

Ritual Formation of Peaceful Publics: Sacrifice and Syncretism in South Sudan (1991-2005)*

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Abstract

During the most violent days of Sudan's civil war in the 1990s, a peacemaking initiative known as People-to-People Peacemaking emerged to address ongoing conflict perpetuated by rival Dinka and Nuer rebel movements. The ritual of bull sacrifice, a central feature of the peace process, sealed peace between Nuer and Dinka and formed public alliances between church leaders and kinship authorities represented by elders and chiefs. Joining indigenous and Christian practices in a single ritual space allowed inclusive participation by a variety of actors, many of whom interpreted the ritual quite differently. Utilizing various methods of ritual analysis, this essay suggests that a seemingly religious ritual enabled new forms of political action, previously unavailable through rebel movements' politics or kinship politics. While rebel leaders often perpetuated political power by manipulating ethnic sentiments, elders and Christian leaders developed forms of politics based on peaceful coexistence and shared identity between Dinka and Nuer.

Keywords: sacrifice, South Sudan, ritual, People-to-People Peacemaking, syncretism

During a peace dialogue held in 1999 between the Dinka and Nuer of South Sudan, a chief addressed the crowd regarding the significance of a *Mabior*, or white bull, ritual sacrifice.¹ 'You, Dinka and Nuer,' he said, 'I caution you to be very careful of what you have observed in *Mabior*. It was very wild. I have never seen a bull as wild as that bull. *Mabior* will take revenge on

anyone who revives these conflicts. *Mabior* died for our reconciliation' (New Sudan Council of Churches 2002, 62). As the opening event of the peace conference, the ritual made possible subsequent dialogues for peace. Prior to other action, the bull sacrifice ritual opened a path to peace by allowing a space before God in which Dinka and Nuer could speak of the wrongs committed against one another and find social and spiritual cleansing. The sacrifice ritual thus enabled activities like dialogue, confession, and restitution. This essay offers interpretations of the ritual event with particular attention to its subsequent implications for the region's politics. By employing various methods of ritual analysis, it shows how ritual sacrifice allowed new forms of coexistence between Nuer and Dinka. The work argues that a syncretistic ritual, utilizing indigenous Dinka and Nuer practices as well as Christian practices, formed peaceful publics that practiced politics of inclusion and coexistence over and against politics of ethnic exclusion as perpetuated by rebel leaders.

The essay offers four ritual interpretations of bovine sacrifice that, taken together, suggest ritual played a vital part in forming these peaceful publics. Because the ritual itself drew from various cultural sources, employing various methods proves the most compelling way to interpret the ritual. The various methods each approach the ritual from a different angle, highlighting the textured layering of indigenous and Christian practice as well as the multivalent nature of the bovine sacrifice. The ritual proves too complex for a single interpretation: a pluralistic ritual requires plural methods of interpretation. The first three interpretations employ classic methods that emphasize the ritual's perceived meaning and its symbolic qualities. These three interpretations show the syncretistic nature of the ritual within the religiously plural environment of South Sudan. Syncretism, defined as phenomena of contested religious mixture, allowed participants of varying and overlapping religious traditions to meaningfully participate

in bull sacrifice.² The fourth ritual interpretation, drawing from Catherine Bell's materialist approach, reveals the subtle power at play in the objects, movements, and spacing of the ritual. Such power dynamics depict a politicized ritual that challenged the exclusionary politics of ethnicity employed by many rebel leaders. The ritual allowed new forms of political participation based on cooperation and overlapping visions of peace between elders, chiefs, and Christian leaders: kinship authorities and church leaders thereby formed new publics. Following Harri Englund's definition, public is here defined as 'an audience whose members are not known to those who address it in order to make claims' (2011, 8-9). The peaceful publics constituted audiences and relations between strangers that formed wide constituencies of Dinka, Nuer, and others seeking alternatives to rebel politics based on ethnic exclusion.³ The publics were peaceful in that they joined persons oriented toward peaceful coexistence into a political constituency. These constituents worked for peace even if they could not always achieve it, given the ongoing challenges of violence in the region.

Bovine Sacrifice and its Religious Interpretations

From 1983 until the signing of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), the military conflict between the Sudan government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) was one of Africa's longest and most brutal civil wars. The war proved so devastating to the southern region that, when given a referendum for independence from Sudan in January 2011, nearly 99 percent of votes counted were for independence. South Sudan became its own nation-state on July 9, 2011 and the SPLM/A became the Government of South Sudan, transitioning from a rebel movement to a national government. Throughout the civil war, however, the southern region harbored deep internal conflicts as well—recently reignited in the

military strife of South Sudan that began in December 2013. Especially in the 1990s, thousands died in south-south conflict as the Dinka-led SPLM/A met resistance from other armed groups who had broken ranks with it. Nuer general Riek Machar split from the SPLM/A in 1991, with more defections following in subsequent years. During the 1990s and 2000s ethnicity became a military strategy for consolidating political power among rebel commanders.

In order to address such conflict, the New Sudan Council Churches (NSCC) initiated a peacemaking process in 1997 that intentionally synthesized longtime peacemaking practices of Nuer and Dinka with Christian practices of forgiveness, public confession, and reconciliation. Called People-to-People Peacemaking, this process gathered elders, chiefs, religious leaders, and political authorities in a common space to address and overcome the brutal Dinka-Nuer conflicts. People-to-People Peacemaking conferences generally began with a ritual bull sacrifice, followed by days of meetings between elders and indigenous religious leaders who recounted crimes committed against one another and sought restitution and reconciliation. The process culminated in the Wunlit Peace Conference of 1999, which brought together Dinka of the eastern Bahr-el-Ghazal region and Nuer of western Upper Nile (the same conference in which the chief above shared his statement on the *Mabior*). The meeting proved a watershed event for Dinka and Nuer relations in years to come, while also instigating peace processes in other regions of South Sudan up to the present. While some scholars have tracked the history of People-to-People Peacemaking and its implications for peace and security studies, this essay offers ritual analysis of bovine sacrifice and its public role in forming social collaboration between Christian leaders and Southern Sudanese elders, indigenous religious leaders, and chiefs.⁴

In 2004 I witnessed a People-to-People Peacemaking ritual during a peace celebration in the town of Rumbek, South Sudan.⁵ This particular celebration, held during ongoing negotiations

that led to the CPA, celebrated the prospect of national peace and sought to enhance Dinka-Nuer coexistence around Rumbek. While Rumbek is predominantly Dinka, numerous Nuer lived nearby, having fled from past violence in their home regions. As with all NSCC-sponsored bull sacrifices, the participants agreed to follow the ritual practices of the host community, in this case Dinka. The ritual's details described below were largely the same as other People-to-People peace gatherings held in Dinka territories (NSCC 2002 and 2004; Ouko 2004).

