacrificing animals, prevents *nueer* and *ruaal* pollutions through the power of Satan, rather than God. Thus, he suggested, he was a *t̲iet*—a ‘witch doctor’ or ‘sorcerer’. What indicated that the ‘earth master’ was a witch doctor was that he was supposed to invoke (*lam*) when slaughtering an animal, an act associated with ‘paganism’, and that his rituals involved no prayer to God. However, when I asked the same person what alternatives the Messianic doctrine offered for dealing with *ruaal* and *nueer* pollutions, he had no answer.

Less pious Christians in Gambella were generally not as confident that ‘bones’ could be ignored, even by baptised Christians, regardless of what the pastors in their churches said.

[45] On the spiritual significance of the spear, see Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 231-47.
[46] See Hutchinson’s description of a sacrificial ritual: Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 132.

‘They don’t believe but they believe,’ Kuel, who used to worship in one of Gambella’s Pentecostal churches explained, when I asked how people perceived the risk of *nueer* in the context of a history of homicide between families. Although Christians would not encourage violent revenge for a killing (for ‘vengeance belongs to God’), they still did not necessarily ignore the risk of *nueer* associated with them:

> Someone, for instance, he will believe that there is *cɔaa* [bone], but he will not tell himself ‘I will go and kill someone because he killed someone from my community.’ Just, he will consider that if his brother was killed, he will think, ‘Enough [*khalaṣ*], let us leave it to our Lord. I am a man of our Lord [*ana zol bita rabuna*]. I cannot kill someone.’ I mean, this is what he will have in his mind, that ‘Let us make *forgiveness* for that person, because I am a man of our Lord, I cannot go and kill another person.’ But he will not live with him and will not eat with him. […] And he will even not converse with him.[47]

Even more unlikely was simply ‘ignoring’ cases of incest (*ruaal*), whose deadly consequences were taken very seriously. Although the specific definition of *ruaal* transformed over the years and was debated, among the general population of Newland, when relationships were deemed incestuous, there was little doubt that without the splitting of an animal by an ‘earth priest’, sickness and death would ensue.[48] However, since Messianic groups strictly prohibited sex before marriage, only allowed marriage between baptised members of the church, and considered incest a biblical prohibition (despite significant differences between the Nuer and biblical definition of incest),[49] they did not have to address the dangers of *ruaal* as such or the legitimacy of cattle sacrifice in this context. Any case of incest would theoretically simply lead to expulsion from the church on the grounds of sexual promiscuity. As such, there appeared to be no reason for any of the Messianic groups to develop an elaborate doctrine on the matter. No case of incest among Messianics emerged during my time in Gambella, neither was any member of the church able to tell me about such a case in the past that the church had to deal with.

It was very rare for such an issue to be explicitly addressed in any other non-Messianic church in Gambella. A pastor in one of Gambella’s smaller Pentecostal churches, Victory

[47] Interview with Kuel, 2 February 2019 (from Arabic).
[48] On the Nuer concept and its evolution, see also: Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 237-69.
[49] The biblical definition is outlined in Leviticus 18.

Fellowship, described to me a case of incest that involved a girl who was impregnated by her nephew. Instead of going to the authorities in the *qebellé* and conducting the 'traditional' sacrificial rite involving the splitting of an animal by an 'earth master', the family decided to come to church. The individuals involved were not members of Victory Fellowship, but they heard that at this church they will be able to receive assistance. While the pastor who described to me the case referred to the 'earth master' as a 'false prophet', he did not reject the notion that incest can indeed cause sever sickness. The sickness associated with incest was precisely the reason a special praying session had to be convened at the church in the first place. The 'earth master' was not required not because incest has no dangerous spiritual consequences, but because the blood of Jesus (*riɛm Yecu*) has already been shed and it 'covers everything'.[50]

Nuer prophets, spirits or spiritual figures were not mentioned in Messianic songs, which, as we have seen, were strictly based on the Bible. They were also not regularly mentioned in Bible study sessions, although I did hear Seventh-day Adventist pastors and believers condemning the Ngundeng movement in church on several occasions. In other words, although demonised, the worshipping practices of Messianic groups did not constantly bring them to life, as some Pentecostal and charismatic churches do in other African contexts. In many respects, they were false and satanic just as the doctrines and worshiping practices of other Protestant churches were. In particular, ecstatic healing and deliverance programmes in charismatic churches—in which believers were being released from the grip of demons by charismatic pastors who summon the Holy Spirit—were seen as suspicious and demonic by Messianics, and as such 'pagan' just like Nuer prophets or Kiir's *Mut* Wiu. Such programmes were regularly held in Pentecostal churches (as well as the Anglican church) in Newland and video clips from similar sessions in other Pentecostal churches in Ethiopia and elsewhere in Africa were often available on people's computers and on television.

Regulating marriage in Newland

Ever since they were established, most disputes brought before Nuer 'customary' courts concerned marriage issues and bridewealth claims.[51] This was also the case in Newland.

[50] Interview with Pastor Stephen Khor, 20 March 2019.
[51] Howell, *A Manual of Nuer Law*, 71.

