

# **The Religious Framing of the South Sudanese Civil Wars: The Enduring Legacy of Ngundeng's Prophecy**

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## **Abstract**

This article discusses how a religious idea informed the political behaviour of South Sudanese leaders in the context of civil wars and the associated bitter contest for leadership. The prophecy which is invoked in the leadership contest in South Sudan is the prophecy of the 19th century Nuer prophet, Ngundeng Bong believed to predicted the course and outcome of the South Sudanese civil wars. At the centre of the prophecy is the prophetic power claim by one of the major political figures in South Sudan, i.e., Dr. Riek Machar and his leadership contest first with Dr. John Garang and currently with President Salva Kiir. In making sense of Machar's self-understanding as a messiah, 'predicted' as it were by Ngundeng, the paper draws on the concept of political culture. It is argued that without endorsing Machar's prophetic claim, it is imperative to understand the claim structure and how it is made plausible in the eyes of the believers, including Machar's pragmatic mix of being a trained political strategist and a politician making use of a spiritual repertoire such as the enduring legacy of the Ngundeng prophecy featuring as a political capital.

**KEY WORDS:** Ngundeng Prophecy, Dr. Riek Machar, South Sudanese Civil Wars

## **Introduction**

Politics have different dimensions, and certainly ideas matter in politics. This paper is about how a religious idea, specifically prophecy, has informed the political behaviour of South Sudanese leaders in the context of civil wars and the associated bitter contest for leadership. The prophecy which is invoked in the leadership contest in South Sudan is the prophecy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Nuer prophet called Ngundeng Bong. It is widely believed not just by Nuer but by many non-Nuer South Sudanese that prophet Ngundeng predicted the nature, course and outcome of the various South Sudanese civil wars, including who would lead South Sudan to independence and deserved to be a

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legitimate leader of an independent and prosperous South Sudan. At the centre of the Ngundeng prophecy and its link with the South Sudanese civil wars is the prophetic power claim by one of the major political figures in South Sudan, i.e., Dr. Riek Machar and his leadership contest first with Dr. John Garang and currently with President Salva Kiir.

In making sense of Machar's self-understanding as a messiah, 'predicted' as it were by Ngundeng, the paper draws on the concept of political culture. Political culture is, "the set of attitudes, beliefs, and sentiments which give order and meaning to a political process and which provide the underlying assumptions and rules that govern behavior in the political system". It encompasses both, "the political ideals and the operating norms of a polity" (Pye. 1968:218). As Hunt (1984:54) noted. "political symbols and rituals were not metaphors of power; they were the means and ends of power itself". Interpreting them and understanding how they are generated and how they work is thus of paramount importance. Political culture is thus the manifestation in aggregate form of the psychological and subjective dimension of politics. Prophecy is one of the major tenets of South Sudanese political culture in general and the Nuerin in particular; the country's second largest ethnic group and a major communal contender in the power struggle during the liberation movement and in independent South Sudan. As Afe Adogame noted for the nexus between religion and violence in his key note speech at the workshop "Religion and violence in contemporary Africa" on which this contribution is based, we need to pay attention to four interrelated issues: the religious concept, actors, arguments and symbols.<sup>2</sup> The religious concept refers to what aspect of religion is at play in a violent situation and type of concepts (religious or not) that emerge in a conflict that is considered to be religious. Actors refer to people (religious or not) involved in the conflict and who are using these religious concepts in what he calls religious outbidding, i.e., religious or political elites who try to outbid fellow competitors. Arguments are claims made by ideological actors in deploying the religious concepts. Symbols embed the violence-inducing religious idea or their interpretation as such.

The paper makes four interrelated arguments. First, it argues that prophecy constitutes the ideational structure of the South Sudanese civil wars and has been used to inform, animate and justify political action; as a basis of political legitimacy and mobilisation rhetoric. This partly explains why Machar has been so driven and determined to get the ultimate political prize, i.e., first to replace John Garang as the leader of the Sudan People Liberation Army (SPLA) and currently to take over the office of the presidency from his rival Salva Kiir. Understanding this presumed 'divine mandate' is important in making sense of the bitterness within which the leadership contest has been fought out at least since 1991 when factionalism had started within the SPLA. Second, the Ngundeng prophecy plays the role of a counter-hegemonic project, ironically one that harbours a hegemonic aspiration, i.e., while countering Dinka political elites' supremacist idea - the so-called Dinka domination of South Sudanese politics - Nuer political elites, mediated through the prophetic claim of Machar, also advance an ethnic divine mandate, the idea that South Sudanese political salvation could only come when it is led by a Nuer. Third, the political context for the salience of Ngundeng's prophecy is the prevailing sense of insecurity generated by half a century of civil wars, one that resonates with the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial unrest of prophet Ngundeng's time. Here the continued relevance of Ngundeng's prophecy appears not only as political

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<sup>2</sup>Afe Adogame, paper presented at the conference on "Religion and Violence", Addis Ababa, April 2016.

capital for Machar but also as a scheme of political interpretation and a project of hope for his followers. Fourth, the salience of the Ngundeng prophecy is also related to its ambiguity similar with the inherent ambiguity of religious texts and ideas that are open to (re)interpretation in changing socio-political contexts. Recent historical research on prophets has argued that prophets should be distinguished from their prophecies in that the latter are subject to "continual rediscovery" or reinterpretation not only about their meaning in the past but regarding their use as "explanations of the present" or "visions of the future" (Anderson and Johnson 1995: 1). People connect the past and the present through prophecies, which then ensured the "correctness" of their experience of current conflicts. However, this suggests that such revised interpretation of prophecies can also shape the reality of conflict.

The empirical base of the paper comes from various sources: the ethnographic fieldwork the author has made among the Ethiopian Nuer in the Gambella region since 2000; the interviews that the author made with Riek Machar and other leading Nuer political leaders in Gambella, South Sudan and Nairobi, online sources (how the relevance of the Ngundeng prophecy is debated in social media), and consultation of the major works of Douglas Johnson and Sharon Hutchinson as they relate to the Ngundeng prophecy.