On a hot, dusty day in the town square, Dinka religious leaders gathered with priests from the Catholic and Episcopal (Anglican) churches. Townspeople and visitors alike congregated, along with women from the Episcopal Church's Mothers Union. Everyone assembled around a pristine *Mabior*, who awaited ritual slaughter. A Catholic bishop opened the ceremony with prayer: 'God has decided to give us peace. ... God wants us to make Sudan a home for peace'. A local authority from the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement offered opening words of welcome by expressing the movement's commitment to peace. A Southern Sudanese Anglican priest read from the book of Psalms:

Bring us back, O God our Savior,
and stop being displeased with us!
Will you be angry with us forever?
Will your anger never cease?
Make us strong again,
and we, your people, will praise you.
Show us your constant love, O Lord,
and give us your saving help. (Psalm 85)

Another young South Sudanese Anglican priest sporting sunglasses played a bass drum to accompany singing women. Children from a Catholic primary school choir sang of hope: 'I am the hope of my people, I am the healer'. The ritual included a variety of different languages: the bishop spoke in English, priests in Dinka, English, and Arabic, while other Dinka and Nuer participants in their respective languages. Christian prayers opened the sacrifice ritual, while indigenous Dinka religious invocations accompanied and followed the ritual event.

The ritual moved toward the act of sacrifice as indigenous Dinka practices of intercession intermingled with Christian prayers and blessings. Dinka religious leaders nimbly moved around the *Mabior*. These ritual leaders, called spear-masters or masters of the fishing spear, pushed their long weapons toward the bull to taunt him, then pulled back. They repeated their taunting over and over as the bull became increasingly agitated—seemingly aware of his pending fate. The spear-masters spoke to the bull, telling him of his mission. His sacrifice would bind peace between the Dinka and the Nuer; he would carry a message to God and the spirits of those who had died that the long conflict between these neighboring peoples had ended. As the ritual drama developed, women ululated while holding Christian crosses in their hands. Meanwhile Nuer and Dinka elders and chiefs vividly threatened anyone who perpetuated the violent conflict between Dinka and Nuer: such perpetrators would follow the deadly path of the bull. Crowded concentric circles formed around the *Mabior*: spear-masters constituted an immediate circle, dancers and drummers surrounded them, and casual onlookers formed the final band. As the bull tired, seemingly entranced, young men wrestled him to the ground, some taking hold of his horns, others his feet. They held him in place as a spear-master cut his throat. Blood sprayed on young men and spear-masters, flowing out from the bull onto parched ground. Participants celebrated—some smiled, others laughed, while some on the outskirts calmly conversed.

While Dinka led, a ritual like this one carried sufficient similarities to Nuer sacrifices for Nuer to recognize and acknowledge many actions of the ritual. Both communities highly value their cattle; in this regard, classic ethnographies like those of E. E. Evans-Pritchard on the Nuer and Godfrey Lienhardt and Francis Deng on the Dinka hold up quite well. Cattle are ‘the most precious thing [Nuer] possess’, according to Evans-Pritchard, while Dinka hold a certain ‘moral closeness and interdependence’ between cattle and human beings, according to Lienhardt

(Evans-Pritchard 1956, 248; Lienhardt 1961, 21). Both communities use oxen for many other sacrifices—Nuer use an ox for a wedding sacrifice, for example—but require bull sacrifice to resolve blood feuds (Evans-Pritchard 1956). Ritual details of their sacrifices do differ, however: in Dinka rituals the bull is attached to a stake in the ground and is killed by slitting its throat, while in Nuer ceremonies the bull roams free and is killed by a single well-placed strike to the heart. At a People-to-People Peacemaking conference in Waat, for example, a Nuer spiritual leader *kuaar muon* or earth-master carried out the ritual sacrifice, slaying the bull with a single jab.⁶ Yet both communities see their rituals as quite flexible: Lienhardt speaks of ‘local variation, change, and freedom’ in Dinka ritual action and Evans-Pritchard writes, ‘Nuer are more interested in purpose than in details of procedure’ (Lienhardt 1961: 265, Evans-Pritchard 1956, 212). Thus Nuer and Dinka see sufficient commonality in their rituals to view the other communities’ ritual actions as efficacious. How, then, might they interpret such ritual acts?

The first and most common interpretation of participants is an indigenous one, by which the bull sacrifice binds peace among erstwhile opponents by allowing a divinely sanctioned space of mutual accountability. From this space, opponents can express wrongs committed against one another and seek reconciliation and restitution. By this interpretation, the bull carries multiple functions: it embodies the raging conflict, it carries messages to God and the spirits of those who died, it serves as an offering to those who have died, and its death threatens those who break the peace (Ouko 2004). The feast following the sacrifice then provides opportunity for opposing parties to eat together, as a beginning of their expression to overcome past strife. One civic leader in Rumbek describes it this way:

Traditionally a bull can be slaughtered. This is a sacrifice that will cement blood relationship, that will address itself to God, [saying] that we have abandoned the war, we have abandoned our quarrel, we are now brothers again. ... This bull ... is an offering to the dead: the blood that pours out from the bull is an oath that if you fight again this blood will not leave you. (Elijah Malok in *The Blood of the Bull*, 2004)

Malok's account is concise and representative of many Dinka accounts. First, he notes that it 'cements' blood relationship between former foes, making them 'brothers again'. Here bovine blood carries a healing quality, one that counteracts the polluting quality of human blood (Ouko 2004; Leonardi 2011). While human bloodshed had contaminated relationships between Nuer and Dinka, bovine blood heals such contamination. The blood also serves as 'an oath' to God and fellow human beings. Those who participate in the ritual promise to end the atrocities committed against one another; if they do not, they risk their own death. Julia Duany, participant in other People-to-People Peacemaking events, describes this oath: 'A curse is placed on any who partake of the Mabior's sacrifice and later break the oath for peace. ... It is a very serious curse: it is a curse of death' (qtd. in Redekop 2007, 78). Malok also describes the sacrifice as an 'offering' to the dead, that is, a way of appeasing the spirits of those who have died in previous conflicts. Such bovine sacrifices entail a certain equivalence between bull and human: just as many humans died in ethnic warfare between Dinka and Nuer, so this bull serves as a collective sacrifice for the many who died before him. The feast continues to bind the people to one another. The NSCC goes so far as to say 'the meat of the bull acts as a sacrament, which feeds the spirit of these people as they eat. It blesses the people gathered and sanctifies their mission for reconciliation' (2002, 61). On a symbolic level, the ritual is a model of past strife as embodied in the bull's struggle, and a model for overcoming conflict through taking oaths of peace to God and through seeking atonement and restitution with those who died (Geertz 1966).