In Gambella, a clear line separated 'legal' marriage, or, as these were more commonly called, 'mid-day marriage' (*kuën cäŋdäär*), and 'illegal' or 'night-time marriage' (*kuën wär*). Also known previously as 'cattle-byre marriage' (*kuën luak*), 'mid-day marriage' were conducted with the knowledge and participation of the families of the couple and without the intervention of 'customary' authorities and the 'people of the government'. 'Night-time marriage', on the other hand, were cases of elopement and impregnation which, once discovered by the families of the couple, required the swift intervention of the *sefer shum* in order to prevent disputes and arrange the payment of bridewealth, or, in case there was none to be paid, to terminate the relationship and impose a penalty on the man. People in Newland lamented that proper 'legal' marriages were becoming increasingly rare and that 'night-time marriages' were the most common avenue to local youths to arrange their marriage. In reality, these trends were already apparent in the 1980s,[52] but widening economic gaps between Nuer in the diaspora and in Ethiopia and South Sudan, coupled with ongoing violence and displacement and the influence of born-again Christianity, only exacerbated them.

One key reason 'illegal' marriages were prevalent was that 'legal' ones became remarkably expensive. In earlier generations, it was not uncommon for a youth to give the sisters or friends of his future bride either small amounts of money, or beads, necklaces and, in some cases, bullets. Nonetheless, elders in Newland insisted that this was not a major part of the marriage process, and such payments were not necessarily expected *before* bride-wealth negotiations started. Gradually, throughout the 1980s and more clearly, during the 1990s, *yi̱o̱w nyiet,* 'the money of the girls', became a major stage in Nuer marriage processes, with a significant economic weight. In essence, this was a sum demanded by 'the girls' (female relatives of the bride) prior to the beginning of negotiations between the families. In Newland, it varied, depending on the relationship between the families and the status of the man. By the time I was there, men from the US, Canada and Australia were often asked to pay 60,000 birr (US$1,700) or more as *yi̱o̱w nyiet*, often sending mobile phones and other presents along with the cash. Local government and NGO employees were expected to pay slightly less. Moreover, in the ideal 'day-time' marriage process, even before negotiations about the sum of the 'money of the girls' could start, the delegation of men that came to talk to the 'girls' were expected

[52] Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 206.

to pay several smaller ‘fees’ (*yi̱o̱w thok-kal*, ‘the money of the mouth of the fence’) in order to access the compound and start the negotiation.

To some extent, the *yi̱o̱w nyiet* gave girls considerable leverage in marriage negotiation. Once the ‘money of the girls’ was agreed upon (and often immediately spent in a large party), however, a man was expected to pay a range of other fees to the girl’s father in addition to the bridewealth payment itself. These payments were associated with the negotiation process and included the money for thigs such as the father’s chair (*kom*) and dry gin (*traijin*). Small sticks were passed around and lined on the floor during bridewealth negotiations to symbolise cows, and were tied together when an agreement was reached, as a record of the number of cows the man’s family promised to deliver. Thus, the man was also expected to pay ‘the money of the tying of the sticks’ (*yi̱o̱w yi̱eenä juacni*). Supplementing ‘real’ cows (*ɣɔɔk miɛm*, ‘cattle of hair’) with cash (*ɣɔɔk yi̱o̱wni*, ‘cattle of money’) was common, and there was no consensus with regard to which of the two was preferred. Finally, proper ‘mid-day’ marriages, especially when men from the diaspora were involved, were often celebrated in large (and costly) events in church. The Pentecostal Christian Temple Church was probably the most popular venue for such ‘American’ marriages in Newland when I was there.

Figure 45. Leaving Christian Temple Church for a parade around Newland after a wedding.

In reality, however, a shiny wedding in church was not how most Nuer in Newland married. As men from the diaspora were drawing the costs of 'mid-day marriages' higher, for local youths and students with no regular employment, the sums involved in arranging a 'proper' marriage were quickly becoming far beyond reach. The natural consequence was the proliferation of 'illegal' marriages, which were essentially the norm in Newland rather than the exception. These not only reduced the number of cattle expected to be paid as bridewealth (from a norm of at least 25 in 'legal' marriages to 15 or less in 'illegal' ones) but also bypassed most of the additional monetary fees associated with the negotiations surrounding 'mid-day marriages'. Their common description as 'illegal' notwithstanding, there were very clear norms governing these marriages. When a girl eloped, her partner did not have to negotiate the 'money of the girls' in advance but was nonetheless expected to pay a small symbolic fee called *pɛythol* ('plastic bag'). This was a payment for the bag in which the girl's clothes were brought to the boy's compound or the house of the *sefer shum* after she was 'stolen'.

Once the elopement or pregnancy were exposed, the boy would rush to the *qebellé* and pay the *sefer shum* a fee of 600 birr (US$17). This money was meant to appease the 'brothers' of the girl and prevent fighting. While this payment was fixed and largely symbolic in Newland, in rural areas, where the possibility of an outbreak of violence was more realistic, it could be much higher. Once the fee was paid, the families of the couple would meet at the *qebellé* to negotiate the bridewealth, with the *sefer shum* serving as arbitrators. All other fees associated with 'legal' marriage were essentially avoided, although the girl's family could still insist on certain payments or reject the union if the boy's family was unable to produce enough cattle. The 'money of the tying of the sticks' was replaced with another fixed fee: the 'the money of standing up' (*yi̱o̱w ji̱äckä*)—600 birr, of which 200 remained with the *sefer shum* and 400 went to the girl's family—symbolising the successful conclusion of the negotiations. To the bridewealth, the boy's family would often also be pressured to add one 'cow of compensation' (*yaŋ cutkä*) to further appease the girl's family.