The discussion in the paper is structured into five sections. Section one introduces South Sudan as a land of prophets with a focus on the greatest of all South Sudanese prophets – Ngundeng Bong. Section two examines the link between the Ngundeng prophecy and the South Sudanese civil wars in reference to the leadership contest between John Garang and Riek Machar from 1991 – 2005. Section three examines how the Ngundeng prophecy played out in the ongoing leadership contest between Salva Kiir and Riek Machar since December 2013. Section four discusses how the Ngundeng prophecy was deployed as a counter-hegemonic project referring to the discourse of Denka domination of the South Sudanese state. It is however noted that Ngundengism, as its critics would call it, also harbours a hegemonic aspiration so long as it promotes the ideology of a divine ethnic mandate for the Nuer to be rulers of South Sudan. Section five concludes with a reflection on how prophecy features in South Sudanese civil wars not only diagnostically but also in its prognosis, i.e., it explains in part how intransigence has undermined the search for a sustainable peace for the troubled South Sudan.

### South Sudan: The Land of Prophets

Prophecy is a deeply felt value that informs the religiosity of many of South Sudanese societies. This is certainly the case for Nilotic societies, particularly the Dinka and the Nuer, the country's two major ethnic groups. There is Ngundeng Bong, Wutnynag, Dak Kueth, Dengdit and Nyachol of Nuer and Dengdit of Bar El gazel, Abraham Chol and many others. Of the various Nilotic societies prophecy is most deeply rooted among the Nuer.

Nuer prophets are said to be 'seized' (*kap*) by divinities (*kuoth*, pl. *kuuth*) and are called *gok kuoth* (vessels of *kuoth*) or *gwan kuoth* (owners of *kuoth*) in the Nuer language (Evans-Prichard 1940). However, in other contexts, they are known as *yoong* (fools, crazy men, sing. *yong*). During the early colonial era in Sudan, Nuer prophets were viewed as "witchdoctors" or "magicians". They were also often called *kujur* in colloquial Arabic by the colonial government, who recognised them as being leaders who opposed colonial

rule. Thus, many *kujurs* were harshly attacked by the colonial government (Hashimoto, 2013). During the time of Sudan's two civil wars, some Nuer prophets were "politically aware" of the modern situation (Johnson 1994: 309) and they tried to maintain peace in the community by forbidding inter-communal fighting and criticising people for depending on UN food relief (e.g., Hutchinson 1996: 338-348). Nuer prophets maintained their role as bringers of peace to the community despite external interference. Their peace-making power is thought to come from their ability to interpret the prophecies of the most prominent prophet, Ngundeng Bong, who died in 1906. Ngundeng is widely considered as the greatest of all South Sudanese prophets and the most celebrated of all the prophets. He is believed to have been possessed by the divinity of Deng, the greatest of all divinities of the Nilotes with the power of life and death (Hutchinson, 2007). The prophecies of Ngundeng have been reinterpreted in the current context. Ngundeng composed many songs, and these songs and his legendary behaviour are now regarded as having prophetic value. Ngundeng's legacy has had a major influence on subsequent prophets, including the contemporary Nuer prophet, Dak Kueth. It is said that Dak has been 'seized' by the divinity of Ngundeng.

Ngundeng had a sacred genealogy. His father, Bong Can, was a *kuar muon* ('earth-master' or 'leopard skin chief'). Earth priests are a clan of indigenous spiritual leaders, who are responsible for purifying slayers who have committed acts of inter-Nuer homicide, and more generally for supporting the peaceful resolution of local feuds and fights. Ngundeng literally means 'gift of Deng', named as such due to the peculiar circumstances surrounding his birth. Nyayiel, Ngundeng's mother, is believed to be an old woman who was well beyond the age of conception. Speaking with the voice of Deng through his songs and prayers Ngundeng enunciated a social philosophy of peace which condemned inter-Nuer feuds and raids against the Nuer's neighbours. In fact, in his book, *Nuer Prophets*, Douglas Johnson (1997) calls Ngundeng a prophet of peace. Ngundeng's prophecy and link with divinity is stored not only in the various songs but also symbols. One of these religious symbols is *Bieb*, popularly called Ngundeng's "pyramid". Ngundeng built a large conical earth mound at Weideang as a symbol of conquest for the epidemic that plagued South Sudan in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Bieb* has attracted visitors from far and wide (ibid). Among the sacred objects Ngundeng used in his rites were *tony* (a brass pipe), *bull* (a small drum), *Jiop Naath* (axe) and the *dang* (a ceremonial stick or 'rod').

Ngundeng spearheaded the resistance against British colonial rule in the Nuer areas. The British administrators had to take *dang* for fear that it was his source of power. His son, Gwek, followed suit and died while fighting the British in 1926 (Johnson 1997). All subsequent Nuer prophets have modelled on Ngundeng and mimicked his prophetic practices. They have also sought to acquire his sacred relics. Wutnyang, a prominent Nuer prophet in the early 1990s, for instance, was inspired by Ngundeng and he sought to acquire his divine relics (*jiop naath*) that are believed to have been buried in Rawmenyang, in Itang district of the Gambella region in Ethiopia in 1992 (Dereje 2011). As the discussion in section three shows Macha has also devoted great effort to acquire Ngundeng's relics, as was the case with the *Dang* in 2009 upon its return from England after 80 years.