The ritual interpretations offered above from participants in NSCC-sponsored peace rituals also closely align with classic ethnographic literature. Evans-Pritchard (1956) and Lienhardt (1961) both speak of bull and human equivalency in rituals such as this one. Evans-Pritchard speaks of the bull sacrifice as expiation for human wrongs, while Lienhardt writes,

‘The death of the [bovine] victim is explicitly the source of life to the people’ (1961, 296).⁷ They similarly speak of ritual participants becoming bound to one another in peace, despite their past conflict. Such sacrifice enables ‘normal social relations to be resumed’ among Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1956, 293), while among the Dinka ‘those attending the ceremony are most palpably members of a single undifferentiated body, looking towards a single common end’ (Lienhardt 1961, 233). Evans-Pritchard would disagree with the NSCC’s assessment of the significance of the feast, however. While the sacrifice itself is a place of divine communication between God and human beings, the feast would not be considered a sacred meal. ‘Those who eat the flesh are not thought to gain spiritual strength by doing so,’ he writes. ‘It might be held that the juices of the cucumber [another sacrificial object] and occasionally the chyme of a beast, have a sacramental use in the sacrificial situation, but the same could not be maintained of the flesh of animal victims’ (1956, 274). Indeed, the NSCC’s assessment shows how ritual interpretations vary and change over time: for some Christian ritual actors, the feast resembled—though did not replicate—the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist. Either way, the feast of the ritual enhances its efficacy as participants engage one another interpersonally through the shared feasting. Human hatred has been carried into the earth with the blood of the bull; the ritual has enabled a space before God that invites people to safely recount wrongs committed against one another, to seek recompense and rapprochement.

Meanwhile, Christian churches’ relationships with this peace ritual have been complicated and remain unsettled. Some pastors feel that Christians should not participate in bull sacrifices, while others offer nuanced reinterpretations of the ritual. Some Nuer and Dinka Christians reject the ritual outright, arguing it arises from pre-Christian sources and thereby detracts from Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross as the final sacrifice for human sin.⁸ Pastors who

oppose such sacrifices often cite the book of Hebrews in the New Testament, which contrasts sacrifices offered ‘day after day’ in ancient Jewish temple rituals with Christ offering ‘a *single* sacrifice for sins’ (Hebrews 10: 11-12). However, many Christians support the bull sacrifice, reinterpreting the event in light of Christian affirmations. Christians participated in the rituals I witnessed and Christian leaders carried positions of significant authority. Not only did Christians offer prayers, scripture readings, and songs as in the event described above, they organized the very peace conferences at which such rituals took place. Indeed, many chiefs, elders, and women present at People-to-People conferences identified themselves as Christians and participated without any hesitation in the ritual and the feast that followed. Many pastors also participated in both the ritual and the feast, thus cementing their inclusion in the ‘undifferentiated body’ of the ritual. I label the two most prominent Christian reinterpretations discussed below as ritual sublimation and sacrificial prototype.

According to ritual sublimation, our second ritual interpretation overall, the church accepts the ritual because it determines the sacrifice is an appropriate expression of peace not substantially at odds with its own vision of peace based in Christian theology. This does not imply, however, that the church accepts the ritual on the indigenous terms described above. Instead, the church sublimates the ritual, giving it a ‘higher’ purpose than its original intention by the ritual actors. Msgr. Caesar Mazzolari, former Roman Catholic Bishop of Rumbek (originally from Italy), offers a precise explanation:

The church has adopted many signs and symbols—singing and dancing—which become spontaneous for our people, to express that we are uplifting, even sublimating, the concept of their reconciliation, making God the center, the giver of mercy, the giver of forgiveness, the one who really is the author of reconciliation. ... [The ritual] is an indicator of our intention to forgive one another. (*The Blood of the Bull*, 2004)

Notice the careful language of the bishop to avoid direct association with certain elements of the ritual: while the church is ‘adopting’ certain signs and symbols, it is not arguing for their ritual

efficacy in the same way as the ritual participants above.⁹ The church uplifts and sublimates a concept of reconciliation that is not entirely its own—‘the concept of their reconciliation’, the bishop says—and offers it up to God with the church serving as intermediary between God and the indigenous practice. As intermediary, the church takes ownership of the ritual before God and offers it to God, yet within the church’s own understanding of reconciliation. We see this transition from indigenous to Christian terminology in Mazzolari’s move to Christian language of mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation. In sublimating the ritual, Christian spirituality moves to the center of the event. By this interpretation, the church does not simply sanctify something formerly considered ‘pagan’; rather, it views the sacrifice as already an offering to the one God, an action seeking atonement for past sins—albeit carried out in ways unfamiliar to the Christian tradition. In that the ceremony aims toward peace, the spear-masters and other ritual actors are carrying out an act centered in the Christian God because this God is the author of all reconciliation and peace, even if spear-masters do not necessarily conceive of the ritual this way. Thus Christians can participate in the bull sacrifice without necessarily being troubled by elements such as prayers to deceased spirits. The bishop could open the ceremony with prayer because the Christian God accepts the ritual insofar as it promotes peace and reconciliation between human beings.