Even more alarming for elders than the proliferation of 'illegal marriages' was the growing number of affairs that ended with no marriage at all. While normally discrete love affairs were accepted and commonly understood as ultimately leading to marriage—whether 'legal' or 'illegal'—a growing number of these were ending up with the couple

separating either because the man's family was unable to produce the required cattle or because the man had no intention to marry his girlfriend in the first place. In such cases, the man was required to pay a fine (*karam*, one cow, or, usually, 3,000 birr) and a compensation called *ruɔl cɨ̱ökni* ('the closing of the legs', also one cow or 3,000 birr) to the girl's family. If she was pregnant, he could still claim the child after birth by paying a compensation, the price of which varied depending on the circumstances and whether the child was a boy or a girl. Over a single month in 2019, I recorded no less than eight cases in *qebellé* 01 that ended up with separation rather than marriage.

One case I observed in the *qebellé* in Newland concerned a young man who impregnated a young woman but then refused to marry her. The woman lost the baby. The man accused her of making an abortion deliberately, but she denied this. Realising that the man already found a new girlfriend and had no intention to marry her, the woman threatened to commit suicide. The girl's family called on the authorities to arrests the man and a meeting was convened at the *qebellé*. The man, however, showed up to the discussion with a host of young colleagues rather than elders from his family—a clear indication that he had no serious intention to negotiate a 'night-time marriage' with the woman's family. One of the *sefer shum*, clearly irritated, accused the boy of 'bad Nuer culture' ('culture *Nuäri jiääkä*'). Impregnating a girl and then not making any effort to marry her is '*lɑ̱t buny*', he claimed, 'the work of highlanders'.[53] The case ended with the man being requested to pay a fine and a compensation. He remained in detention in the *qebellé* until his family was able to pay.

A marriage in Zion District

In short, the accelerated monetisation of marriages meant that a proper 'legal' marriage in church was beyond the means of most local youths, while 'illegal' marriage not only had a problematic reputation (only to a limited extent, in an environment where it was remarkably common) but was also seen as unbiblical and opposed to God's will. Marriages within Messianic groups operated under a different economy. Messianic churches only allowed marriages between baptised members—as people from outside the community were considered 'gentiles'. They rejected polygyny and divorce, and only

[53] *Qebellé* 01, 19 April 2019.

accepted 'legal', 'mid-day' marriages. However, they also rejected the inflated payments added to these marriages in recent decades, instead sticking to the 'traditional' transfer of cattle. As such, their marriage system was understood to be simultaneously the most biblically authentic one *and* the most consistent with Nuer 'tradition'.

'The Torah and Nuer culture agree,' one of the elders of the Congregation of Yahweh told me. 'The Torah demands dowries. At the same time, Nuer laws also say dowries [must be paid] to the parents. It is also our doctrine: to pay dowries.'[54] As one Church of God youth explained to me proudly one afternoon, when it came to marriage, biblical and Nuer norms aligned, and Messianics were able to follow both and regulate an economy that has otherwise spiralled out of controlled in wider Nuer society:

> The Nuer Christian Missionary Network, they want the Church of God to be part of them because we follow the laws of marriage. Only the Church of God keeps it. In other churches, they violate it with payments. Especially, the rules say that you may pay up to 25 cattle. But some people demand money for the father, money for mother, the sisters. Because of the money, the law of marriage is violated. People do agreements illegally—marry by night. The Nuer Christian Missionary Network says that those who follow the laws will be the leaders and should sign the by-laws that will restore the laws of traditional marriage. But the Church of God doesn't want to participate, because they [the network] are also involved in politics. Church of God doesn't want to have association with Sunday keepers.[55]

When a male member of the Church of God wanted to marry, he had to inform the elders of the church, and they would announce it before the congregation. Only then was the man allowed to approach female members of the church. Otherwise, interactions between unmarried male and female believers outside church activities were discouraged. Once two members agreed to marry, bridewealth negotiations between their families could last for months and years. This was true for most marriages in Newland. Since people living in town had no access to their families' cattle and often no means to communicate with their relatives in rural South Sudan and Ethiopia, traveling across the region to discuss

[54] Discussion with elders of the Congregation of Yahweh, 24 December 2018. The word 'dowry' (used in English in the interview) refers to bridewealth here, wrongfully.
[55] Notes, 5 August 2019.

cattle transfers or collect cows was a common practice. One youth from the Congregation of Yahweh told me how he had to skip one year of schooling in order to embark on a tour through rural Gambella and Upper Nile to try to collect cows for his marriage.[56] Many of the disputes discussed in the *qebellé* revolved around cattle in rural areas that were promised but not delivered or around concerns that cattle which were promised did not exist.

The final ceremony legalising the marriage was held in church, and as in most 'Sunday' churches, this usually involved a full festival: dark suits for the groom and the groomsmen, a large white dress for the bride and matching dresses for the bridesmaids, a long ceremony, featuring songs, the 'Word of God' (that is, preaching or Bible 'lesson'), speeches by relatives of both families, the signing of a marriage certificate issued by the church, the ceremonial presentation of gifts to the couple, and, of course, food. I participated in one such event in the Church of God in Zion District, on a cool Sunday afternoon in the rainy season. The young couple getting married were to move into a new hut, a short walk from the church, on the same evening, and the ceremony ended with the whole congregation escorting them to their new home, with the gifts they received, in song and dance. A cow was brought to Zion District the evening before the ceremony took place and it was slaughtered at night, exclusively for food: with 'no ceremony' and 'not even by the members of the church,' as I was reassured.

