Countering Rupture:  
Young Nuer in New Religious Movements

By Christiane Falge

I. Introduction

In the overall whirlwind that has captured postcolonial Africa through war, structural adjustment and outmigration, young people and their conflicts with older generations are currently prominent themes of academic observation and analysis (De Boek/Honwana 2005: 1; Alber/Martin 2007: 169). Constituting the largest group of the African continent, they open up a way to understanding broader socio-political and economic transformations in their struggle for education, employment and health services. Confronted with and incorporated by political conflict, armed violence and the HIV/AIDS pandemic they are forced to reinvent themselves and develop new strategies to counter the destabilizing ruptures which the penetration of the global thrusts upon them. In the literature young Africans are often simultaneously viewed as creative and destructive forces, makers and breakers (De Boek/Honwana 2005). As soldiers within African markets of violence (Elwert 1999) they take part in the marauding, raping and killing of civilians, and as major players in new informal economies and processes of globalization they struggle for a better life. Against the prominent proclamation of generational conflict in Africa (Richards 1995: 134–70, Abbink 2005: 1–34), recent research has shown that some African youth are preoccupied with both fighting a war and defending their families (Leonardis (2008), Madut (2007)). Besides, many drop out from war and become the driving forces behind the flourishing religious movements that embody the expectations and promises of Western capitalist ideals.

The young people this article deals with belong to the Nuer society who geographically divides between Western, Central and Eastern Nuer. It is important to note that each of these various groups displays some internal differences, and each have had a different exposure to external influences such as Christianity. They also had different experiences in the two civil wars of the Sudan which lasted from 1962–1972 and from 1983–2005. In this paper I am specifically looking at
the Eastern Nuer who straddle in the Ethio-Sudanese borderland and who are therefore doubly affected by the simultaneous civil wars in Sudan and Ethiopia in the 1980s and 1990s. This group divides into Gajiok, Gajaak, Gaagwang and some Lou sections. The presence of the international border meant that they had a substantially different experience of war than the Western Nuer who inhabit the Sudan’s oil fields, and who are the main focus of previous studies (Hutchinson 1996, Hutchinson/Madut 1999).

Figure 1: Nuerland with Principal Nuer Divisions Stretching from Western Upper Nile (Sudan) to Gambella (Ethiopia) as well as SPLA Camps (1980s) and Refugee Camps (1990s) in Gambella

During 24 months of fieldwork conducted between 2001 and 2004 in villages, refugee camps and cities among the Nuer in south-western Ethiopia and the USA¹, thick observation in a sense of interpretive

¹ I am very grateful to the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle and the Cusanuswerk e.V. in Bonn who provided the financial and technical resources that enabled me to conduct this research. I am also thankful for comments and criticisms of the peer reviewers of this paper and want to thank Mamadou Diouf for his insights on the modernity debate as well as Douglas Johnson for his advise on this paper and for sharing with me his deep insights about the Southern Sudan, specifically on the Nuer.
rather than just physical participation and importantly also as social proximity (Spittler 2001: 19) constituted my main methodology. I observed how the Nuer reacted to and coped with external changes. Religious movements were the central forums for my observations in the camps as in the absence of cattle\(^2\) their significance had increased and turned religion into one of the most important revitalizing forces to counter the processes of war and rupture that had become part of their life experience. I will draw attention to the young generation of this group of Nuer during the second phase of the civil war in Sudan (1983–2005) and their reinvention of themselves in religious movements as a response to the post-1991 shattering of southern political and military unity. Common to many other African countries, present-day Nuer Christianity represents a young literate generation that wants to ‘move forward’ (*gore wa nhiam*) that differentiates from illiterate elders less in need of such progress-oriented change. What makes the Nuer case interesting though is the fact that a small section of young Nuer has decided to leave their Christian peers in order to lead a group of elders who have established a neo-traditionalist movement. Suggesting an alternative to foreign Christianity, they have joined the religious battleground by trying to reinstate the divine qualities of the old order. The involvement of young Nuer in both religious movements shows that the theme of intergenerational conflict does not fit here and questions the overall proclamation of intergenerational conflict in Africa. Similarly, Leonardis in her recent study on youth in Southern Sudan warns us from explaining all youth violence in Africa through crisis as it would ignore local reasons for rebellion and detach youth from families. By referring to the division of Southern Sudan into a home sphere that is dominated by elders and a government sphere that is dominated by political rather than age-based categories she shows that youth operate in several spheres simultaneously. Importantly, they conflict and harmonize with people and practices in several spheres (Leonardis 2007: 409). In my analysis of the young Nuer in two religious spheres, one dominated by elders and one by a younger generation I will examine the strategies and reasons of young Nuer to join two different religious spheres. I will analyse how they gain positions at the centre of each of these spheres and the ways in which young people in both movements develop alternatives to war and inequality.

Religious movements have been described as a response to the condition a society is in, and they are often explained in the context of de-

\(^2\) Unlike during the 1980s, the refugees who entered the camps in the post 91 period were not allowed to bring their cattle with them. This might be another reason for increasing conversion rates as the absence of cattle implied that their divinities could not be contacted via cattle sacrifices.
privation and anomy (Peel 1999: 3, Ranger 1975, Hefner 1993). This is also the case in Southern Sudan where Christianity attracted followers since colonial times and increasingly during the civil war. The abundant literature on social change in Africa often focuses on processes in which societies are oriented towards the outside – often the colonial project – and identify with it. This has been described in various studies on conversion (Comaroff / Comaroff 1991: 250). Some authors who deal with these issues, however, also draw attention to those societies which have experienced an inward turn as a result of change and show how they have tried to disconnect from external forces. One of these cases is Baum’s historical analysis of the Diolas’ reaction against slave trade. Here the increasing insecurity that accompanied slave raids turned people’s spiritual concerns towards local shrines in order to protect their families from attacks and spiritual danger (Baum 1999: 128). Peel also criticises the overemphasis of the external – here colonialism – in religious studies because it leaves out the importance of religion as a revitalising force for the local (Peel 1999).

To categorize the Nuer either as inward or as outwardly oriented would be difficult as both reactions are to be observed and are criss-crossing different movements and generations. The majority of young Nuer who converted to Evangelical Christianity along with a small but influential elite of elders that converted since the early arrival of Christianity are oriented toward the Western world in their strive to catch up with the ‘foreigners’ (turuk) while nevertheless embodying elements of Nuer culture in their Christian practices. Similarly, the neo-traditionalist movement formed by a group of elders and joined by a small group of educated young Nuer wants to connect with the Western world with many of the members favouring the spread of modern institutions. They want to do so, however, by orienting toward the ‘tradition’ of their local belief-system.