According to the third interpretation, sacrificial prototype, the church appreciates the sacrifice of the bull because it serves as a prototype for comprehending Jesus’ own sacrificial death. In the indigenous interpretation of the ritual above, the bull serves as a sacrifice made for wrongs of the past—such as killings based on ethnicity and abduction of women and children—while also opening up new possibilities of living peacefully together. Language of sacrifice for past wrongs that allows peaceful relations with one’s neighbors would sound familiar to

Christian ears. For Christians, Christ takes on the sins of human beings on the cross and allows humans to live at peace because sin no longer inhibits humanity's relationships with God and with one another. The bull ritual sets the stage for the message of Christianity. As one Christian pastor active with the NSCC told me, 'Christ is a sacrifice, the bull is a sacrifice. Let's not add confusion where we do not need to'. He was not implying strict equivalence between the bull and Christ but rather substantial similarity. Both sacrifices cover human wrongs, though the bull sacrifice covers specific wrongs limited to one period of time and one human locality, while Christ's sacrifice covers human sin across time and place. This Christian leader would likely agree with Godfrey Lienhardt's assessment of Dinka acceptance of Christian atonement: 'The doctrine of redemption in Christian theology should present less difficulty [for Dinka] than some other doctrines, since the notions of a kind of redemption and vicarious suffering are embedded in their own thought' (1961, 238). Like the ritual sublimation interpretation, this view does not accept that pre-Christian ritual practices are inherently evil; rather it views God as present in those practices, with God coming to dwell in a new way with the advent of Christianity in this cultural context. Thus an Anglican priest read from Psalm 85 invoking God to look beyond human sin and bring humans back to God's self—'bring us back, O God our savior'. By choosing this Psalm, the Anglican priest vocalized the similarity between the bull sacrifice and Christ's actions since both sacrifices seek atonement and ask God to cease displeasure with humans' wrongful actions.

Before moving to a fourth ritual interpretation, note that the syncretistic character of the ritual allows each of these interpretations to serve as plausible accounts of the same event. Syncretism allowed participation by people of the varying—and at times overlapping—traditions represented above, thereby forming a ritualized collective amid differing accounts of the ritual

event. While many Christians rejected intercessions to the spirit world, they valued the ritual's emphasis on peace through sacrifice and thus felt comfortable participating. Many Christian pastors participated in the ritual because they reinterpreted the event and thus saw no theological dissonance in their association with it. These pastors acknowledged that their participation could be controversial or contested—thus syncretistic in the sense used in this essay—but theological interpretations like ritual sublimation and sacrificial prototype justified their participation in the ritual while also allowing them to participate in commensal acts like the feasting that followed. Meanwhile some non-Christian Dinka and Nuer would not agree with Christian interpretations of the ritual. For them, the ritual promotes peace without having to gesture toward anything beyond itself, as in ritual sublimation and sacrificial prototype interpretations. The flexibility of the ritual thus became a political virtue: it could bind people together in a common space and allow for communal acts like feasting, despite differing interpretations.

Some ritual participants, however, did not view the religious mixture as contested; for them, the religious mixture could be interpreted more as synthesis than as syncretism. In such synthesis, Christianity and indigenous religious practices constitute a spiritual whole that need not be conflictual. Women danced by the bull and spoke of him while carrying Christian crosses in their hands. Many participants did not work within clean metaphysical distinctions between indigenous spirituality and Christianity; rather, as they engaged in the ritual they drew from these various sources that together constituted both individual and collective identities. The ritual was thus both syncretistic and synthesized: for some the mixture was contested, for others the mixture blended into a religious whole.¹⁰ Overall, the ritual exemplified what Lamin Sanneh, among others, identifies as African pluralism, that is, the ability of African kinship polities to

incorporate widely different cultural practices in a single political realm with tolerance and diversity (Sannah 1997).

Overcoming Ethnic Exclusion through Ritualized Politics

Bovine sacrifice not only employed syncretism and synthesis in religious ritual, it also enhanced the authority of elders, chiefs, and church leaders while countering violence perpetuated by rival rebel groups. A fourth ritual interpretation, drawing on Catherine Bell's method of ritual analysis, offers an avenue into understanding how People-to-People Peacemaking's bull sacrifices helped refigure politics in South Sudan.¹¹ The rituals and peacemaking dialogues of People-to-People Peacemaking revived the authority of indigenous leaders, increased the political prestige of church leaders, and challenged the hegemonic power of rebel leaders who employed authority in a violent and statelike fashion. After discussing the fourth ritual interpretation, this section then examines specific ways in which People-to-People Peacemaking both responded to and altered the changing political landscape of the region.

Material objects and the movement of bodies in the ritual displayed the power wielded by varying participants, from ritual leaders to peripheral figures. The spears of the spear-masters showed their age-old authority and carried memories of past rituals of reconciliation. Chiefs and elders stood near the center of the ritual action and vocalized the meaning of the ritual, displaying their longtime authority.¹² The Catholic bishop's regal apparel, the crosses carried by Christian women, and the clerical dress of Anglican priests exhibited Christian authority. Christian women carrying crosses while dancing by the bull made visible overlapping commitments to peace in Christianity and indigenous religion. Meanwhile, rebels provided security for the event, vividly displaying their power through the AK-47s casually slung over the

shoulders of young soldiers. At the start of the ritual, various leaders moved onto a small raised platform—itsself a display of power and authority—in order to greet participants. Rebel authorities offered a brief opening greeting from the platform and Christian leaders offered prayers and readings from Christian scriptures. Yet the power of rebel leaders became noticeably constrained: after their initial greeting, they moved to the periphery of the ceremony. After opening formalities, the spear-masters exerted the most control of the ritual as they manipulated the movements of the raging bull. They inspired the movements of dancers, singers, and drummers; determined the ritual's length; and decided what happened to the meat after the sacrifice. Spatial dimensions of the ritual displayed authority as well. The bull figured at the center of the ritual with spear-masters immediately surrounding him; outside the circle of spear-masters the chiefs, priests, and women of the Mothers Union gathered, with the remaining ritual participants surrounding them. Yet those at the center of ritual did not carry sole authority over the event; participants negotiated their own authority by deciding what songs to sing, what drumbeats to play, and when to ululate, all of which influenced the pace and character of the ritual.