The wedding ceremony itself included a long 'lesson' on marriage (*ŋicä kuën*), delivered by an elder of the church. It comprised of a detailed tour of various biblical verses outlining what the righteous marriage looks like and means, with occasional references to the way biblical directives relate to Nuer 'culture'. Thus, although in Nuer 'culture' is it common for men to marry more than one woman, the audience was told, the Bible prohibits that.[57] The Bible does not say much about bride-price payments (*mohar*, in Hebrew), but the lesson featured references to some of the verses that indicate this was a common practice in biblical times and that, as in Nuer 'culture', the precise price

[56] Interview with Thuk, 21 March 2019.
[57] Polygyny has long been a hotly debated issue in Christian missions in Africa and African churches. I do not explore this issue here as there was simply no question around the matter among Messianics in Gambella: polygyny was rejected. On Christian Nuer attitudes towards polygyny, see also: Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas*, 336. On polygamy and the Seventh-day Adventism in Africa, see: Höschele, *Christian Remnant*, vol. 34, 287-300.

demanded by the bride's family varied.[58] Before family members of the couple came forward to announce how many cows they agreed to be paid as bridewealth—a common feature of marriage ceremonies in all churches—the elder leading the ceremony referred to the verses describing how Rebekah's family agreed to let her go and marry Isaac, in Genesis 24. After the ceremony was over, one Messianic turned to me: 'So, have you identified the similarities with the system of the Jews?'

Figure 46. Girls singing during a wedding in the Church of God, Zion District.

Biblical practices may have been understood as consistent with Nuer 'culture', but what Messianics did not revive or endorse was the role of cattle as a spiritual medium, which was already undermined by decades of engagement with markets, the secular state and Christianity. The practices they endorsed, just like the practices they demonised, were the product of a particular historical process that shaped what they came to consider 'tradition'. For under an ideology in which cattle and human blood are linked and cattle serve as a spiritual medium, bridewealth was not simply a material symbol that formalised a marriage and compensated the family of the bride for the costs associated with bringing her up. First, bridewealth distribution forged kinship ties. As described in the previous chapter, even when a man was not the biological father of a child, the transfer of cattle between families validated the relationship between the two. The definition of incest

[58] Exodus 22:16-17; Genesis 34:11-12.

corresponded with the dispersion of bridewelath cattle, with the limits of exogamy determined by the limits of bridewealth claims.[59]

Second, and perhaps more importantly, cattle transfer during marriage had a spiritual dimension. It invoked the blessings of the spirits associated with the families involved and specific cows of the bridewealth were set aside in honour of the spirits associated with either the mother or father of the bride:

> A cow so dedicated to a spirit must remain in the kraal of the parents and now and again they rub ashes along its back and pour milk over its tethering-peg and invoke the spirit. The spirits of the family are thus made cognizant of the marriage and are a party to the pact just as the ghosts are informed of what is taking place and are invoked as witnesses at the wedding ceremony. Spirits and ghosts are *jicungni*, claimants entitled to a share in the bridewealth, and were they to be denied their right the marriage would not be fruitful.[60]

In reality, it should also be noted, not all Messianics married 'legally' as their church required. Unbaptised Messianics—not yet formally members of the church—could still marry 'illegally' outside their church without being punished. One devoted Messianic from the Church of God with whom I spent a lot of time in Newland married 'by night' before he was baptised. He then persuaded his new wife, previously a member of a 'Sunday church', to join the Church of God as well. Only after the marriage was finalised in the *qebellé* and his wife joined the church, he was baptised. Another member of the Church of God told me that he married a woman outside the church 'illegally' *after* being baptised. However, in light of all the splits and quarrels between Messianic groups at the time, the leadership of the church allowed him to stay, arguing that whether or not he will be forgiven will depend on him and God alone. Later, his wife was also baptised as a member of the church. A proper marriage—of two baptised members, at the church, 'by day'—was the ideal elders and committed members aspired to, but not necessarily the reality for all Messianics.

[59] S. E. Hutchinson, 'Changing Concepts of Incest Among the Nuer', *American Ethnologist,* 12 (1985), 628.
[60] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, 'Nuer Bridewealth', *Africa,* 16 (1946), 253.

Reinventing tradition?

At its broadest level, the history this chapter tells is one about the gradual intermeshing of two systems for the regulation of social relations and communal life. In both systems, God is the ultimate judge and source of justice. However, in one system, the pre-colonial Nuer one, relations with God are mediated through communally owned cattle and are concerned with people's lives and livelihoods in this world, while in the other, that of born-again Christianity, they are mediated through individual self-mastery and are concerned not only with this world but also the next. From a historical perspective, we can see how these two systems did not neatly replace each other at the frontier. Instead, they have uncomfortably and inconclusively bled into one another over the past century against the background of the influence of the modern secular state and the coming of the *kumɛ*. These not only sought to clearly demarcate and regulate the domains of 'religion' and 'tradition' in social and political life but, as part of this effort, also destabilised the role of cattle as an extension of human beings and as a spiritual medium.

We can see how some of the processes outlined in this chapter resonate with those described earlier. The shift from an ideology of 'cattle-over-blood' to one in which kinship is very much dependent on blood ties, corresponds with the shift described here, from a spiritual and legal order in which cattle serves as a medium to one in which the individual (body and soul) is the ultimate vehicle for communication with God. This is a shift that is significant both in terms of religious practice but also in terms of inter-generational power dynamics and communal economies. Cattle were, and to a great extent are, communally owned, but controlled by elders. A process in which youths who migrate into peri-urban areas or refugee camps subscribe to religious orders in which cattle are redundant therefore represents not merely a shift in their understanding of spiritual mediation or justice but also an inexplicit renunciation of the authority of 'village' elders, whose main source of wealth and power becomes much less essential. In this regard, and although there were many elderly male leaders of churches, it is no coincidence that churches were often regarded as a place for youths and women.