As Christianity has empowered the younger generation by introducing literacy to them, elder’s attitude toward it is characterized by ambivalence. On the one side, they view it as an additional source of power that benefits society at large, while on the other side it threatens the power balance between them and the younger generation with their lessening dependence on elders. This ambivalence, however, cannot be defined as a generational conflict that reaches the level of crisis, but as an inherent societal tension that has increased in the context of rupture.

The experience of war over several generations has caused a hope that linking up with the western world would establish peace and rectify social inequality. At the same time the two religious movements that have emerged as a response to the war play an important role in
fulfilling this hope: Interestingly enough, both movements are led by literate young men who are linked to the global through their literacy. And most importantly, what all members of this movement have in common is that they do not or no longer do participate in war. Living in the refugee camp Funyido they are either dropouts from the army, have never actively participated in the war or when it comes to elders are war veterans.

II. The Question of Modernity in a Context of Rupture

Nuer society in general is in a process of revising its moral economy in order to fit and confront new challenges related to the war and to life in the refugee camps. Some express their outward orientation to connect with the wider modern world in order to participate in certain forms of a western lifestyle by using the metaphor ‘cop’ (to arrive somewhere/to be advanced), move forward (wa nhiam) or being ‘skilled’ (turuk) (see also: Hutchinson 1996: 40). The two original meanings of cop refer to the initiation into adulthood as well as to the actual arrival in a certain place. All these notions refer to a certain condition characterized by the availability of schools, roads, courts, churches, medical facilities, and the like. They mirror what has been described elsewhere as modern, symbolic or as an alternative modernity (Eisenstadt 2000, Knauft 2002, Donham 1999). During the revival of the modernity debate in the late 1990s, the concept of modernity has undergone serious criticism and debates, in which one side was claiming it to be a singular idea of a progress-oriented West towards which the rest of the world is forced to orient itself, whereas the other side saw it as a pluralistic idea which assumes the existence of alternative, non-western modernities. In his critical analysis of both approaches to modernity, Cooper argues against a rigid dichotomy because both concepts would always underestimate each other. The universalism of modernity as a western idea, holds the danger, he argues, that all non-Western societies may become copies of the West, while the assumption that modernity can be reduced to capitalism and imperialism attaches a Western-centeredness to it that would bury all possible non-Western alternatives. The good/bad juxtapositions, which are introduced by the modernity concept, also risk to prevent formerly colonized societies from escaping their marginalisation by “missing the power and poignancy of dreams and aspirations and the range and complexity of efforts at transforming colonized societies” (Cooper 2005: 148). In line with Cooper and by drawing on local notions of transformation, this paper therefore tries to capture the various ways in which the Nuer aim at striking a balance between an outward and an inward turn as a non-
Western alternative to social transformation. How this is implemented in a Christian and a neo-traditional movement is a central aspect of this paper.

As both religious movements, that of the Christians and that of the neo-traditionalists are closely connected to the war as a driving force for major social change and re-identification processes, the following section will give some insights into the religious traditions of the region and the processes of mobilisation that were caused by the war.

III. External Powers and the Significance of Prophets and Christianity During Civil War

Though religious movements for long played a role among the Nuer in regard to foreign powers from colonial to post-colonial times, not all religious movements that flourished during colonialism were involved in resistance. The old Nuer prophets who flourished in the first third of the 20th century for instance were wrongly declared as ‘resistance leaders’ against foreign powers or during crisis – a false category that came out of the first generation of post-colonial Africanist historiography. They were feared by colonial administrators, because their claim for peace was a claim for political authority. It was this assertion, not the old prophets actual involvement in resistance that made the colonial authorities suppress, jail and kill them (Johnson 1994: 329). Hence, according to Johnson, rather than the old prophets actually being warrior and resistance leaders, this colonial imagination was born out of the government’s preoccupation with responses to itself. By drawing a direct connection and inspiration between the modern nationalist movements of Africa and the resistance to colonial conquest, African historiography elevated ‘resistance’ to heroic status, without necessarily examining the options confronting African peoples and African

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3 Prophets (guan kuth) include people whose abilities are derived through a tutelary relationship with a divinity. The ‘old’ prophets who flourished in the context of Nuer migration toward the East were exiled or killed by colonialists while the ‘new’ prophets who came up after 1930 claim links with the divinities who spoke through the prophets of the past. The ‘new’ prophets did however never reach the same fame as the old prophets (Johnson 1994: 330).

4 One example for this is given in Johnson’s paper about “C. A. Willis and the Cult of Deng” (1985) where the colonial administrator Willis created false evidence that the prophets were planning a general uprising despite the government’s scepticism about the prophets’ resistance. Willis was able to force events in his province to produce sufficiently hostile reactions from the Lou Nuer prophet Guek (Ngundeng’s son) to convince the government to go to war against Guek (Johnson 1985: 134).
leaders during the period of colonial conquest.\textsuperscript{5} Even Evans-Pritchard stepped into this trap when he falsely represented the Nuer prophets as war-leaders (Evans-Pritchard 1940) despite the fact that most of them were either dead or in exile by the time he conducted his research\textsuperscript{6} (Johnson 1994: 31). While in the 1920s–1930s the Nuer prophets were suppressed and eradicated by colonial administrators (Douglas Johnson 1985, 1994) without being involved in resistance, after their death – especially that of the most famous prophet Ngundeng – their message of peace became all the dearer for the very absence of that peace they tried to attain. Hence, it is not surprising that as the war intensified Ngundeng’s teachings and fame spread both within Nuer society and beyond it (Johnson 1994: 330). The colonial construction of prophets as war- and resistance leaders seemed highly appealing to the Nuer and by the end of 1972 Ngundeng’s words had achieved a currency that transcended linguistic and ethnic boundaries (Johnson 1985a: 124). Memories about the prophet Ngundeng became important tools of revitalization for a demoralized society when the majority of the first generation of prophets had vanished. Ngundeng has become extra-prominent during the second phase of the war as a symbol of resistance against the government of Sudan (1983–2005). The fame he gained in the post 91 religious period was related to the fragmentation of Southern political and military unity and the ethnic, religious and political fragmentation of Nuer society. This already started in the 1980s, when the SPLA reinterpreted Ngundeng songs in order to manifest military unity among its soldiers and to ground its claim to establish military bases in Gajaak areas.\textsuperscript{7, 8}

Missionary influence did not affect the vast majority of Nuer and was confined to a tiny proportion of the first generation of what became an educated elite. The defeat of the ‘old’ prophets was followed

\textsuperscript{5} Personal communication with Douglas Johnson 2008.