Such reordering of authority within bovine sacrifices asserted a social ordering that promoted peace while resisting rebel hegemony. Bovine sacrifices were not only religious ceremonies along the lines of the first three ritual interpretations above; in expressing alternative modes of authority they were political as much as religious. These rituals, through their wide participation and focus on reconciliation, expressed a social order of inclusive politics as practiced for years by Dinka and Nuer. Localized political groupings of Nilotics like Nuer and Dinka not only form around agnatic ties, but also around the ability to incorporate outsiders into the moral community through, for example, marriage or ritual acts (Johnson 1991). Nuer and

Dinka blend agnatic kinship ties with other connections developed through sharing residence in common lands, expressed in the shared concept *cieng* (Deng 1972; Evans-Pritchard 1951). Forming a Nilotic moral and political community thus entails ‘a willingness to share, give, loan, and accept compensation for wrongs’—the very values expressed in bovine sacrifice (Lienhardt, qtd. in Johnson 1994, 56). Such inclusive political structures, which had lost considerable authority to rebel leaders as they set up their own administrations, regained their former status through sacrifice rituals and People-to-People dialogues. For Christian leaders, meanwhile, the centrality of peace in the ritual portrayed a vision of peaceful politics that aligned with Christian social teaching, as in the bishop’s invocation above: ‘God has decided to give us peace. ... God wants us to make Sudan a home for peace’. The rituals included rebel leaders, yet did not provide them the political authority they enjoyed in other social circumstances such as military events or NGO conferences.

Bell argues that such power dynamics prove crucial to interpreting ritual: ‘Ritualization is first and foremost a strategy for the construction of certain types of power relationships effective within particular social organizations’ (1992, 197). Bovine rituals thus expressed a social arrangement in which political power was not solely in the hands of rebel leaders but shared by various actors across South Sudan such as chiefs and church leaders. Such reshaping of the social hierarchy was not limited to the ritual, however. For Bell, the authority expressed in ritual extends beyond the event—participants become ritualized actors habituated into the ritual’s power dynamics. It is not that rituals put figures like spear-masters and pastors in authority for a limited period of time, only to lose such authority in the mundane non-ritualized life that followed. The bovine ritual was less a liminal space than an event that set up ‘hierarchical schemes’ extending into other aspects of social existence (1992, 104). The power dynamics that

challenged rebel hegemony spread beyond the ritual to the events that followed: participants further secured their connections through shared feasting, they built trust through peacemaking dialogues, and they consolidated peace through shared covenants. Once People-to-People conferences came to a close, participants carried their ‘hierarchical schemes’ into the political life of their home regions.

Thus public alliances were formed through People-to-People Peacemaking. Particularly for church leaders and indigenous leaders who did not possess the authority of physical force like the SPLM/A, Bell suggests ritual to be a highly effective means of wielding power:

‘Ritualization is the way to construct power relations when the power is claimed to be from God, not from military might or economic superiority’ (1992, 116). The ritual not only sought ‘the production of ritualized agents,’ in Bell’s words (1992, 221), but the production of ritualized collectives. Shared bull sacrifice could turn formerly separate individuals into cohesive groups wielding political power. In the words of the NSCC, the ritual not only ‘transform[ed] people’s identity’—or produced ritualized agents, in Bell’s conception—but it also ‘create[d] new shared identities for people in conflict’ (2004a, 64).

Such shared identities challenged the politics of rebel movements, particularly those who consolidated their military strength by appealing to divisive ethnic sentiments. In the 1990s and 2000s, many rebel leaders employed what Sharon Hutchinson and Jok Madut Jok call ‘the militarisation of ethnicity’ (2002, 84). Rebel leaders exploited and enhanced ethnic sentiments in order to increase the viability of their own movements. When Nuer leader Riek Machar split from the Dinka-dominated SPLM/A in 1991, it led to rival factions that exploited ethnic identity in order to seek political power, whether in the SPLM/A or otherwise. Nuer and Dinka alike described how ethnic identities were distinct but fluid before the 1990s, they frequently

intermarried and emphasized their common ancestral heritage. Skirmishes over cattle took place, but not on a vast scale because aggressors generally used spears rather than AK-47s. Hutchinson and Jok chronicle the shift from a permeable sense of identity to a rigid ethnic one. Ethnic slurs about Dinka and Nuer increased in the 1990s, Dinka called Nuer ‘unruly’ while considering themselves more ‘discriminating’ and ‘reflective’. Meanwhile, the Nuer increasingly considered Dinka ‘deceitful’ and ‘autocratic’ (Hutchinson and Jok 2002, 92-94). As Nuer and Dinka soldiers raided one another’s cattle and grazing lands, each ethnic group’s sense of identity became fixed, even racialized.

Along with this militarization of ethnic identity, the ethics of war shifted in the 1990s as well. In prior conflicts, killing with spears involved spiritual and blood connections between the aggressor and the victim: the spirit of the victim would remain with the killer until ritual cleansing took place, often followed by compensation to the victim’s family. Such obligations and taboos served as deterrents to warfare. In the 1990s ethnic conflict became ‘devoid of the social and spiritual risks’ previously associated with it, because rebel leaders did not require purification after soldiers killed their enemies (Hutchinson and Jok 2002, 98). Rebels did not offer compensation for stolen goods, arguing that killing with guns did not carry the spiritual consequences of killing with spears. As the indigenous ethics that constrained cattle raiding wore down, the practice became more common—with deadly consequences. As elders lost authority to rebel commanders and as rebel commanders resisted public forums that drew attention to their own atrocities, the SPLM/A began to limit public dialogues such that peace meetings became rare. The consequences proved devastating for civilian populations, including women and children.

Amid such retributive violence, People-to-People Peacemaking formed an alternative narrative regarding Dinka-Nuer conflict, one that emphasized a history of cooperation and collaboration. In the days of dialogue that followed bull sacrifices, Dinka and Nuer leaders again spoke of each other as ‘brothers’ who shared Nilotic heritage; they referred to times when they did not consider themselves separate peoples and spoke of their overlapping identities. Chiefs referred to past and present intermarriages between Nuer and Dinka; they discussed their history of shared commercial ties and shared resources like grazing lands and fishing grounds. Resolutions from People-to-People conferences called for renewed commercial links between Dinka and Nuer, as well as local courts and other conflict resolution structures. Overall, in opposition to rebel leaders’ use of exclusive ethnic identity, elders and chiefs emphasized a malleable sense of identity in light of their shared history and heritage.