The historical entanglement of 'Nuer customary law' and 'tradition' with Christianity and the secular state raises important questions with regard to the making and meaning of 'tradition' in Africa more broadly. The fierce rejection of some 'traditional' spiritual

activities, a common stance among born-again Christians in Africa, is in fact a product of a particular historical process in which the secular state sought to demarcate 'religion' and separate it from supposedly non-spiritual domains of authority, thus producing a notion of 'tradition' whose spiritual dimensions are often ambiguous. However, the incorporation of the 'traditional' Nuer bridewealth system, albeit in a transformed *desacralised* form, into the Messianic world, demonstrates how Christianity can play a role not only in castigating 'African tradition' but also in reviving it and imbuing it with new meaning and relevance. As in previous chapters, we can therefore see how Messianic practice and doctrine engages with the spheres of 'modernity' and 'tradition' to produce ways of political action and collective being that do not lend themselves easily to either of these imagined cultural spaces.

Conclusion

This thesis traced the evolution of Evangelical Zionism and Messianic Judaism among Nuer communities in Ethiopia's western frontierlands. At heart, it sought to present a counter-history: Against the common perception of the periphery as a space that is constantly in the process of being incorporated into the state—locked between an imagined 'traditional' past and a promised 'modern' future—this study interrogated some of the alternative temporalities, moral orders and cultural itineraries articulated in the frontierlands. Instead of approaching life in this region from the normative perspective of the state and its policies and priorities, this thesis focused on the everyday practices through which subjectivities and communities are forged and explored their historical transformation. Rejecting earlier accounts that approached Christianity among South Sudanese communities primarily through the prism of 'crisis' and wars, and interpreted religious conversion as driven by the local association of Christianity with 'civilisation', urban life and South Sudanese national identity, this study sought to explore the religious sphere as a meaningful site of political action and social change in its own right.

While I did not explain Messianic Judaism as a 'response' to the conditions of life in the frontierlands, I did seek to understand its historical trajectory in light of, and as embedded in, these conditions. This thesis positioned Messianic Judaism within a longer history of political and religious change in the frontierlands and demonstrated that the Messianic promise of divine authenticity proved particularly appealing in a context in which seeking access to superior external knowledge has long been an entrepreneurial strategy. The first chapter illustrated the salience of knowledge acquisition and concerns with deception and trickery at the state frontier. In the second and third chapters, we have seen how the Christian 'speech' of God entered the circuits of knowledge exchange of the frontierlands, and how competing claims of biblical authenticity (and thus, 'truth') were debated and evaluated and led to the formation of an ever-growing number of Evangelical Zionist churches. The following parts of the thesis demonstrated how Messianism transformed the way music and hymns were used to communicate with the divine and make it present; history, 'ethnicity' and biological descent were constructed and imagined; and Nuer 'tradition' and 'customary law' were engaged with and evaluated.

This historical analysis is of broader significance for our understanding of the region's political culture. A few years before South Sudan's independence, Leonardi described youths in the country as navigating between two spheres. One was that of the 'government' (*hakuma*, in South Sudanese Arabic), associated with towns, the state or militaries. The other was that of 'home', associated with kinship ties and the social order of the village. Youth, Leonardi argued, were 'characterized by their participation in both "*hakuma*" and "home", but also by their resistance to full incorporation into either sphere.'[1] Full incorporation into the sphere of the 'government' or military immediately raised suspicions of corruption and self-interest. Like the Nuer 'son of the town' (*gat rɛk*) who was associated in Newland with both sophistication and threatening trickery, a person who drifted away from 'home' into urban life and the 'government' was seen as betraying the expectations and authority of his own community. Leonardi argued that youths therefore attempted to benefit from what the urban sphere had to offer without being 'captured' by it. They did so by maintaining a solid link with 'home', most prominently by pursuing the establishment of a family through a proper marriage, recognised and facilitated by their community.

Leonardi's work is primarily based on research among Dinka, Bari and Kakwa speaking communities, but the distinctions she identifies resonate with those drawn among eastern Nuer in Gambella, between the 'town' (*rɛk*) and rural areas (*rɛy ciëŋ*), each representing a set of supposedly opposing cultural itineraries associated with 'tradition' and 'modernity', 'community' and 'the state' and so on. We can think of the histories of religious practice and thought that this thesis explored as offering a way to navigate between these spheres without being 'captured' by either: Once we approach religious change, as proposed in the introduction, as a meaningful political process in and of itself rather than a 'second-order process of adjustment',[2] we see that Messianic Judaism put forward an avenue for political action that represented an alternative to the political and moral orders of both the 'village' and the 'town'. The common association of Christianity with urban life and 'development' is therefore problematic. If mastery of 'modern' urban life and the ways of 'governments' implied proficiency in the arts of performance, falsity, trickery and exploitation, at the distant horizon of the born-again landscape was the promise of absolute justice and truth.

[1] Leonardi, '"Liberation" or Capture', 395.
[2] Marshall, *Political Spiritualities*, 22-35.