Various scholars have examined the role of Nuer prophets as peacemakers or conflict actors or both. Douglas Johnson (1997) argues that Nuer prophets were first and foremost peacemakers and overseers of a moral community. They served the same role as the Leopard Skin Chief that Evans-Pritchard described in the 1930s but appealed to a

larger pan-tribal constituency. According to Johnson, prophets protected their people against crop failure, disease and infertility. He shows how Ngundeng could organise the Nuer and the Dinka by appropriating their gods and forming a pantheon under Deng. In their discussion of contemporary Nuer prophets Hutchinson and Pendle (2015), on the other hand, argue that the Ngundeng prophecy can be invoked both in justifying violence or promoting inter-ethnic peace. They have demonstrated this through analysis of two powerful living Nuer prophets - Gatdeang Dit and Nyachol. Accordingly, Gatdeang Dit rejects all forms of violent aggression and fosters relations of peace and intermarriage with Dinka neighbours. Nyachol, on the other hand, inspires thousands of armed Nuer youth to retaliate against Dinka cattle raiders and other external threats while insisting on purification for Nuer–Nuer homicide. This paper focuses specifically on how Ngundeng prophecy is implicated in the South Sudanese civil wars. This is evident in the belief that Ngundeng predicted the Sudanese civil wars and the eventual independence of South Sudan; the influx of massive South Sudanese refugees into Gambella (Ethiopia); the tragic death of John Garang, the current (“final”) civil war, the coming of foreign troops to South Sudan and its ultimate political salvation when a Nuer becomes the president of South Sudan.

In some of the songs Ngundeng even predicted specific events such as the *Wii Wal* prophecy; the enlargement of South Sudanese traditional three provinces (Bhar Gazal, Upper Nile and Equatoria) into ten states (materialised in 1993) and the return of his *dang*. *Mi ciao thuok ke ruac noonge dangan mac thok eni nyuura*, “if you have finished with the talks (debates) bring my dang”, a prophecy which materialised in 2009. Elders say the timing of the return of dang was in accordance with this prediction. The talks could be the Niavasha peace talks in Kenya. Others say it could be the debates during the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). But they all agree that the return of dang symbolises the return of the Nuer/South Sudanese power, which they said was lost since the 1920s. The Ngundeng prophecy has gained such a political prominence among South Sudanese refugees in Kenya where there is the so-called Mini-August session at Simmers Restaurant in Nairobi central business district made up of Ngundeng Scholars nearly every day.<sup>3</sup> These discussants comprises of middle age South Sudanese historians and intellectuals giving in-depth analyses to the current political crisis in a sober and decorous manner testifying the fulfilment of the Ngundeng prophecy including the ongoing civil war since 2013. Some Nuer I talked to even read the Nuer massacre at Juba at the outset of the current civil war in the following verse of the Ngundeng song:

*laatde je ciet ka mi ca bi ranth*  
*cango wa mar ro we mar ni thaar Bieh ka a ba wa toom*

Loosely translates, “Let people talk about it as if it will not come to pass; when it explodes under Bieh it will have a very loud sound; the very day it will explode around Bieh it will have a very huge sound”. In Ngundeng songs the term *Bieh* is used not only to refer to his capital but also any major administrative centre, in this case Juba. After prophesying a great deal of suffering and internal fighting among South Sudanese, Ngundeng finally predicted a unified South Sudan under a loving and caring leadership. He predicted a united people of South Sudan, happy and who do not recognise themselves based on tribalism or the practice of tribalism. It is not yet clear whether this predicted unity is supposed to happen before or after independence. In his songs

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<sup>3</sup> <https://paanluelwel.com/2016/07/23/in-south-sudan-ngundengism-is-almost-the-equivalent-of-marxism-in-the-west/>.

Ngundeng said, “*Cia ben pal gaat ka diaal e nga bi nga ngico, cang ni Ngok bike toang cuare dual ke beri marol; gueth ce jany ke ram kel ce bi yic ni bow; jiok nyal yith tung de puar; ci gueth jany ke rol mac ce bi yic ni bow; jiok nyal yith tung de puar.*” This translates: “You have all come together, praying together all my children without bothering to know who is who; even the Ngok will participate in the building (of the nation); don’t be afraid of Jalaba’s flags; the power has been in one person, but this will not be too confusing for the world (nation?); my coloured bull’s long horns reach to the skies; the power has lasted long with Jalaba, but will not be too confusing for the world; my coloured bull’s long horns reach to the skies.”

The enduring legacy of Ngundeng and his prophecy is also evident in the emergence of the Ngundeng Church, a syncretic religiosity between the Nuer indigenous religion centred on the Ngundeng prophecy and Christianity. Although there are many Nuer Christian sceptics regarding the relevance of the Ngundeng prophecy many also not only relate to it but also fuse it with Christian prophecy.

### **The Ngundeng Prophecy About the Leadership Contest Between John Garang and Riek Machar (1991 – 2005)**

John Garang led the SPLA with an iron fist from its inception in 1983 until his tragic death in 2005, shortly after the historic peace agreement, the so-called Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between himself and Omar Al-Bashir, president of Sudan. Admired by some as one of the charismatic liberation movements in Africa others deeply resent the undemocratic way he led the SPLA. The call for political reform within the SPLA peaked in the late 1980s (Nyaba 1996). Reinforced by the loss of SPLA’s major backer president Mengistu Hailemariam of Ethiopia in 1991 after he was ousted by a coalition of ethnic-based liberation movements – the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) it ultimately led to a splinter group under the leadership of Machar. Allied with other major political leaders of the SPLA such as Lam Akol, Machar called his faction SPLA-Nassir. On his part Garang named his faction SPLA-Torit or SPLA mainstream. The two SPLA factions became involved in one of the bloodiest, what Hutchinson (2005) called, “South-on South civil war”. SPLA-Nassir launched a major attack on Bor, the hometown of Garang indiscriminately killing thousands of civilian Dinka (Nyaba, *ibid*). Garang’s SPLA Mainstream retaliated by doing the same against civilian Nuer population. Based in the Upper Nile region of South Sudan where most of the Nuer live, Garang’s retaliatory act helped Machar to frame the power struggle between the two factions in ethnic terms – an overarching frame which has ethnicised the civil wars in South Sudan ever since; as if the conflict is an identity conflict between the Dinka and the Nuer. As Machar lost some of his major non-Nuer allies he was drawn into a Nuer constituency as his major power base. This politico-military strategy is abetted by the cross-border settlement of the Nuer across the Gambella region of western Ethiopia where the Nuer also constitute an ethnic majority. It is in this political and military context that Machar probably gave a serious thought to tap into the Ngundeng prophecy as a political capital.