\textsuperscript{6} According to Johnson, some ‘old’ prophets were eventually caught up in conflict with the Condominium government, but in the 1920s when Evans-Pritchard conducted his research at least, that conflict was not initiated by them (Johnson 1994).

\textsuperscript{7} The Gajaak are the largest Nuer group on Ethiopian territory. They live in the Itang and Jikow district where SPLA military camps as well as the UNHCR camp were established in the 1980s. They were highly affected by the SPLA presence and targeted by SPLA atrocities.

\textsuperscript{8} The SPLA changed existing Ngundeng songs by interpreting them so that Ngundeng ‘ordered’ Gajaak to welcome the SPLA soldiers. When Gajaak failed to provide the needed resources, this appeal to the past enhanced SPLA soldiers’ fighting morals against Gajaak. The soldiers took what they needed by force and used the Gajaak areas as a reservoir for their needs for food, women and cattle.
by the establishment of the Verona Fathers among the Western Nuer on the Bahr el-Ghazal in 1925 (Sanderson/Sanderson 1981: 148). But despite the fact that the ‘old’ prophets were gone, conversion to Christianity did not increase until the 1940s, and only started to accelerate in the Sudan after the expulsion of the missionaries (Johnson 2003: 35). It was also then that Christianity and Christian leaders played an important role in the early resistance movements in the war against the Government of Sudan (Hutchinson 1996: 319).

The long history of Sudanese Christianity’s significance in the civil war against the Islamic government of Northern Sudan actually started with the small mission of educated elites who formed the first rebel movement Anyanya I in the 1960s. In Sudan, the association of Christianity with resistance is continued by various Southern military leaders such as Riek Machar who walks around with an oversized bible. Machar once jokingly commented on the growth of Christianity during the 1980s to be the only thing that has been growing in the Western Upper Nile during the war (Hutchinson 1996: 319).

The civil war in Sudan was fought between the Government of Sudan (GOS) and the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) which temporarily had its military bases in Gambella9. From 1984 – 1991 there was a military camp in the Nuer area Bilpam as well as training camps in the Anywaa areas Bonga and later also in Funyido.10 Parallel to the technological advancement of arms and war equipment during a more intensified second phase of war, the moral economy of local conflict resolution began to erode. In the 1980s the SPLA was in extensive control of Nuer society, thereby drawing on both popular religions, the ‘traditional’ and the Christian one. From 1985 – 1988 they fought a war against the Gajaak known as „kur SPLA“ (SPLA war)11 during which many Gajaak were killed. While both movements were strongly connected to a spirit of resistance, traditional religion was more important

9 By then Gambella was part of Illubabor region but for matters of clarity I refer to it by the name it received in the post 91 period.

10 According to eye-witnesses from Gambella, the SPLA established military camps in the Ethiopian Nuer areas since 1984. The UN refugee camps were quasi controlled by the SPLA and served as their resource base (fieldwork Falge: 1996/2001, Nyaba 1997: 55). It was however only in 1988 after the merger with the Anyanya 2 rebels that the SPLA established undisputed control over Eastern Nuerland. After 1991 the SPLA maintained only an informal military basis in Gambella. I witnessed SPLA trucks loading refugee rations from Funyido camp in 1996 and 2001. Several times during my research in 2001 – 2, SPLA soldiers from near-by military basis were treated in the medical clinic of the Funyido refugee camp.

11 For further details on SPLA atrocities against civilians see Nyaba 1997: 43 – 58.
to the SPLM/A in the 1980s. Though Ngundeng was never involved in war, the SPLA turned him into a symbol of war against foreign invasion. The more intense the war became and the more cruel the killing practices got, the more the Nuer drew on prophetic memories of the famous Ngundeng to attach meaning to the experience of war and rupture. ‘Prophetic’ resistance proved more adequate to the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the SPLA than Christianity. Ngundeng songs therefore became very popular among SPLA soldiers and were also used by anti-SPLA guerrillas. When the SPLA reconciled with the guerrilla forces in 1988 a Ngungdeng song about Dinka / Nuer unity was broadcasted over SPLA radio (Johnson 1994: 342–343) and in 1989 short before the SPLA captured Nasir, an SPLA commander sent 80 elephant tusks from Ethiopia to be placed on Ngundeng’s mound (Johnson 1994: 344).

In the 1980s more and more soldiers converted to Christianity and their morals condemning fighting became more pronounced when violence escalated. To many of its advocates, conversion to Christianity constituted an alternative identity to the experience of uprootedness and an alternative to a spiral of violence unfolding in the Nuer villages on both sides of the border. The villagers’ attitude towards the soldiers and the resistance movement was ambivalent because they suffered from their atrocities against civilians and at the same time supported them out of their identification with the liberation as such. By 1989 the war had caused the flight of 350,000 Sudanese into the Ethiopian refugee camp at Itang. In the 1990s the war intensified further after the SPLA had split and Southerners were simultaneously fighting among themselves and against the GOS. Across the ethnic lines of Nuer and Dinka and among the Nuer, Southern resistance fragmented into various succeeding splinter groups, a process that began to affect all spheres of Nuer society (Hutchinson / Madut: 1999). All modern institutions such as churches in Sudan and Ethiopia and mushrooming political parties on the Ethiopian side in Gambella were fragmenting along the overall instabilities that had captured people's lives.

1. Christian Movements

The Nuer have a long history of exposure to Christianity, first through the mission churches and schools which for the Eastern Nuer goes back

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12 Here colonial imaginations and historiography about Nuer prophets as war-leaders are reflected by local memory.