This historical ethnography of Messianic Judaism, which intentionally did not position the state at its centre, nonetheless offers a new perspective on the enduring ambivalence towards the sphere of the 'government' in South Sudanese society.[3] It is true that like 'chiefs', church leaders emerged as frontier entrepreneurs and churches as frontier institutions, somewhat paradoxically appearing to represent the outside world to their communities and their communities to the outside world. But there were fundamental differences between what they came to offer, and what 'governments' did. Since the colonial period, the line between the *kumɛ* and *Kuoth Nhial* was clearly demarcated, even if attending a missionary school was the prime avenue to gain knowledge of the 'government' and its ways. Over the past century, different 'governments' in the frontierlands brought with them devastation and predation but also security and services. At best, the role of 'people of the government' has been to engage with them through strategies that sought to harness their resources while limiting their ability to exploit.[4] As such, the *kumɛ* of this world was always as good as the resources it could provide and as bad as the suffering it inflicted. Even if it influenced the way people engage with spiritual forces, it never replaced the latter as a source of authoritative moral guidance or as the producer of meaningful media through which a social relationships and communities are configured.

What the account provided here suggests is that at least for Messianics, the sphere of 'the state' and that of God operated on entirely different registers of authenticity and authority. This study put particular emphasis on religious mediation, and sought to investigate how the spiritual value of various materials—in particular, speech (or, words), blood and cattle—transformed over time, and with it the way people related to each other and to God and understood their place in the world. We have seen that Messianism promised a sense of authenticity, grounded in the 'speech' of God, in which certain materials, practices, institutions and objects were understood as immediately linked to the divine and could be situated within biblical time and space. It was in this sense that 'truth' was defined and sought. The 'true church' or 'true religion' were 'true' because of their indexical connection with divine history: Jesus Christ, the Jewish People, the Land of Israel, and so on. In the sphere of the 'government', on the other hand, there was no

[3] See also C. Leonardi, 'Paying "Buckets of Blood" for the Land: Moral Debates Over Economy, War and State in Southern Sudan', *The Journal of Modern African Studies,* (2011), 215-240.
[4] Leonardi, *Dealing with Government*.

'divine indexicality'.[5] From a biblical perspective, everything was artificial, 'manufactured', 'man-made' and as such neither real nor false but a performance. In urban life—indeed, perhaps as in modernity at large—performance was sufficient to produce 'meaningful fictions',[6] and signs were therefore always 'as likely to mislead as not'.[7]

It was for this reason, I believe, that even some of the most committed Messianics and Adventists I met in Newland did not think that they were doing anything particularly wrong when they 'forged' (as this act would be understood from the perspective of the law) school certificates or recommendation letters for their employers. Initially, such practices caught me by surprise, but I gradually learned that like the 'fake' hand-watches and sunglasses in Gambella's markets, they were neither rare nor avoided. For example, since UN scholarships for degrees in Ethiopian universities were only granted to South Sudanese refugees who graduated from non-Ethiopian schools, some Ethiopians and refugees bought counterfeit Sudanese high school certificates (sold in Newland for about 150 birr) in order to be eligible. At the same time, South Sudanese who moved to Ethiopia often had to forge Ethiopian secondary school certificates in order to access higher education as citizens, outside the camp. After graduation, to access jobs (particularly with NGOs), young people with no prior experience often forged recommendation letters. But even in this context there existed no clear boundary between the genuine and false, for it appeared that none of the private higher education institutions in Newland operated with a formal license in the first place,[8] and even in legitimate Ethiopian institutions, claims of forgery and cheating in exams abounded.

It would come as no surprise that in the premillennialist eschatologies circulating among Messianics and Adventists in Gambella, world governments and secular power were always suspected of being associated with Satan. This is a common theme in Evangelical theologies, but it nonetheless resonates differently in different contexts. The operations of government institutions and UN agencies in Gambella were chronically suspected of being deceptive and predatory—part of Satan's efforts, as described in the Book of

[5] Dulin, 'Messianic Judaism'.
[6] Newell, *The Modernity Bluff*, 247.
[7] Siegel, *A New Criminal Type*, 55.
[8] *Addis Fortune*, 'Agency Suspends Two Colleges in Gambella,' 16 March 2019, available at: https://addisfortune.news/agency-suspends-two-colleges-in-gambella/.

Revelation, to 'capture' the people of God, draw them from the righteous way and force them to submit to an evil 'New World Order' in the Last Days. Any information disseminated by the government was suspected of being a lie. Any policy intervention introduced from above was suspected of having a hidden agenda not made known to the people. Particularly concerning for many in Gambella at the time of my research was the introduction of biometric registration in refugee camps, for example, which required individuals to provide iris scans and fingerprints. Rumours that this technology represented the satanic 'mark of the beast' all humans are expected to be forced to receive ('on their right hands or on their foreheads') according to Revelation 13, persisted. Some concerned members of the Congregation of Yahweh in Kenya, where a similar biometric registration campaign took place, even wrote to the group's leaders in Jerusalem in order to inquire whether they should cooperate with the authorities in the refugee camp.[9]

Nonetheless, this 'demonization of everyday life'—the sense of living in what De Boeck called the 'apocalyptic interlude' in which Satan is omnipresent—did not imply that all institutions associated with the secular state were avoided.[10] Messianics studied (and taught) in the university and worked in government institutions and international NGOs. There were also Messianics, including members of the more separatist Congregation of Yahweh, serving as *sefer shum*, 'people of the government', in Newland. But ideally, they always sought to make sure they can 'separate what belong to God and what does not belong to God,' and properly align themselves with the former: 'The things of this world which belong to the government of this world are treated in separate manner,' Gatluak, who I quoted in the introduction and who was a lecturer in Gambella University, told me. 'The things that belong to the Kingdom of God are treated in separate manner.'[11] The sphere of the government lacked divine authenticity and represented an artificial episode in history, but it was a sphere one inevitably had to navigate, cautiously, until the Second Coming. This was the challenge of living in the frontierlands, in the temporal 'valley of the church' and the political and geographic margins of the state.