Drawing together the four ritual interpretations in summary, we find that the syncretistic ritual of bovine sacrifice proved the gateway to forming new public alliances in South Sudan based on shared commitments to peace. Syncretism allowed disparate authority figures to meaningfully join together in something more than a short-term political coalition because their relationship and cooperation became sealed in the ritual act of bovine sacrifice. The ritual was flexible in its interpretation so that elders and spear-masters could interpret it one way, church leaders another, with many ritual participants blending elements from various traditions. Since the ritual did not require one authoritative interpretation, it possessed tremendous flexibility as a means of enacting social collaboration. During the bovine ritual itself, spear-masters exerted power along with the chiefs and church leaders, thus inscribing onto ritual participants their identification with a new social alliance—a collective that joined inclusive kinship politics with the NSCC’s politics of peace. Thus ritual proved essential to the formation of new publics; its

syncretism allowed a variety of constituents to participate, and it sealed the theme of peace as the shared motivation of participants.

Such religious mixture proved crucial to reconciliation because longtime political structures in South Sudan, like those based on kinship and *cieng*, had deteriorated during the civil war such that these constituencies could not effectively address the scourge of Dinka-Nuer conflict on their own. Many elders and chiefs lost political power as the SPLM/A implemented their own civil administration; given they were fairly localized, elders and chiefs also faced great difficulties traveling across opposing rebel territories. Spear-masters, earth-masters, and Nuer prophets' status and activities ebbed and flowed. Prophets, for example, would often rise up as secular governmental authorities declined in power and status, then diminish as secular authority grew.¹³ The church was a young and growing cultural force but lacked the social legitimacy to carry out a peace process on its own—indeed, many church leaders would have resisted a peace process implemented exclusively through the church without the cooperation of indigenous religious and political authorities. Thus the new publics emerging from People-to-People Peacemaking formed political alliances that reflected the new and changing social landscape of South Sudan. As a collective practicing politics through syncretized rituals, shared feasts, and peacemaking dialogues, Dinka and Nuer religious leaders, elders, chiefs, and Christian leaders proved able to resist ethnic conflict and move public conversation and public activity toward peace. Syncretized ritual allowed them to employ significantly more political power vis-à-vis rebel movements—themselves the primary perpetrators of violent conflict.

How then did People-to-People Peacemaking engage and shape the wider politics of South Sudan? Amid a constantly changing political landscape, People-to-People Peacemaking resulted in tangible social outcomes across widespread communities, even as territories and

alliances violently shifted between the SPLM/A, the Sudan government, and other armed groups. As People-to-People Peacemaking progressed, the Nuer and Dinka of the western Upper Nile and eastern Bahr-el-Ghazal regions began to share grazing lands, fishing grounds, and water holes for cattle (Hutchinson 2009; Ouko 2004; Human Rights Watch 2003). Dinka and Nuer enjoyed greater freedom of movement between one another's territories, thereby building up or reestablishing trade routes. Many displaced peoples from Bahr-el-Ghazal and Western Upper Nile returned to their homes, and many abductees returned to their families. Furthermore, as conflict continued in other regions of South Sudan such as Eastern Upper Nile, displaced Nuer peacefully settled in the Dinka-dominated Bahr-el-Ghazal region. As People-to-People Peacemaking spread to the Equatoria region south of Bahr-el-Ghazal and Upper Nile, peace initiatives formed among displaced Dinkas who had come into conflict with resident agriculturalist communities (NSCC 2004a). Finally, community organizations not directly associated with NSCC sprang up and began work in peacemaking, using similar methodologies to People-to-People Peacemaking such as the Magang Grassroots Peace Initiative. Indeed, international NGOs active in South Sudan began their own programs in peacebuilding modeled on People-to-People Peacemaking.¹⁴ Because the process was syncretistic and easily adaptable, others in South Sudan could implement similar initiatives in various contexts.

As People-to-People Peacemaking grew in scope, it also facilitated public linkages between traditional forms of politics on the one hand and rebel politics on the other.¹⁵ In 2000 the NSCC facilitated a meeting called 'Strategic Linkages' in the town of Wulu, in which elders and chiefs acknowledged that although they promoted peace among their own kinship ties, many rebel soldiers continued to instigate conflict. One chief said, 'We have made peace, but it is our sons [rebel leaders Garang and Machar] who continue to encourage conflict' (qtd. in Ashworth

and Ryan 2013, 57). This began a series of conferences that brought together elders, chiefs, and senior rebel leaders in a common space, first in the ‘Strategic Linkages II’ conference in Kisumu, Kenya, in 2001. This conference pressed for reconciliation between Garang and Machar in order to end a decade of conflict in the name of ethnicity. The two figures did indeed reconcile soon after, partially through the pressure of the Kisumu conference; such unity between the rebel leaders then proved vital to negotiations leading to the CPA. After Strategic Linkages II, the NSCC, together with the Sudan Council of Churches, hosted a series of so-called Civil Society Forums in 2002-2003 that accompanied ongoing peace negotiations between the SPLM and Khartoum government. These conferences again brought elders and other civic leaders into dialogue with rebel leaders negotiating with the Sudan government in order to give nonrebel leaders a voice, albeit an indirect voice, in negotiations leading to the CPA of 2005.

The NSCC’s commitment to empowering traditional forms of politics in South Sudan provides an example that runs counter to much contemporary literature on Christianity and public life in Africa. The literature commonly portrays churches as playing an intermediary role between traditional kinship politics and modern politics, but the bridge is often conceived as unidirectional from traditional to modern: churches provide an avenue into modern state-based politics and capitalist-based economics. Indeed, as early as 1952 historian Roland Oliver identified the church as a well-placed link between traditional politics and emerging forms of state governance:

The church ... was the only institution of which the African was consciously and by outward initiation a member, which was wider than his own tribe and wider than his own race. As such, it was a corporation of unique value in the plural society which was moving towards self-government in East Africa. (1952, 286)

Yet the NSCC leveraged this intermediary role in distinct ways, in particular by actively recruiting both kinship political leaders and rebel politicians into ritual processes and

peacemaking dialogues. If missions and churches in Africa often served as a bridge into colonial and state politics by providing education and skills that prepared African citizens to participate in colonial and postcolonial administrations and economics,¹⁶ in South Sudan churches served as a bridge into traditional kinship politics by providing platforms for elders to reassert their political authority. Contrary to instances in which missions and churches perpetuated state politics and disempowered traditional politics, whether through education, economic development, or otherwise, the church in South Sudan actively encouraged traditional politics as a means of promoting peace. As is evident from its conferences titled ‘Strategic Linkages’, the NSCC consciously viewed itself as an intermediary entity between these two political realms. The peaceful publics of People-to-People Peacemaking thus negotiated between traditional politics and rebel movement politics with remarkable acuity since the church was the only public entity other than the SPLM/A with political networks covering the entire geographic bounds of South Sudan in the 1990s—from Torit in the southeast, to Awiel in the west, to Renk in northern Upper Nile. People-to-People Peacemaking utilized the church’s public networks to promote a form of inclusive politics practiced by kinship authorities, which easily overlapped with the peaceful politics promoted by many church leaders.