SPLA’s factional politics also had an ideological dimension. In fact, one of the major political differences between Garang and Machar was in defining the objective of the South Sudanese Liberation Movement. Garang advanced the idea of New Sudan – the

vision of a united and democratic Sudan.<sup>4</sup> For Garang, the South Sudanese Liberation Movement should ultimately liberate the whole of the Sudan under his leadership. Machar challenged the feasibility and desirability of the politics of unity. Instead he championed the politics of secession. In so doing, he might have drawn on the largely Nuer-based South Sudanese Liberation Movement called Anyanya II which clearly articulated succession as the objective of the South Sudanese Liberation Movement (Belete 2013; Dereje 2015). But it seems Machar might have also found a religious justification for the politics of secession in some of the Ngundeng's songs. The verse in the Ngundeng song which is at the centre of Machar's prophetic power claim and a justification for his ideological position on the political future of South Sudan was the following: *ca beera da mat kena ber roal'* (my flag cannot be combined with that of (roal) Arabs). According to the Ngundeng prophecy, Garang was just fighting something bigger than him. Ngundeng centres his message about a bearded man he terms "*Tikyualknoth*" who will lead his people but his fire is going to blast: *Tikyual kouth da bi mac da bool*. The full version of the song further throws light on Machar's prophetic power claim and a justification for him being 'on the right side of history' with his ideological correctness:

Wars would be fought and a large country [Sudan] would split into two. A heavily bearded man would relinquish power and a left-handed Nuer would raise a new flag of an independent country.

With the privilege of hind sight Machar and his followers feel they are historically vindicated when South Sudan became an independent country in 2011. The ideological orientation of Machar was explicitly stated in one of the political organisations that he set up – the South Sudan Independence Movement (SSIM). Machar's SSIM tried to justify its actions by claiming that they were the fulfilment of Ngundeng's prophecies (Johnson 2014). Notwithstanding his opportunistic alliances and peace agreements with Khartoum, such as the 1996 infamous Khartoum peace agreement, Machar often justified his power bid as the 'chosen leader' given his consistent adherence to the politics of secession as opposed to Garang's politics of unity. By 2000 Machar's fall out with Khartoum became solid and he made a rapprochement with Garang, hoping that he could still advance the politics of secession within SPLA. That he was promoted to the third man position after Garang and his deputy Salva Kiir despite the tactical alliance he made with Khartoum was crucial for his power claim after the tragic death of Garang in 2005.

A second important verse in the Ngundeng song is the identification of the characteristic features of the person who would replace the "bearded man", i.e., Garang: "A heavily bearded man would relinquish power and a left-handed Nuer would raise a new flag of an independent country". In other versions of the song additional physical features and attributes of that person are mentioned: a Nuer without the tribal mark (*gar*); gapped teeth; a descendant of a spiritual authority (Teny), and one who married a white woman. Machar appears to be a perfect candidate for Ngundeng's ideal typical ruler of South Sudan. He is left-handed. He does not carry the Nuer tribal mark in his forehead. His grandfather's name is Teny, the Western Nuer prophet who was Ngundeng's contemporary. And finally, Machar was married to Emma McCune in 1991 shortly after he split with Garang; an expatriate British aid worker in South Sudan and died in 1993.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://paanluwel.com/2011/07/24/dr-john-garangs-1987-heritage-interview-with-arop-madut/>.



*Riek Machar appearing without the Nuer tribal mark and a gap in his frontal teeth<sup>5</sup>*

From his split with Garang in 1991 and his rejoining of the SPLA in 2002 Machar followed various political and military strategies – from ethnicising factional politics, seeking tactical alliance with Khartoum, to tapping into the Ngundeng prophecy. As Hutchinson noted:

Machar turned to indigenous prophets in the hope of boosting his political legitimacy. He benefited indirectly from well-known passages of Ngundeng’s songs, which predicted that a “left-handed”, “unsacrificed” Nuer man would play a decisive role in the military fight against northern domination. The fact that Machar’s paternal grandfather had achieved regional prominence as a prophet of the divinity of Teny strengthened this spiritual association in the eyes of some supporters (Hutchinson, 2005)

Machar even entertained the possibility and political desirability of assuming the office of a *kuaar muon* (earth priest):

At one point Machar, who is a baptized Presbyterian, attempted to achieve the status of a *Kuaar muon* [...] The spiritual leaders whom Machar approached with this request however rejected it. They respectfully informed Machar that this was primarily an inherited position, which would be inappropriate for him to assume (Hutchinson, *ibid.* p.38).