13 Ngundeng is most famous for building a large mound as his earth-shrine (see also Johnson: 1994: 88 ff.).

14 For the first time since 1902 ivory returned to Ngundeng’s mound.
to 1916\textsuperscript{15}. Missionary influence did not affect the vast majority of Nuer and was confined to the first generation of what became a small but influential educated elite. The post-missionary period after the expulsion of foreign missionaries from the Sudan in 1963–1964 left the Sudanese local churches in the hands of local church leaders. It was due to the Missionary Act in Sudan however, that the US missionary Charles Jordan entered the area of the Ethiopian Nuer. The latter anticipated his eviction from Sudan\textsuperscript{16} and instead of going back to the US moved to Ethiopia and established the first Nuer mission in Adura. Adura became a place of refuge for many Nuer refugees and Jordan continued to work here as a missionary until the Ethiopian regime expelled all US-based institutions in 1977.

I distinguish between the form of Christianity that was introduced by the missions who have been operating among the Nuer since 1916 when the American Presbyterian Mission was established at Nasir and new forms of Evangelical Christianity that were introduced during the second part of the civil war and most extensively during the post-socialist period in Ethiopia since 1991. The important difference between the Ethiopian and the Sudanese Nuer is that in Sudan conversion to Christianity increased in 1983 as a direct response to shari‘a (Madut 2007: 78) while among the Ethiopian Nuer conversion to Christianity was a way to enforce inclusion into a Christian Ethiopian mainstream society and counter stereotypes as primitives directed at the Ethiopian Nuer. The influence of Islam was almost insignificant for their conversion in Ethiopia. Important to note is also that significant conversion rates among Christians of the Eastern Jikany clan were observed since the late 1970s and early 1980s while a similar wave of Christian conversion reached the Western Nuer only as of the mid 1980s (Hutchinson 1996: 318). Here, the rise of interest in conversion to Christianity among the Sudanese Nuer has to be understood in relation to the war, resistance against the Islamic government of Northern Sudan and the galvanizing potential of religious oppositions that individual SPLA leaders had recognized therein (Hutchinson 1996: 320). Disillusioned by the militarization of Nuer and Dinka ethnic identities and the fragmentation of Southern unity, many Christians have become reluctant to go to war. They have taken the lead in organizing several important peace initiatives such as the Wunlit peace conference in 1999 or the Fangak All Nuer People Peace

\textsuperscript{15} In 1916 the Christian mission was found at Nasir in Sudan, which is situated near the Ethiopian border. Many evangelists converted at Nasir later proselytized among the Ethiopian Nuer (Sanderson / Sanderson 1985: 97).

\textsuperscript{16} All missionaries were evicted from Sudan as a result of the ‘Missionary act’ in 1964.
The end of the cold war had a tremendous impact on the situation of the Nuer in the Ethiopian borderlands. This was related to first, the global salience of Christianity after the demise of socialism, second, the shift of UN resettlement programmes from the former Soviet bloc to Africa and the Middle East and third, an increasing permeation of Nuer society with images of Western-world lifestyles. Towards the early 1990s, parallel to the intensification of the civil war in Sudan, the number of Evangelical converts in Ethiopia once more increased and religious movements flourished dramatically. In 1991, after the 350,000 Sudanese refugees had returned to Sudan the opening up of postsocialist Ethiopia to religious movements caused an influx of new US based churches to Ethiopia and Sudan. Though the refugee camps were re-opened in 1992, only few returned to Ethiopia and the camp population in Funyido never exceeded above 30,000 (UNHCR refugee count: 2001). The majority of the post 91 refugees have an Eastern Nuer background and many of them originate from Ethiopian villages. At the same time thousands of those Nuer refugees from the Ethiopian camps outmigrated via resettlement programmes to the US and other Western countries. Partly enforced by 9/11 and following the Ethiopian regime and Southern Sudanese leaders who had adjusted to the global alliance of forces, being a Christian was more and more perceived by them as a gateopener to the global Christian community.

One of the things that attracted the younger generation of Eastern Nuer and also women to Christianity was access to leadership granted to young men and women, a privilege that in the ‘traditional’ sphere

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17 While during the cold war the resettlement of refugees by the UN was dominated by political rather than humanitarian concerns and focused on persons from the former Soviet bloc, African and other refugees were overlooked. The end of the cold war, however, put the 1951 UN Convention under scrutiny as resettlement temporarily lost its political legitimation. With the outbreak of ethnic tensions across the globe, however, refugee figures began to increase rapidly and as a result resettlement emphasis shifted to people from the Middle East and Africa.

18 According to the journal ‘Disasters’ (17. 03. 1993: 213), one third of the refugees returned to Ethiopia. Many of these returned to Sudan after the SPLA Nasir lost Ethiopian support.

19 In their claim to “bako ro mat rey naath” Nuer Christians stated to me that they want to be part of ‘the world’ or of ‘the people of the world’. Images of this world as a global Christian community emerge from the narratives of their relatives who have outmigrated to the US and returned for home visits to establish Evangelical churches. As the Evangelical churches connect the Nuer in the homeland with resources from the Western world they symbolize a link with the global Christian community (for further details see Falge 2005).
would be exclusively granted to elders. In early 2000, the first Nuer, who had migrated to the US, returned from the diaspora for home-visits. As missionaries to the Ethiopian refugee camps and the Ethio-Sudanese borderland they communicated images of a powerful Western world. The churches they established in their homeland became knots in a transnational church network that connects Nuer Christians all over the globe and serves as an economic and spiritual support network through which communication and development activities are being channelled.

The glittering temptations of Western-world images and war-related technology the Nuer had encountered introduced a perception of their society as being ‘backward’ and enforced the existing aspiration, particularly among the younger generation, to ‘catch up with the foreigners’. It was in the camps of all places where this aspiration crystallized most as they were mainly inhabited by the young future-oriented generation. Many of the young Nuer who live in the camps have explicitly decided against following the destructive pathways of soldiers on the warfront. In the camps where they have access to education and depend less on elders, literacy and UN food rations had shifted power from parents and elders as the former food providers to the UN. This development has empowered the young generation which has also affected the position of the latter in the villages leading to an increasing alienation between the elders and their home-visiting children. To the young generation Christian conversion has become an empowering tool which enables them to simultaneously engage in the urbanized and the rural sphere. Early studies of African conversion such as those by Achebe on Nigeria (Achebe 1958) or by Sundkler on South-Africa described conversion in the context of generational tensions emerging from these developments. Christianity is presented by them as a social divide that separated generations and where the village sphere is a place where young South Africans had nothing to lose while in the missions they had ‘something to gain’ (Sundkler 2000: 89). As already mentioned, this clear-cut divide between the two spheres is neither the case among the Southern Sudanese youngsters described by Leonardi nor did I observe it among the young Nuer. None of these groups cut off relations with the rural sphere or the elders who live there but simultaneously maintain relations with both spheres. Though Christianity with its emerging leadership positions partly poses a threat to the established gerontocracy, new resources channelled through the transnational church network like remittances, scholarships, food aid and money are also benefiting them and hence are welcomed by the elders.