This is not to say that these new publics were always successful in promoting peace. Despite numerous conferences in Eastern Upper Nile, People-to-People Peacemaking struggled to take hold there, due in part to the refusal of some rebel politicians like Riek Machar to participate, but at times also due to insufficiently inclusive constituencies (Machar had supported the earlier Wunlit Conference of 1999). For example, the NSCC did not significantly engage Nuer prophets, thus potentially overlooking vital groups of Nuer in Upper Nile. People-to-People Peacemaking was a voluntary peacemaking process, not necessarily a representative process;

thus some parties to violence did not participate in its dialogues and negotiations, or participated only insofar as they perceived some near term political advantage.¹⁷ In addition, some perceived People-to-People Peacemaking as a Dinka-led process because many of its leaders were Dinka. Finally, many of the concerns voiced in People-to-People Peacemaking were not adequately addressed. Many expected a ‘peace dividend’ from NSCC’s international partners as displaced peoples returned to their homes, such as boreholes or rebuilt schools and clinics. Such dividends proved elusive, however. ‘It is to the credit of the people of the west bank that the peace [of Wunlit] held even without any significant humanitarian support’, one churchman later reflected (Ashworth 2014).

In conclusion, People-to-People Peacemaking reconfigured political authority through syncretistic ritual; the ritual of bovine sacrifice ingeniously intermingled religious practices with political activities. The ritual both perpetuated existing political authority and established new authorities. Elders and church leaders exerted established forms of authority familiar to South Sudanese. In the case of elders and chiefs, they reasserted authority that had lost much of its political capital to rebel leaders; in the case of church leaders, they asserted familiar moral power in speaking out against rebel atrocities. Yet if bovine sacrifice only perpetuated existing political authority, it would have given rebel leaders a much more prominent place. Instead, it reinvigorated kinship-based political power and marked the emergence of a syncretistic political alliance. Exclusively Christian rituals, such as confession or Eucharist, would have asserted church authority but would have been unlikely to reach extensively beyond church communities; meanwhile, exclusively indigenous rituals would have potentially overlooked the growing influence of churches in the social landscape of South Sudan. A ritual that joined Christian prayers, songs, and Psalms with the longstanding indigenous practice of bovine sacrifice

effectively drew from both traditions; doing so in a single ritual space allowed the syncretism necessary to form this new political alliance. The *Mabior*, as the chief said, ‘died for reconciliation’ between Nuer and Dinka; the ritual sacrifice in turn led to new publics that perpetuated peaceful politics in South Sudan.

Afterword: Legacies of Ritualized Politics

The bull sacrifice ritual described earlier in this essay took place during a time of great hope and optimism for the people of South Sudan. In 2004, Sudan’s twenty-year civil war was coming to an end. Negotiators for the Sudan government and the SPLM/A had already established a thorough framework for peace in the Machakos Protocol of 2002; in January 2005, less than a year after this ritual, negotiators signed the CPA to end Sudan’s civil war. The ritual portrayed a moment in time when it seemed South Sudan would overcome its devastating violence. In the years between the CPA and South Sudan’s independence in 2011, People-to-People styled peacemaking continued in various forms, albeit with varying levels of success. As conflicts reemerged in the Jonglei region following independence, church leaders like Anglican Archbishop Daniel Deng Bul, together with the Sudan Council of Churches, served as negotiators between warring parties (the NSCC merged with the Sudan Council of Churches following the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement). A process called ‘Peace from the Roots’ allowed victims to tell their stories and produced resolutions and recommendations to end violent conflict, with the support of paramount chiefs from Jonglei. Retired Catholic bishop Paride Taban, a cofounder of the NSCC, opened the Holy Trinity Peace Village to youth who perpetrated Jonglei conflicts. Being hosted in the Peace Village—itsself an effort in ongoing reconciliation—provided transition opportunities for youth to peacefully repatriate into their

home communities (Ashworth and Ryan 2013). While comprehensive reconciliation in Jonglei proved elusive, People-to-People Peacemaking nevertheless built the methods employed in ongoing reconciliation efforts, that is, it established the precedent of churches working together with chiefs and elders to build peaceful publics.¹⁸

In December 2013, however, the young nation-state broke out in renewed military conflict, following a painfully similar trajectory to conflicts of the 1990s. Riek Machar challenged John Garang's successor, Salva Kiir; Kiir called his challenge a coup—clearly harkening back to Machar's breakaway from the SPLM/A in 1991. Machar capitalized on existing discontent with the South Sudan government in the Upper Nile region, while other armed groups utilized the situation for their own more local aims. Brutal atrocities followed in towns like Bor and Malakal—familiar sites of devastation during the 1990s as well. Meanwhile, initiatives for peace have drawn from the methods of People-to-People Peacemaking described above, again with varying results. Before the conflict broke out, both indigenous elders and church leaders like Catholic Archbishop Paulino Lukudu urged politicians to dialogue rather than declare open warfare; bishops have served as mediators in grassroots conflicts as well as the state-level conflict. Despite similarities, however, the contemporary political strife differs from the 1990s in that any grassroots peacemaking movement would require more than a mere recapitulation of People-to-People Peacemaking. South Sudan is a nation-state no longer engaged in an outright war with the Khartoum regime, and the SPLM is no longer a rebel movement but a government. In a nation-state context, a national-level peacemaking process to address present conflict would entail more initiative from the SPLM-led government than People-to-People Peacemaking required. Yet People-to-People Peacemaking does suggest that an integrated approach to reconciliation that includes meaningful ritual acts, extended peacemaking

dialogues, and an inclusive political space—especially one that includes elders and religious leaders—provides a promising model for forming and perpetuating public alliances for peace.