[9] Notes, 5 September 2019 (discussion with members of the Congregation of Yahweh, Kampala).
[10] F. De Boeck, 'The Apocalyptic Interlude: Revealing Death in Kinshasa', *African Studies Review,* (2005), 11-32.
[11] Interview with Gatluak, 10 February 2019.

Scholarship on born-again Christianity and Pentecostalism often emphasises the highly individualistic attitude of these faiths and their focus, above all, on personal transformation, empowerment, blessings and salvation. This theme came out strongly in Chapter 6 of this thesis as well, in the discussion of the declining spiritual significance of cattle. The Protestant strive for purification, immediacy and authenticity is usually understood as geared towards producing a human subject who is a liberated 'self-aware agent'.[12] This focus on the individual has significant political implications. Together with the demonisation of secular power, it can undermine institutional authority and circumvent the interpersonal engagements upon which a community is established. 'Pentecostalism expresses a negative political theology, whether one understands this term in its sense of a theology of sovereignty or as a theology of community,' Marshall writes, reflecting on Nigerian Pentecostalism. 'With its emphasis on individual salvation, interiority, and affectivity, coupled with its incipient messianism, it has great difficulty in either founding an authority that commands obedience and may embody divine will, or creating the foundations of a political community.'[13]

The image that emerges out of the history of the Nuer Messianism is different, for a number of reasons. First, as we have seen in Chapter 2, institutional genealogy did matter a great deal for Gambella's Messianics. For decades, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Church of God and all their splinter groups each claimed that its authority derived from it being the 'true church'. To quote again one of the members of the Congregation of Yahweh: 'The righteous way is not only to be a righteous person. *You should know the line!*'[14] Moving from one church to the other was not simply a matter of finding a better environment for communicating with God and experiencing the Holy Spirit, neither the result of a quest for resources or the consequence of kinship-related quarrels that had nothing to do with the Christian doctrine. These factors were certainly there, but they should not obscure the fact that institutional affiliation was also part of a much more consequential quest to associate oneself with the 'correct' remnant. Being close to God and obeying His will was not simply a matter of individual disposition and 'belief' but also institutional association.

[12] Keane, *Christian Moderns*, 54; Robbins, *Becoming Sinners*.
[13] Marshall, *Political Spiritualities*, 165.
[14] Notes, 27 July 2019.

The notion that 'No one will go to heaven only according to their church,' as one member of the Church of the Nazarene once told me, did not apply for Messianics. As far as they were concerned, divine indexicality extended to church institutions as well: some churches were 'true', others were not. When I was in Gambella, some Messianic youths, influenced by the teachings of American Messianics, were beginning to challenge the exclusive institutional authority of their churches by promoting the notion that 'the truth is found in Jesus,' and not in any specific institution.[15] Proponents of this position, calling for Messianic unity, prepared a detailed document in which they compared the doctrines of Gambella's main Messianic groups. They sought to demonstrate that the differences between them were marginal and should not stop them from organising activities together. But it was unclear whether this message could displace the otherwise very powerful notion of a 'true church', and it was nonetheless still based on the notion of a united 'true remnant' community. These dynamics stand in contrast to the fluidity of Pentecostal church affiliation and the centrality of personal charisma in Pentecostal authority, even if they are driven by a similar quest for divine truth.

But even when institutional authority was under duress and churches continued to split, the very quest for the divine was by definition a political enterprise. Whether people in Gambella studied the Bible alone, in groups or in church, they were part of a conversation, and this conversation, as Chapter 3 demonstrated, was fuelled by the constant circulation of (and search for) new sources of information and inspiration. In a similar vein, as discussed in Chapter 4, the production and performance of Christian music also configured communities and subjectivities and publics that were engaged in endless conversations with one another. Meanwhile, the origins and essence of human blood and cattle were also caught, as the final two chapters demonstrated, in a similar state of indeterminacy and thus debated and questioned. The conversations this thesis explored, configured around the quest for divine authenticity, never come to a definite end. At least until the Second Coming—when humanity finally arrives at the next 'peak of prophesy' and divine truth reveals itself with absolute clarity to both the sinners and the righteous—scepticism and doubt always continue to lurk behind every piece of information, object, substance and practice and the promise of epistemological certainty remains unfulfilled.

[15] Notes, 3 July 2019 (Messianic prayer group).

And it is precisely for this reason that the quest for it can continue to sustain a vibrant arena of argumentation.

The political power of born-again Christianity, the story of Gambella's Messianic Jews suggests, is situated not in its ultimate success in fixing broken signifiers or 'overcoming mimesis',[16] but in setting in motion a dynamic debate about the possibility of doing so. This point resonates with Keller's argument on Adventism in Madagascar: it is the very *process* of intellectual inquiry associated with these faiths, not the definite answers they offer, that attracts people to them.[17] In this regard, even if the Nuer Messianic Jewish movement continues to fragment into an endless number of competing institutions, it will also continue to uphold a shared arena of communal reflection and debate that is meaningful in and of itself. Reflecting on the theological debates that drive denominational divisions and schism among Guhu-Samane Christians in Papua New Guinea, Handman suggests that while churches may constantly split, multiply and perish, 'the longevity of a group should not be seen as the primary index of its cultural value for either local people or for social scientists.' That is because by its very nature, schism is already a product of critical deliberation. Therefore, 'the value of a remnant group can be seen in terms of its capacity to create critical discourses.'[18] That an ever-growing number of splinter groups emerged out of the Church of God can be understood as evidence of the success of its discourse just as much as it is evidence of institutional failure.[19]