Machar also enlisted the personal support of a charismatic Lak Nuer prophet called Wutnyang Gatakek shortly after his 1991 split with Garang. Wutnyang, inspired by Ngundeng and his prophetic practices, was also a military leader. He raised a formidable military force, also called the White Army that briefly took control over the town of Malakal in 1992. Wutnyang also sought to acquire Ngundeng’s relics believed to have been deposited at Rawmenyang, a village in Itang district in Gambella where he clashed with Ethiopian government forces (Dereje 2011). Wutnyang finally returned to his home town at Peak in central Upper Nile where he built a large pyramid imitating Ngundeng’s *Bieb*. Similarly, local SSIM personnel regularly sought advice about the optimal timing of their raid against the Dinka from another famous Nuer prophet Gatluak Yieh in the late 1990s (*ibid.*: 46). There was also a high-level rumour circulating that the baton carried by

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.france24.com/en/20131217-south-sudan-riek-machar-rebel-statesman-coup-leader>



Garang was magically powerful and would tell which food was poisoned and which one was safe for the leader to feast on.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Ngundeng prophecy and the South Sudanese civil war – the leadership contest between Salva Kiir and Riek Machar (2005 to the present)**

As ‘predicted’ by Ngundeng, Garang died after a tragic helicopter crash in 2005. Salva Kiir became the new leader of SPLA and Riek Machar his deputy. Despite Kiir’s so-called ‘Big tent’ policy meant to foster reconciliation and political reintegration, the different factions within the SPLA remained factions. From the start, the two never got along and rather used the CPA period (2005 – 2010) to consolidate their respective power positions (BICC, 2016). New additions to Ngundeng’s prophecy assumed public prominence, as some of the older versions were found not to be realistic, such as, “a left-handed man will raise the flag”, as it was Salva Kiir, the bearded man, not Riek the left-handed, who became the president of an independent South Sudan in 2011. One of these additions is: “*Riek da ba totd raar ka Jiom ba ruac da riet*”, which means, “a person by the name Riek will lead his people into prosperity and peace” but warned after the “Mac of *tikyual kuotb*”, the greatest of all and the final war. The ongoing deadly confrontation between forces loyal to President Salva Kiir and Riek Machar since December 2013 is believed to be the fulfilment of the Ngundeng prophecy.

Upon the tragic death of Garang, Machar was promoted as the second person within the SPLA leadership and jointly with Kiir presided over the CPA period (2005 – 2010). The relationship between Kiir and Machar had been fraught with tension from the start<sup>7</sup>; a tension which quickly grew in the events leading to the 2011 referendum and the issue of a power struggle in independent South Sudan following the result of the referendum according to which the overwhelming majority of South Sudanese voted to be independent. Salva Kiir become the president and Machar the first vice-president of independent South Sudan.

Tension peaked in June 2013 when Kiir dismissed Machar from his position as First Vice President<sup>8</sup> regarding the controversy surrounding the planned SPLA convention in December 2013. Kiir accused Machar and other senior members of his government of plotting a coup, an accusation which Machar dismissed as unfounded. The tension escalated when military forces loyal to Kiir clashed with the forces of Machar quickly leading to what is now called the Nuer massacre in the nation’s capital Juba. Machar and his allies fled from Juba and formed what has come to be known as SPLA-IO (SPLA in Opposition). This was followed by a deadly military confrontation between the forces allied with President Kiir and the SPLA-IO under the leadership of Machar. When it became clear that the SPLA-IO would prevail over the forces of Kiir President Museveni of Uganda sent in his troops to ostensibly protect Ugandan interests in South Sudan but also to rescue Kiir from his beleaguered position. A stalemate then ensued allowing the Addis Ababa-based regional block IGAD (Inter Governmental Authority for Development) to embark on the protracted peace process.

After nearly two years of a relentless peace process that also involved the

<sup>6</sup> <http://martingarang.blogspot.com/2014/02/my-god-and-my-militant-rights-games.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Wuor Joak. Major causes of the current conflict in South Sudan. <http://www.nyamile.com/major-causes-of-the-current-conflict-in-south-sudan/>.

international community the two factions finally concluded a peace agreement in August 2015. However, the implementation of this peace agreement was derailed by yet another eight months during which both factions violated the peace agreement and continued military clashes. After a concentrated pressure by the AU, IGAD and the international community it appeared both factions became ready to give peace a chance when they formed a Government of National Unity in April 2016. The Government of National Unity has however proved to be short-lived when another round of war broke out between forces loyal to Kiir and the SPLA-IO in Juba in July 2016. This time around Kiir outmaneuvered Machar by persuading senior political leaders from Machar's side to switch sides and join him, including Taban Deng, Machar's chief negotiator throughout the conflict since December 2013. Taban Deng ultimately replaced Machar as the FVP. It appeared that Machar's days were numbered when neighbouring countries endorsed the government of Kiir and recognised Taban Deng as the new FVP. Machar however has been proved to be resilient still leading a rebellion against Kiir's government, active mainly in the Upper Nile region. As in previous factional politics the confrontation between Kiir and Machar has also been interpreted with reference to the Ngundeng prophecy. In his song Ngundeng talked of a leader called 'Kiir Nyal Diing' who would lead South Sudan. Elders say it is Salva Kiir Mayardit. The name 'Kiir' would match the first name of the current president of South Sudan, but 'Nyal Diing' is probably a nick name describing Kiir – names of many dotted colours, "Kiir of many colours". Ngundeng said this Kiir will one day bring, probably bad news, to his people when he said "*Kiir Nyal Dieng be ba juoclom*" Ngundeng also said, "*Tikyualkuoth bi mac de bool*" – the flames of fire of God's long bearded man shall be widespread – some elders say it is Garang with reference to the 21 years of bitter wars. Others say it is Salva Kiir.

The failure of Machar's breakaway movement notwithstanding, after the signing of the CPA in 2005 and Machar's accidental elevation to the position of vice presidency following Garang's death, many of his followers continued to claim that Machar would be the fulfilment of the alleged Ngundeng prophecies predicting an independent South Sudan and a Nuer ruler. Machar is a baptised Presbyterian but has been proved to be playful with his divine mandate to rule an independent and prosperous South Sudan. In an interview that I had with him in his Nairobi 'tent court' in 2002, I asked Machar whether he believes in Ngundeng's prophecies. He admired Ngundeng for his "accurate" predictions of the political future of South Sudan. Instead of answering my question head on as 'yes' or 'no' Machar replied, "I am a Nuer and I respect Nuer culture, and Ngundeng prophecy is an important part of Nuer culture". In a recent interview, Machar has spoken out more clearly about Ngundeng's prophecy, including the ongoing leadership contest between him and Salva Kiir:

Ngundeng mentioned almost everything happening today. Even the war we are fighting with Kiir Nyaldiing [this is how Salva Kiir is believed to have been mentioned in Ngundeng song] was taught to us since we were young boys by our fathers. This war is Tick yual Kuothpiny war. I knew I was not to die without this happening. We count the years. We know every turn of the history. Almost all the old men in this village knew that this is the last war among South Sudanese and SalvaKiir will be conquered.<sup>8</sup>

More importantly Machar has sought to acquire Ngundeng's relics, particularly the *dang*, the sacred object identified with power. After Ngundeng died his son Guek claimed to

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.nyamile.com/2015/07/27/dr-riek-machar-the-great-ideologies-debater/>.

be seized by Deng and took possession of his father's relics, including the *dang*. Guek came into conflict with the British and was killed in 1929 and Ngundeng's relics were taken as trophies by British officers. The tony and the bull were eventually housed in the Ethnographic Museum in Khartoum and restored to the Lou Nuer by presidential order in 1978 (Johnson 2014)<sup>9</sup>. They have been kept safe by Ngundeng's descendants living near Weideang ever since. Originally, it was thought by the historian Douglas Johnson, that the *dang* was to return to its rightful owners – the descendants of Ngundeng or at least to be stored in a South Sudanese national museum. It inadvertently fell into the hands of Machar in 2009. The return of the *dang* was predicted by Ngundeng and what happened in 2009 is considered as the fulfilment of his prophecy.

At any rate that *dang* was returned in late 2009 and was symbolically important for Machar, as this was a time when he was positioning himself in the impending post-CPA leadership contest with his rival Kir.



*Machar euphorically holding Ngundeng's dang upon its return in 2009<sup>10</sup>*

Machar's actions have politicised the *dang* to such an extent that it has ceased to be considered a national historic relic. Since the new outbreak of war in South Sudan there have been reports that Machar continues to use the *dang* as a religious object to solidify a sense of Nuer entitlement and unity behind his own aspirations (Johnson, 2009). Machar held various ceremonies with the *dang* to generate political loyalty among powerful Nuer militia leaders between 2010 until his rebellion in 2013. That the return of *dang* was predicted by Ngundeng has lent greater political legitimacy to Machar's power claim. Machar made a speech that highlighted its historic moment:

Ngundeng had foretold the emergence of an independent southern Sudan and the coming referendum. It was no coincidence that the *dang* was returned on the 16th of May, the anniversary of the beginning of the revolution against the north, now National Day in South Sudan (Johnson 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Johnson. "The fate of Ngundeng's dang". <http://riftvalley.net/news/fate-ngundeng>.

While Machar celebrated the return of the *dang* by sacrificing a cow, already at Juba international airport, and signalled his personal ownership, his rival Salva Kiir was ambivalent – while acknowledging the historical importance of the return of *dang* and its symbolism for the South Sudanese Liberation Movement he also expressed concern that it might be used (by Machar?) for malevolent reasons and that ownership of the historical relic belongs to the people of South Sudan housed within a national museum:

The *dang* has been returned from United Kingdom to Juba on the historic day of the 16th May, the day when the liberation war started. The return of this holy artifact is a victory to our people as it symbolized the resistance of our people, particularly our traditional leaders [...]. Although this holy *dang* was used for war, we will urge our Nuer traditional leaders to use it for promoting peace and unity among our people.... We will keep it as an important national artifact for our national museum. I direct our Ministry of Sports and Culture to make the necessary arrangements in consultation with Nuer community to preserve this important national artifact. (ibid)

Besides, Machar has currently enlisted the active support of a famous Nuer prophet called Dak Kueth. Like the prophets before him such as Wutnyang, Dak also derives his powers from Ngundeng's prophecies (Hashimoto: 39). In fact, it is said that Dak has been 'seized' by the divinity of Ngundeng. Dak is thought to have incited several White Army soldiers to attack the Murle. He built on Ngundeng's prophecy that mentions, "Murle and Bor, just wait until I solve the problem with the Arabs. Then I will return to you." That means, after independence is achieved, problems with the Murle and Bor (Denka) will occur. In allying with Dak Machar finds a mythological articulation between Ngundeng's prophecy about his 'eventual' triumph over Kiir and the 'inevitable' war between the Nuer and the Dinka.



*A photo of Machar with Prophet Dak Kueth at his headquarter Fagak<sup>11</sup>*

Machar is not alone in being playful with his divine image. Some SPLA soldiers at the front-line became spiritual with the intention to survive attacks, and military advances toward the enemy. There were, for instance, SPLA soldiers who bragged of their purchased powers from local medicine-men, spear-masters and seers. The powers they received were thought to render bullets powerless in the event of shoot outs. No

<sup>11</sup> <https://paanluelwel.com/2016/08/05/what-is-the-legacy-of-dr-riek-machar-in-the-history-of-south-sudan/>.

force made it more explicit than the famous Mobile Task Force. This amalgam was a tactical response special unit called upon when the swiftest fire power was needed on a particular front. It was said to have been made up of soldiers with impenetrable bodies - kind of bullet-proofed skins (Aher 2014). Salva Kiir is also rumoured to possess certain powers that would make him escape any attack deemed to kill everyone. In early 1990s when he was involved in a plane crash in Western Kenya and walked away unscathed, the rumour nearly became a certainty.<sup>12</sup>

### Prophecy as a Counter-Hegemonic Project

Nuer sense of political entitlement in South Sudan not only draws on Ngundeng's prophecy but also on what they perceive as the current domination of South Sudan by the Dinka political class. Various scholars have noted the danger of tribalism in South Sudan, more so in the post-independence period when it has actively subverted the building of a nation on a more inclusive basis:

The perception of Dinka domination pervading the Sudan People Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the Sudan People Liberation Army (SPLA) by other ethnic groups is not new. But it has become increasingly marked in a country with a fragile economy, limited opportunities for employment and deep-rooted patrimonialism throughout all tiers of government. While there is a long-standing rivalry for power between the Dinka and Nuer, South Sudan's two largest tribal groups, others, such as the Equatorians, perceive both groups as monopolizing power.<sup>13</sup>

In an article entitled, "Riek Machar on the right side of history" a Nuer further depicts this perception of South Sudan being dominated by the Denka:

It is inevitably right and suitable to attribute the independence of South Sudan to Machar and necessarily ascribing democracy to him [...]. Based upon his unquestionable nationalism and patriotism in objectively choosing what works best for the citizens of this blossoming Democracy, Machar qualifies himself not only the father of this country but also the leadership best exemplary for the country Africa and indeed fits himself for the rest of the world at best [...] Did Machar win the history of the liberation struggle over Garang? I answer, yes, he won it [...] simply because Machar thought it right that to fight for self-determination consequential to the Independence- the total beneficial freedom to the people of southern Sudan, would rather work best for the common good or will of southern Sudanese. This Machar's better off thesis was opposed to Garang's below worse off thesis became the best choice during the referendum on Machar's self-determination. Garang thought it was right that to fight for unity of Sudan under new basis would rather be workable for the greater good of all marginalized Sudanese. This was or is a good idea however, unworkable. [Similarly] Machar has got a doable political ideology opposed to Kiir's. Machar's political ideology is none other than Democracy. Machar's system of governance as he already fine-tuned it, is federalism [...]. Well, Kiir's political ideology is all about *dinkocracy* or *Kiicrocacy* and this typical government is a government of

<sup>12</sup> <http://martingarang.blogspot.com/2014/02/my-god-and-my-militant-rights-games.html>.

<sup>13</sup> [Hannah Bryce. The Dangers of Tribalism in South Sudan https://www.chathamhouse.org/media/comment/view/196439](https://www.chathamhouse.org/media/comment/view/196439), 19 December 2013.

Dinka by the Dinka for the Dinka. Such *dinkocracy* is for Dinka elders, a real substitution of democracy and its definition.<sup>14</sup>

In an article entitled, “In South Sudan, Ngundengism is almost the equivalent of Marxism in the West” a Nuer commentator in a popular South Sudanese blog revealed the enduring legacy of the Ngundeng prophecy as follows:

You may have heard ideologies such as Nyayoism in Kenya, Fidelismo in Cuba, Garveyism in Jamaica and Moaism in China. Ngundengism is an indigenous political thought. If you listen keenly and look at the prevailing circumstances and the ongoing events in South Sudan since we attained independence five years ago, one must come to an agreement that ‘Ngundengism ideology’ has evolved from simple African religious faith to a complex political ideology whose cardinal objectives include *inter alia*; to restore or to change the present regime by all means available at their disposal [...] Ngundengism is almost the equivalent of Marxism. The conflicts in South Sudan including the 2013 one had already been prophesized by Ngundeng, and the victory is believed to be certain. According to the believers of the Ngundeng prophecy, in a rule based on his prophecy all citizens will get all their needs at their doorsteps and the country will be restored to a peaceful path, that there would be no need for elections or new leadership because everyone will be part and parcel of the national cake and South Sudan shall be a country for all; no one can attempt or imagine to go to forest [rebel] with an aim of overthrowing the government based on Ngundeng policies; that will be suicidal act and an affront to the Prophet. As such, there should be a necessary dictatorship.<sup>15</sup>

While countering the Nuer accusation of ‘Dinka domination’ the Dinka accuse the Nuer political class for aspiring to be, “the chosen nation” destined to rule South Sudan. For that they use the term “Ngundengism”, as the following excerpts from Dinka commentators indicate. An article entitled: “Ngundeng Bong traditional prophecy is responsible for the mess in South Sudan” reads:

Misperception, wrong ideas, illiteracy and misleading prophecies have harmed South Sudan to fall into this situation in which cannibalism is the order of the day and you cannot share ideas or trust your fellow countrymen or women to do anything in return for togetherness for nation building. To start with, the illusive prophecy has harmed our unity and the prosperity of our country from measures of consolidation repeatedly highlighted about the man who had been highly rated in the crime records of South Sudan, “*Ngundeng Bong*”, over centuries. The courtesy of the men who are claiming Ngundeng prophecies to drag people of South Sudan into senseless war over the years, is a doom illusion that will never disappear in the history of worshippers of prophets of doom. Why the *Ngundeng Bong* prophecy is all about country’s leadership of a left-handed Nuer son and wars if he was truly sent by God to inform his people about foreseen events likely to occur in future South Sudan? The insistence of Machar claims on Ngundeng prophecy to be himself predicted, is a mere tool to gain the support of the entire Nuer community to boost his bloody ambition (presidency) which now

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<sup>14</sup> Gatkuoth Lok. <https://paanluelwel.com/2015/04/16/dr-machar-at-the-right-side-of-south-sudan-history-and-his-opponents-at-the-reverse/>.

<sup>15</sup> Dak Buoth. “In South Sudan, Ngundengism is almost the equivalent of Marxism in the West”, Posted: July 23, 2016 by PaanLuelWël in Columnists.

seem impossible after the July 2016 fighting in the presidential palace.<sup>16</sup>

In an article entitled “Dr. Riek Machar and the Politics of Ngundengism in South Sudan” posted a month before the outbreak of the December 2013 civil war a critic of Machar shares a similar hostility to “Ngundengism” as one of the drivers of violence in South Sudan:

We need to be honest to history if we want to shape the future. Riek Machar started his leadership as a Nuer leader in South Sudan, and he is believing in that. The grassroots support that he talks about is based on Ngundengism, a belief promoted by Riek that his leadership was predicted by Ngundeng. Before South Sudan independence, the Nuer in the villages were made to believe that Salva Kiir would be slapped to death in Khartoum and Riek Machar would take over as the president. When that happened, Dinka would be slaves forever. When Salva Kiir did not die before 2011, Riek Machar came up with new propaganda that Salva Kiir would die like John Garang and his deputy (Riek Machar) would take over. Riek Machar is not the vice-president right now, and the new propaganda among the Nuer is that he would defeat Salva Kiir in the SPLM Convention and the Dinka would prevent him to lead the SPLM party creating a war between the Nuer and Dinka. Riek Machar’s supporters believe that in 2015 election, a war would take place between the Nuer and Dinka if Riek Machar does not become the President. They said that “prophet Ngundeng predicted that war”. They believe that after the war, the Nuer will win, and Riek Machar would be crowned as a leader for life. When you see Riek Machar talking about democracy within the SPLM, he is talking about it in the context of Ngundengism. He believes that once he fails to achieve the chairmanship of the SPLM party, then, his supporters will start a war. That is what Riek Machar believes in.<sup>17</sup>

The debate over the role of prophecy in the South Sudanese civil war is still raging in social media criticising Machar’s bid for power with an Ngundeng ticket:

Riek Machar needs to abandon the concept of using tribal war to achieve his political objective. If he wants to become a president, he will get it through peaceful means, NOT the use of Nuer supremacists to bring him to power by annihilating Dinka. The people of South Sudan need to know whether Riek Machar is a Nuer prophet or a South Sudan politician. He is now the custodian of Ngundeng’s *dang* and he refused *dang* to be handed over to the family of Ngundeng. That shows that Riek still believes in the concept of war against Dinka to come to power as he believed in 1991 that the killing of Bor Denka was prophesied by Ngundeng. If Riek is a South Sudan politician, let him forget Ngundeng’s *dang*. But if he chooses to be a Nuer prophet, then, let him move to Bieh of Ngundeng to start practicing as a Nuer prophet.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Thon Atem Ayiei. “Ngundeng traditional prophecy entirely responsible for political mess in South Sudan with Dr. Riek Machar insistence on this ideology”.

<sup>17</sup> Gordon Buay Malek. Dr. Riek Machar and the Politics of Ngundengism in South Sudan. Posted: January 3, 2015 by PaanLuelWël. <https://paanluelwel.com/tag/gordon-buay-malek/>.

<sup>18</sup> <https://paanluelwel.com/.../dr-riek-machar-and-the-politics-of-ngundengism-in-south-sudan>.

## Outlook

South Sudan is one of the most conflict-ridden parts of the world. This conflict has colonial roots; a reflection of the crisis of nation building in post-colonial Sudan, and power struggle among the political class of South Sudan; however they would like to represent it in ethnic terms. It is also a major contention of this paper that prophecy in general and the invocation of the Ngundeng prophecy in particular has been implicated in the South Sudanese civil wars constituting its ideational structure. Prophecy among the Nuer of South Sudan is a living tradition. In recent conflicts prophets have played a part both in mobilisation for war and in making peace. Historically, the most celebrated of the Nuer prophets was Ngundeng Bong, whose pronouncements—preserved in songs widely known in South Sudan—are thought by many to have foretold current events in the country. Ngundeng’s songs will continue to inspire interpretation. The songs are often in obscure language, making references to now forgotten contemporary events that can be reinterpreted to apply to current events. These comparisons are inevitable if South Sudan’s present continues to resemble the disturbed and violent times in which Ngundeng lived.

Inadvertently connected to the fulfilment of one of Ngundeng’s prophecies – the return of the *dang* – the historian Douglas Johnson has become an ardent critic of Machar’s prophetic power claim and the implication of this for a peaceful South Sudan when he wrote: “Let us not even try to identify the figure in Ngundeng’s prophecy that peace would be brought by a left-handed man. Ngundeng was left-handed. So is Abel Alier, the leader of the government delegation that negotiated the Addis Ababa Agreement. Some people hope it might mean Riek Machar. But US president George Bush and Barak Obama are also left-handed. So, take your pick, there are enough left-handed men and women to go around.”<sup>19</sup> Such a normative stance threatens to undermine an analytical rigour or misses the social construction of reality.

Without endorsing Machar’s prophetic claim, it is imperative to understand the claim structure and how it is made plausible in the eyes of the believers, including Machar’s pragmatic mix of being a trained political strategist and a politician who makes use of a spiritual repertoire such as the enduring legacy of the Ngundeng prophecy which features as a political capital – as long as it is deployed to ease mobilisation. If the democratic deficit of the SPLA leadership continues to plague South Sudan alternative bases of political legitimacy including prophecies will continue to thrive not only in the form of its instrumentalisation and religious outbidding by political leaders but also as a form of sense-making, human security device and a solace for ordinary Nuer men and women as they found themselves in a situation of life threatening insecurity.

The paper also argued that the political salience of the Ngundeng prophecy relates to the crisis of the South Sudanese national identity. Many Nuer and other non-Denka South Sudanese perceive South Sudan as a polity dominated by the Denka political class, which is also referred to by its critic as “*Dinkacracy*”. Many Denka reject this claim and rather point to “*Ngundegism*” as a Nuer political project of domination of the South Sudanese state. In that sense *Dinkacracy* and *Ngundengism* are mutually constituted, instancing a hegemonic and counter-hegemonic project respectively. The latter also harbours a hegemonic aspiration as long as the centre of the counter power claim is

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<sup>19</sup> Douglas Johnson. 2012. “What did Ngundeng really do?” [www.upper Nile Times.net](http://www.upper Nile Times.net), March 22, 2012.



based on an ethnic divine mandate to rule, a sentiment which is generated and reinforced by Machar's prophetic power claim. South Sudan rather needs inclusive ideologies as it struggles to avert its lethal civil wars. In so doing it is hoped that its political leaders also remember the more constructive side of the Ngundeng prophecy, such as nation building that eschews tribal parochialism.

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