For several reasons, partly because Christian values conflict with elders’ values and partly because Christian churches have induced a pro-
cess of fragmentation, however, elders also critique Christianity. In the refugee camp and among the Eastern Nuer this critique is expressed in an anti-Christian discourse that creates images of disorder about Christianity as a place of chaos and sexual immorality and it is due to this dissatisfaction with Christianity that some Nuer have formed a neo-traditionalist movement with the aim to create peace and re-establish unity among Nuer society.

The neo-traditionalist movement which mainly attracted elders came to be characterized by a certain anti-Western turn articulated in an anti-colonial discourse and in narratives about conquest and rebellion against the colonial regime. This contrasts with the Christian movement which is much more silent about colonialism in an effort to connect with and imitate what stands for western lifestyles represented by the former colonialists and missionaries. The young men in both movements promote a certain discipline that is directed against drinking and smoking and partly against polygamy and while Christians at least in public partly subdue to these regulations, elders from the Ngundeng church openly practice it as part of their cultural identity.

In order to understand reasons and outcomes of the Ngundeng movement, the following section will begin by drawing attention to the effects of Christianity on the non-Christian sphere.

2. The Ngundeng Movement

In the face of the high level of attraction Christianity constituted for the young generation and in face of the backwardness discourse against non-Christians, representatives of the local religion began to apply different strategies to regain authority. The transformation of their religious practices thereby constitutes an attempt to claim recognition on equal level with Christianity. The new prophets did so by incorporating Christian elements into their sphere like Thenduk a prophet whose compound is surrounded by Christian churches. Hoisting a brand-new flag with a Christian cross and wearing a cross necklace the prophet claims to have inherited a Christian tradition for prophetic practices from his father. Another prophet, Gatkuoth, who lives opposite a Christian mission, similarly tries to establish the Nuer belief-system on equal level with other ‘religions’ relevant to Nuer lives. He argues about the existence of ‘kinship links’ between his divinity, Jesus and Mohammed. Another prophet called Gatluak, who lives in a predominantly Christian village: Lol Gunjang, goes even further. He claims that the divinity that seized him requested to be married with a Christian wife. Hence, following the practice of ghost-marriage, in which a person is married to a deceased one in whose name it produces
children, Gatluak married a Christian wife to his divinity. This marriage neither constituted a major contradiction or taboo break to the Christian congregation of the couples' village, nor to the wife and shows the considerable level of tolerance existing between Christians and non-Christians. Next to the mutual tolerance that the three cases bring to the forefront they also show elements of competition the non-Christian sphere articulates toward Christianity. Unlike in the past, Christianity is no longer simply ignored, but creatively being appropriated by representatives of the non-Christian sphere.

The Ngundeng church that emerged in Ethiopia goes in line with the prophets' appropriations of Christianity and their claim for recognition on equal level with it. It constitutes an example of the non-Christian spheres' reaction toward the salience of Christianity. In the late 1990s Nuer elders were frustrated by the intensification and the length of the civil war, the disempowering experience of bereavement, their loss of control over the younger generation, and partly by feeling excluded from the Christian sphere. It was then that some of those elders living in the Ethio-Sudanese borderland and in Funyido began to counter images of 'backwardness' associated with the 'old order'. In the late 1990s, two Nuer prophets in the Ethiopian villages gathered a group of elders and built a fence which they called Ngundeng church (luakuoth Ngundeng). Here they met regularly, made goat sacrifices and celebrated singing Ngundeng songs. Another group was established in the refugee camp of Funyido. Initially, these Ngundeng groups were loose assemblies of mainly elders – often war-veterans, disillusioned by the war, but also single women, and besides having in common a rejection of a 'white-God' religious model with the aim to revive the traditional belief system as an exit strategy from anomy. During their gatherings they would tell each other about and analyse Ngundeng prophecies about war, exile and liberation. They established what they called ‘the Ngundeng church’ by drawing on several Ngundeng prophecies that foretold the establishment of peace, the return to the old order and elderly respect. While the rising prominence of Ngundeng in the context of war is not a new phenomenon (Johnson 1985) this group of elders was different. Unlike previous Ngundeng supporters they did not claim a return to a pre-government way of life (Johnson 1985: 126). Instead they proclaimed the end of war, the reconversion of all Christians to the former belief-system heralding Nuer unity and the establishment of an ‘advanced’ version of the older order. “I am also turuk” claimed one of the elders by self-consciously referring to his knowledge base about fertility and ability to bless. This new meaning attached to the use of the term ‘turuk’ as it was originally ascribed to ‘foreigners’ and since the introduction of schools is also ap-
plied to educated Nuer, suggests the regaining of new self-confidence of elders toward local knowledge. The Ngundeng church members re-interpreted several prophecies that were already applied to events in the past. One of such re-interpretations was applied to Ngundeng's prophecy that 'peace would come from the East' – a prophecy that already explained Abel Alier's involvement in the Addis Abeba agreement in the 1970s (Johnson 1985). Consisting of Eastern Nuer and being based in the Ethiopian refugee camp Funyido eastward from Nuerland the establishment of Ngundeng church was the fulfillment of that prophecy and would lead to Ngundeng's eventual return on earth. In their opposition to Christianity the Nuer elders blamed external influences like colonialism, the Arab conquest and Christianity for their condition of anomy. Their narratives are constructed as a process of gradual disempowerment that places the beginning of the church at the missionary encounter and colonialism. The British murder of Ngundeng's son Guek, who had been seized by the divinity Deng passed to him by his father, forms a central story in this narrative. The refusal of Deng to re-seize another prophet until today demonstrates the disempowerment of the old and is ascribed to the foreign invasion. Currently, also the elders reinvent themselves by carrying Ngundeng's revitalising message as an exit strategy towards order, peace and re-empowerment. One condition for achieving this aim is the return of their paraphernalia from the museums in Khartoum and the Western world. During one of the Ngundeng meetings in the camp the elders demanded the return of all their paraphernalia:

“The person who burnt the cattle byre, destroyed the mound and killed Guek Ngundeng is the one who destroyed our God. Now we have come back and want our God back. We want to worship him. We want all our holy materials back which were stolen from us.”