This thesis deliberately focused on non-Pentecostal born-again groups and paid attention to the evolution of different churches and the dynamics between them rather than focus exclusively on one particular church. Too often, scholars of born-again Christianity in Africa speak confidently about this faith as a static and distinct set of ideas to which people either subscribe or not. The religious sphere, by implication, is understood as one of indoctrination rather than deliberation and change.[20] But this position tells us little about what faith and Christian practice mean to people and why. There are certainly many things born-again Christians share, but the histories traced in this thesis also sought to

[16] De Boeck and Plissart, *Kinshasa*, 112.
[17] Keller, *The Road to Clarity*.
[18] Handman, *Critical Christianity*. Handman partly links her discussion of denominational divisions to Melanesian forms of sociality, but her argument is primarily concerned with Christian thought and practice and therefore resonates with the case discussed here.
[19] See also C. Handman, 'Critical Failures', *Critical Research on Religion,* 6 (2018), 16-20.
[20] Compare, in the Islamic context: Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*.

highlight that argumentation, change, scepticism and doubt are all important parts of Christian life, and that in order to take seriously the religious sphere as a site of political action and community making, the dilemmas that configure it must be taken into account. Messianic Judaism assumed a powerful role in the frontierlands not because it provided conclusive and certain answers that were politically appealing, but because it opened up new ways of asking questions—questions to which all answers are, for the time being, tentative.

yaŋkuɔth: ‘the cow of spirit’, butterfly

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References to casual conversations and observations, as well as quotes from church sermons, appear in footnotes as 'Notes', followed by the date in which they were recorded. Listed below are only those formal interviews which are cited directly in the text. Some names have been changed. All interviews were carried out in Newland and in English unless mentioned otherwise.

Wendemu	24.11.2018	Businessman and member of a prominent family of merchants from Gambella town.
Gatluak	26.11.2018	Cieng Nyijaangni elder, from Makuey (interview in Nuer).
Jock Kier	29.11.2018; 8.02.2019; 21.04.2019; 4.06.2019	Cieng Thiang elder from Lare, long-time resident of Newland.
Mathew Dolak	05.12.2018; 17.12.2018; 03.07.2019	Pastor, Mekane Yesus, from Lare.
Simon Deng	12.12.2018	Pastor and founder, Christian Temple Church, originally from Nasir, South Sudan.
Ding Gach	20.12.2018	Executive Manager of the Ethiopian Nuer Development Association, and former reverend in Mekane Yesus Church.
David Wurieng	23.12.2018	Founder, Evangelical Covenant Church of Ethiopia, originally from Jikow.
Congregation of Yahweh elders	24.12.2018	An open group discussion with a several leaders of the congregation.

Panom Puk	30.12.2018; 11.03.2019; 28.04.2019	Former Church of God and Ahavat Yeshua Messianic Congregation member.
Simon Hoth	07.12.2018	Education coordinator, Church of the Nazarene, originally from Akobo (Ethiopia).
Kuel	02.02.2019; 25.04.2019; 06.06.2019	Christian Temple Church member, from South Sudan, (interview in English and Arabic).
Gatluak	10.02.2019	Elder in the Church of God, from Jikow.
Nhial	10.02.2019	Elder in the Church of God, from Lare.
Chuol	14.02.2019	Founding member, Ahavat Yeshua (former Church of God).
John Yien	26.02.2019	Legal Affairs Advisor, Regional State Council, and among the founders of the Church of the Nazarene in Gambella.
Matthew	28.02.2019	Student from Lare, used to pray in Ahavat Yeshua Messianic Congregation but not as a member.
Nyawec Jok	07.03.2019	Among the members of the first Seventh-day Adventist church in Gambella, from Jikow (interview in Nuer).
Stephen Khor	15.03.2019; 20.03.2019	Pastor and founder, Victory Fellowship Church, originally from Ulang.
Thuk	21.03.2019	Student, Congregation of Yahweh member, originally from Nasir.
Chuol Kun	29.03.2019	Head of Trinity Lutheran College.
Thankuei	29.03.2019; 01.04.2019	Elder, Church of God, from Lare.
Seth	13.04.2019; 13.06.2019; 08.08.2019	Member of Ahavat Yeshua Messianic Congregation, originally from Ulang.
Chang	20.04.2019	Member of the Congregation of Yahweh, originally from Akobo (Ethiopia).

Catholic Church father (Ethiopian)	24.04.2019	Conducted in the main Catholic Church compound, Gambella town.
Catholic Church father (foreigner)	29.04.2019	Conducted in the main Catholic Church compound, Gambella town.
James Duop	02.05.2019	Reverend, Mekane Yesus Church, originally from Adura but long-time resident of Newland.
Gatluak	11.06.2019; 20.06.2019	Elder, Seventh-day Adventist Church, originally from Lare.
Matthew Riek	19.06.2019	Pastor and founder, Evangelical Lutheran Church, originally from Maiwut (South Sudan).
Jing	12.07.2019	Christian Temple Church member (prophet, secretary of one branch of the church and former 'mission team' leader).
Rachel	01.08.2019	American missionary attached to Mekane Yesus Church in Newland (under the Evangelical Church Bethel).

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