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¹ I use the designation South Sudan throughout this essay. During the years under consideration the region was known by many designations, including southern Sudan, south Sudan, and New Sudan (the latter for those areas under the political control of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army). While 'southern Sudan' was the most common term used for the region, upon independence in 2011 the new nation-state termed itself South Sudan. Given there was not a single designation before independence, I use the term South Sudan for ease of reference across the pre- and postindependence periods.

² Syncretism defined as *phenomena of contested religious mixture* moves beyond the term's pejorative use in some theological circles, while also offering more precision than broad definitions employed by many religious anthropologists. Some theologians argue the term should be avoided entirely due to its pejorative use in the past (Schineller 1992), yet no other term adequately captures the contested phenomena described in this essay. In fact, many theologians,

e.g., Boff (1986) and Starkloff (2002), encourage use of the term to acknowledge processes by which Christianity fruitfully interacts with various cultural traditions. At the same time, definitions offered by some anthropologists do not adequately differentiate syncretism from other forms of cultural mixture. Charles Stewart offers a representatively vague definition: ‘We need to proceed with the broadest and most general definition of syncretism: the combination of elements from two or more different religious traditions within a specified frame’ (1999, 58). However, such a loose definition that merely entails religious mixture does not sufficiently distinguish the term from other vocabulary of cultural mixture such as hybridity, bricolage, or creolization. Some contestation seems vital to syncretism, as Stewart’s (1999) own examples of mixture show. Indeed, Richard Werbner suggests that religious mixture that does not entail contestation seems either highly unlikely or simply outside the bounds of syncretism (in Stewart and Shaw, 201ff). For diverse collections of articles on syncretism see Leopold and Jenson’s *Syncretism in Religion* (2005), Stewart and Shaw’s *Syncretism/Anti-syncretism* (1994), and *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Gort et al. (1989).

³ Politics here is understood as any form of collective decision making, or of decision making by individuals and groups on behalf of others, ranging from the family to any wider social grouping. This definition is largely derived from David Beetham (1995, 61).

⁴ See Hutchinson (2009), Ashworth and Ryan (2013), Redekop (2007), Agwanda and Harris (2009).

⁵ While People-to-People ceremonial bull sacrifices were more often held beyond a town square in a neutral space agreed upon by Nuer and Dinka leaders, this particular event was held in the town center of Rumbek since it was a celebration of ongoing peace between the two groups. This same event is portrayed in the film *The Blood of the Bull* (2004) commissioned by

the Episcopal Church; the film vividly captures the dynamics of the ritual and provides useful interpretations by ritual participants (the author appears in the film).

I experienced this ritual while serving as a volunteer with the Episcopal Church, USA, assigned to the New Sudan Council of Churches. Such an assignment allowed for extensive conversation with ritual participants and church leaders both immediately after the ritual and in the months that followed. The interpretations that follow draw from interviews and conversations held while living in East Africa from 2002 to 2004, as well as conversations with South Sudanese since that time.

⁶ Interview with Bill Lowrey, organizer for People-to-People Peacemaking, November 7, 2014.

⁷ The imagery of the bull offering life to the people is also expressed through ritual action: women carry the slain bull's genitals—a source of life—to the spear-masters following the conclusion of the sacrifice. (Women performed this act in the Wunlit Conference of 1999.) 'This conversion of death into life is particularly clear ... especially in the removal of the sexual organs of the sacrificial victim by women and their consumption as a source of fertility to the lineage' (Lienhardt 1961, 296).

⁸ Hutchinson offers accounts of Christian Nuer rejection of ritual sacrifice (1996, 145-146, 299-300).

⁹ For a fruitful study of ritual efficacy see Johannes Quack and Paul Töbelmann (2010).

¹⁰ One lacuna in many discussions of syncretism is the attention to syncretism in cultures outside the modern West without discussing syncretistic practices within Europe and North America. Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* offers a portrayal of the Western self integrating various traditions, suggesting that the Western self is as syncretistic as any other. Rather than

moving cleanly between one tradition or another, Taylor contends, the Western self draws from concepts and practices of various traditions, many of which originally opposed one another, such as Christianity, Enlightenment thought, and Romantic expressivism. ‘Views coexist with those which have arisen later in reaction to them’, he writes. For example, ‘Born-again Christians in the United States cannot help being somewhat influenced by expressive individualism’ (Taylor 1989, 497).

¹¹ See Bell (1992). Curtis Hutt (2009) provides a useful assessment of Bell as well as an overview of her reception among scholars.

¹² Many chiefs of Dinka and Nuer were appointed by colonial administrators and thus might not be considered ‘indigenous’ leaders in a certain sense. Yet over time many chiefs have gained significant local prestige and authority beyond their original colonial functions.

¹³ See Johnson (1994) for the pattern of Nuer prophets. I am also grateful to Noel Stringham for his insights on Nuer prophets.

¹⁴ Such international NGOs include PACT, Catholic Relief Services, and World Vision.

¹⁵ These two realms entail political as well as economic aspects, as Cherry Leonardi (2011) argues. To many villagers the modern economy with its educated leaders has led only to violence, not economic opportunity. Because so many rebel leaders received higher education in Western institutions, many villagers refer to the conflict between the SPLM/A and rival armed groups as ‘the reign of the educated,’ (Jok and Hutchinson 1999, 132). One elder explained the conflict this way during a People-to-People peace conference:

During the old days when the Dinka and Nuer used to fight over pasture and grazing land, they never used to kill women, children and elders. Now the educated Dinka and Nuer are killing women, children and elders. Between uneducated old generations who never killed women, children and elders and the new generation who are educated and killing people, who is more intelligent than the other?’ (qtd. in NSCC 2004a, 73).

¹⁶ See Beidelman (1982), Jean and John Comaroff (1991), Gifford (1998), and Marshall (2009) for representative examples.

¹⁷ I am grateful to Merlyn Kettering, Church of the Brethren consultant with the NSCC, for noting the distinction between People-to-People's voluntary rather than representative approach.

¹⁸ After South Sudan's independence, Archbishop Deng and Bishop Taban were appointed as chairman and deputy chairman respectively of the National Healing, Peace and National Reconciliation Commission.