(Deng Makuac, Funyido Refugee Camp 2001)

The return of the paraphernalia is a prerequisite for the resurrection of Deng whom they have chosen to be their God (kuoth) and heralds the re-establishment of a 'good world' along with the end of the war. The elders' version about a time where the 'world is good again' is a

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20 Here we are dealing with a change in perception among the Nuer who in the 1970s ascribed the refusal of divinity to re-seize Guek to his disobedience to the divinity's will, not to foreign invasion. Today, divinity's refusal to seize people is also ascribed to peoples' conversion to Christianity.

21 Interestingly enough, the Ngundeng members make this claim, unaware of the fact that most of the paraphernalia like the pipe and drum were returned to the Lou in about 1980. A similar case appeared in Jikow in 2000 when a prophet's warning about the return of Ngundeng's drum through the river caused the evacuation of the whole village from the riverside.
'claim of return': next to their paraphernalia they reclaim the respect (boar) they used to be granted by the younger generation. This respect is currently threatened by the black-haired generation (dhœr me wi car) as was predicted in a Ngundeng song. In this song Ngundeng predicted that the new generation would no longer listen to the elders’ advice and change the order of things by randomly consuming what traditionally was under the elders’ control, namely meat, tobacco, wine and vaginas – categorized in the songs as the ‘four red things’. Next to the re-establishment of younger people’s respect (boar) for the elders one of the tasks of the Ngundeng church was therefore to regain control over cattle, women and food as ‘pillars of the old order’. Ngundeng church narratives herald the re-establishment of peace by a return of Ngundeng predicted as a final battle. This old prophecy, a similar version of which was already recorded by Douglas in 1975 (Johnson 1985: 127), started with a heavy rain and a cattle sacrifice that would wash away all the war-related crimes and taboo breaks. It would re-establish the moral economy, elderhood and junior status, the ordered and strategic circulation of women, the expert mastery of divinity and it would reunite Nuer society. The prominence of this prophecy among Ngundeng church members indicates the strong desire for peace as well as a certain reluctance to participate in war.

It is not clear whether the Ngundeng church first started in the US, the homeland or whether it was developed simultaneously in a transnational space as each group claims to have initiated it. But it was the young leaders from the US who shaped it in a way that would actually make it comparable to the church as an institution while the elders who started it in the villages, thought of it rather as an informal gathering. Many of the illiterate, unskilled Nuer in the US, who feel excluded by the overwhelmingly white, middle-class dominated US churches and disillusioned by the impossibility of their upward mobility have increasingly drawn on Ngundeng as a symbol of new self-confidence. Their idea was to resist the hegemony of Western Christianity, while building up ties between people in the homeland and the Western countries that had become their homes. To all groups the movement constituted a countermovement to Christianity based on the idea of a Ngundeng prophecy about Nuer empowerment and unity.22 This common theme of Ngundeng songs even before the religious fragmentation – was newly interpreted as Ngundeng’s appeal to religious unity through the reconversion of all Nuer back to the non-Christian sphere.

22 Ngundeng is specifically of interest to the current processes of religious competition as he was also involved in a religious struggle against other ‘old’ prophets and their divinities. Considering all other divinities as being inferior, he buried these prophets divinities under his mound to establish divine supremacy.
Ngundeng group meetings in the refugee camps used to have festive character. Elders used to smoke, drink and dance together which was considered with ambivalence by the US members to whom this diverted from the Nuer perception of being ‘advanced’ (cop) and limited the chances of attracting Christian converts. In order to correct the elders’ behaviour the US group authorized a former Christian named Gatdit to re-shape the group and to strengthen its orientation towards the West. Equipped with considerable start-up capital from the US group, Gatdit joined the elders. Pastor-like he carried a tape recorder, wore sunglasses and new clothes to mark his leadership status and began to reform the church. Along with some other young literate Nuer about the same age, Gatdit developed strategies to facilitate the Christians’ reconversion. His central method was to create linkages with Western countries – a means that proved effective among congregations to increase membership. Beside Gatdit other young men showed up. Most of them were ex-Christians and/or war-drop-outs, disillusioned by both, Christianity and war. Having participated in the war as soldiers and having witnessed the cruelties and perversions of war-making and being abhorred by the way rival southern factions fight out their ethnic differences at the expense of civilians made them reluctant to go to war. But Christianity also disillusioned them where fragmentation, corruption and leadership struggles are similarly practiced. Longing for new meaning for their lives they signal their reinvention by joining the elders’ narrative of condemnation that defines Christianity and colonialism as a motor for exclusion, betrayal and surrender. One of the central arguments of this narrative goes like this: “Why do you think the white people depict Satan as a black person? It is because the white people consider us Satan. They do not consider the snake to be Satan but an animal, but they say that it is us the black people who are the real Satan.” (Ngundeng gathering, Funyido: 2001). Their narratives express disillusionment with the Western world for which Christianity stands and from which they feel excluded as Africans, citizens, Christians, and young generation by being banned to the peripheral, inhuman and worthless sphere. Though this view is extreme, it contains elements that reflect lived experiences of various Nuer in the rural homeland and in the urban areas, refugee camps and the Western world where often they are ascribed to the lowest stratum of society. This is done irrespective of their belief-system and it is these forms of exclusion by the urban, Western sphere that motivates people to join the Ngundeng church.

The young Ngundeng members were soon accepted by the elders and began to institutionalize their movement. Their next step was to ask the Inter Church Committee (ICC) in the refugee camp to accept the
Ngundeng ‘church’ as part of its administrative structure. The committee agreed on the condition of various membership assets, like a literate leadership, a church building, a drum, a book/bible and a hierarchy of elders including a pastor – a task the young leaders took upon themselves. They began to seek for an adequate means which could represent their ‘Ngundeng bible’. Douglas Johnson’s book “Nuer Prophets” – heard of and found in my house – seemed appropriate enough for such a purpose and for some time young Ngundeng church members visited me to have a look at it, requesting more such copies for their church services. In the end, however, Johnson’s book was rejected as a colonial representation. Instead, the young members began to write their own ‘bible': from elders they collected Ngundeng’s life history, miracles and prophecies about the war, the refugee camps and the origin myths of their lineages. Compiled by them in handwritten form they began to refer to it as their ‘bible’ during the newly established ‘church services’. They also created Ngundeng hymns by appropriating Christian melodies they then taught to the elders. The literate young men distributed among themselves the church offices with Gatdit as ‘pastor Ngundeng’. Besides, the Ngundeng church in the US sent further remittances and promised the arrival of a white ‘sponsor’ from ‘America’ – a common procedure after the establishment of Christian churches. They sent enlarged photocopies from photos in Johnson’s book, showing Ngundeng’s famous mound. Elderly women began to worship the mound in its glass-framed poster during Ngundeng church services while singing the new hymns. In 2002 a church building was erected in Funyido, in its round form explicitly distinct from the Christian rectangular churches and echoing the shape of other shrines built in cattle byres, and Ngundeng’s Mound. The Ngundeng group marked their identity by setting worshipping days and Ngundeng’s birthday on different dates than the respective Christian holidays with worship being set up for Wednesdays and Christmas (Ngundeng’s birthday) for January.

The completion of the church building raised the need for a church drum and Ngundeng members began to talk about a certain bull Ngundeng had predicted to come from the West. For several weeks we heard rumours about the near arrival of the legendary bull. Ngundeng leaders approached me once more, this time in the context of the bull’s failure to arrive. By that time, my anthropological interest in their

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23 Similarly, Hutchinson observed this phenomena of referring to Ngundeng’s sacred songs as the ‘Nuer Bible’ in Sudan (Hutchinson 2001: 326).

24 Reflecting the ‘old order’ women were not legible for leadership positions in the Ngundeng church. In Christianity and its understanding of a progressive institution, Nuer women are entitled for leadership positions.
church and my regular participation in their services\textsuperscript{25} as well as their visits to my tukul created the impression among the other Nuer in the camp that I myself had become a church member. Understanding the position I had gained in Ngundeng church as part of this method I felt honoured by the idea of being accepted by a church that basically rejects foreigners. Due to the pressing need for a drum, the leaders explained to me that a bull had to be purchased from the market and since they – being refugees – had no access to cash, they indirectly asked me to do so. At this stage I felt irritated and at first was unsure what to make out of this request. I was alienated by being indirectly pushed into the role of the donor as it reflected a power hierarchy between us that I thought, my research method had relativised. Was I just perceived as a resource to be made use of or was there ‘real’ social proximity between ‘them’ and ‘me’? Or were these claims emerging from my ‘going native’ (Spittler 2001), from stepping across a boundary that allowed them to make these claims? I remembered how UN staff used to express to me their alienation during camp visits when refugees would pull up their T-shirts to show their empty stomachs claiming to increase their food rations. I well remembered the certain satisfaction I felt when being told such stories as I had never been begged by the Nuer refugees. When approached by the Ngundeng church I began to doubt the social ties that had developed in the field. I wondered

\textsuperscript{25} I actively participated in the Ngundeng Church activities in Funyido Refugee Camp between July – October 2002.
whether purchasing the desired ox would further enforce the existing power hierarchy at the expense of my position as a friend? On the other side, I thought that the ox purchase would also reveal important insights on practices related to ‘the old order’ and bring me into the position of observing a sacrificial ritual. This reflection helped me to de-idealize my relationship with the Ngundeng church members and to accept the ambivalence between acknowledging friendship and social proximity despite existing power hierarchies so that in the end I decided to buy the ox. Besides, among the Nuer cattle exchange is a common means to create relationship on equal ground. Finally, I also simply did not want to appear greedy. The very day I handed over the money, a black bull was purchased and tied up under a large tree near the new church building.

The sacrifice turned into a PR-like campaign as large groups of elders from all over the camp came to watch the sacrifice, curious to become acquainted with ‘Ngundeng church’ practices. Around 50 spectators gathered around the tree in front of which the ox stood. The event was organised in a way that hymn singing and ‘bible’ reading was assigned to the young leaders while the sacrifice and drum preparation remained in the domain of the elders. Instead of the sacred Ngungeng songs newly composed Ngundeng church songs were first sang by the youngsters while the elders were listening. As part of the programme I was asked to give a speech in my role as a sponsor and the white representative of the church. It felt like an imposition to be the personified link with the Western world. Against this and while being unaware that I was going native in being more and more pulled into Ngundeng church I held an emphatic speech in which I basically supported Ngundeng church. I promoted it as an institution that countered the Westernization and dissolution of Nuer cultural practices in face of the growing outmigration to Western countries and the spread of flat materialism. With the acclamation “Don’t let your culture being swallowed by America!” I ended my speech and went back to my assigned place among the other church members. After an elaborate process of sacrificial blessing by elders from all clans in reference to prosperity, unity and peace a representative of the Thiang clan performed the sacrifice followed by uleling. Now it was the elders turn to immediately start chanting sacred Ngundeng songs and as if they were awakening, euphoria began to disseminate among them and the other attendants.

26 In my perception, those cattle I had given to individual Nuer in the villages had so far positively re-enforced my relationship with them rather than created a power imbalance.

27 The Thiang clan is the guardian of the holy spear and its spirit Wiu protects Nuer society on the Eastern frontier.
Having unlearnt the sacrificial slaughter, the man however hit the bull's lung instead of its heart. When it neither fell on the left nor on the right side but went down to its knees, where in a long and slow struggle it was bleeding to death this gesture was interpreted as a sign to symbolize the current stage of stagnation and dependency the Nuer were facing in the refugee camp. An elder had carved the wooden drum corpus during the preceding weeks and the fresh skin was now stretched over it. This was unlike a Christian metal drum preparation where the drum's corpus is covered in no time with a purchased cow-hide, while the Nuer ritual preparation of the Ngundeng drum took the entire day. The euphoria following the sacrifice that started from the elders spread to the young members until the whole group collectively joined euphoric feasting. In the end the young leaders even let go of the self-imposed discipline and joined the elders' dancing, smoking and drinking.

My performance on that day in the Ngundeng church, the ox donation and my speech were understood as affirmations of the church ideas. It ascribed to me a role close to that of the church leaders as if I had become the church's tie with the West, contributing to its legitimation among the other churches. Some elderly Ngundeng members began to address me as kuär (leader)\textsuperscript{28}, \textsuperscript{29}. In the days following the ritual, Ngundeng members, during their occasional visits to my house, approached me with respect while providing me with news on the proceedings of ‘our’ church (luakuothdan)\textsuperscript{30}. When Christians started to make fun of my new role I began to realize that I had gone too far by being pulled to such an extent into Ngundeng circles. Fearing that this appropriation of myself could limit my perspective on the Christian groups and in order to regain my anthropological ‘neutrality’ I decided to distance myself from the Ngundeng church. While Ngundeng members accepted this decision the rumour that the Ngundeng church had a white leader continued to spread as I heard during my visit in the regional capital, and weeks later in Nairobi. Having lost hope that I would play the ‘Western link’, the church leaders began to announce

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{28} Kuär is the word for ‘chief’ in an administrative sense, but ‘master’ or ‘priest’ in the religious sense.
\footnotetext{29} I am drawing here on Johnson translation (1994: 59) as opposed to Evans-Pritchard’s translation that limited kuär to a religious category as priest (1956: 289).
\footnotetext{30} It is important to note here that Sudanese and Ethiopian Nuer use separate terms for the word church, Sudanese using the Arabic word kanisa while Ethiopian Nuer apply the Nuer term ‘luak kuoth’ (fieldwork Falge: 2001). The latter refers to a byre or shrine of Divinity and was used by Ngundeng for his Mound and for other shrines such as Luang Deng (personal communication with Douglas Johnson 2008).
\end{footnotes}
the near arrival of other Western Ngundeng supporters and once even gathered for a whole day to wait – in vain – for a white leaders’ predicted arrival in the camp. Rather than the expected Ngundeng leader from the West, the Ngundeng members were left with patiently witnessing the numerous white American pastors coming to see Christian churches in their neighbourhoods.

I understand my appropriation by the church as the essential ambivalence entailed in the Ngundeng community. On the one side they express an anti-Western, anti-white attitude and are dissatisfied with Christianity, racist attitudes by white Christians and the denial of ‘tradition’ and on the one side they equally have a desire to nevertheless be part of the global, Westernized world or in other words ‘be advanced’ and ‘catch up with the foreigners’. Following patterns of the Christian churches, I felt instrumentalized by the Ngundeng church to temporarily represent its already existing connection with the Western world maintained through the US Ngundeng congregation. Though the young leaders mainly orchestrated it, it happened in accordance with the elders. Against their general rejection of the external as represented by the foreigners and the loss of respect of the ‘black-haired generation’, the incorporation of both – the external and the internal – into their sphere is an expression of all members’ ambivalence toward both spheres. In their approach to transformation they were funambulating between the external and internal while simultaneously assuring the maintenance of their distinct identity through practicing aspects of ‘tradition’. They elevated what stands for the older order on equal level with the urban, Christian sphere by drawing a thin but important line of distinction between an ‘advanced’ Christian and an ‘advanced’ Ngundeng church. This constitutes an example for the great creativity with which Africans’ appropriate rather than copy the global.

IV. Conclusion

This paper dealt with the creative strategies a group of young Nuer from the Ethio-Sudanese borderland has developed as a reaction to the experience of violence, marginalisation and socio-economic exclusion. It constitutes of examples for how young Africans distance themselves – at least temporarily – from their role as ‘breakers’ and apply strategies to counter the challenges of the global world. Instead for the war-front, they opted for refugee camps where they dedicated their lives to religious activities and establishing transnational networks and ties with the Western world. They based this on the overall aim to achieve peace, development and unity similar to the latter. Importantly,
they do so at the forefront of two competing religious movements, the Christian and the neo-traditionalist one and in their capacity as literate Nuer regain value by building up transnational links with the literate Western world. By highlighting the strategies with which the society at large and the young people in particular try to strike a balance between an outward and an inward turn in this undertaking, I show how they develop non-Western alternatives to social transformation. Both, the Christian and the Ngundeng movement differ however in their degrees of outward and inward orientation. Though the transnational networks of Christian churches are oriented toward the outside and officially dismiss aspects of the local belief system, Christian practices nevertheless embody aspects of Nuer culture. Similarly, the Ngundeng church, which draws on a neo-traditional form of a revised old order nevertheless copies cultural practices from the Christian Nuer churches and maintains and strives for transnational connections. Having a shared experience in their encounter with the external, each group has enacted their specific ideas about a more outside or inside oriented religious identity through dances, songs, a particular architecture and ways of feasting. Both groups also resist, either openly or in a hidden form, Western-Christian ethics with their strict behavioural conduct and partly refused to copy the ideology of capitalist modernity with its characteristic politics of disciplining and domesticating people (see also: de Boeck / Honwana 2005: 11). This resistance is specifically emphasized in the Ngundeng church which offers a space to compensate for all the frustrations and the disempowerment encountered in the external (urban, foreign, western) sphere and its various exclusionary practices. The social critique young and old members of the Ngundeng church articulate against society focuses on the experience of exclusion Nuer across the world undergo in their ‘believe’ in the ‘benefits’ of the Western world whether it be as Christians, non-Christians, educated or uneducated, urbanized or rural, refugees or citizens or as migrants. The Ngundeng church’s attempt to establish an alternative religious identity based on local values claims to be closer to the Nuer selves than the one currently practiced by Christians. The striving for peace I observed among the Nuer in the two religious movements confirms Hutchinson’s and Madut’s observations among ordinary Nuer and Dinka civilians, describing civilians similarly disillusioned and abhorred about the fighting out of ethnic differences (Hutchinson / Madut 1999: 139). This disillusionment that has made them reluctant to go to war channels Christian activities to the organization of peace conferences and the Ngundeng church activities to interpretations of Ngundeng opposing those of the SPLA. As many of its members are war-veterans or war-drop-outs, they interpret Ngundeng
as a peace-maker. By personally objecting against war, they distance from the SPLA and by re-interpreting Ngundeng prophecies they suggest an alternative to violence.

Hence, this article has shown how young Africans, exhausted from the war are seeking for alternatives to it. They do so in cooperation with their elders and by simultaneously being part of different spheres, Christian, non-Christian, a rural sphere dominated by elders and an urban transnationally oriented sphere in which they take the lead. In this sense, the article also alludes to the fact that the current trend to interpret African youth in terms of crisis and intergenerational conflict might veil important aspects young Africans play as revitalizers of their societies.

References


Summary

This article deals with the religious strategies, a group of young Nuer from the Ethio-Sudanese borderland and the diaspora applies to actively engage in the challenges the global and civil war in Sudan (1983–2005) thrusts upon them. It looks at how the Nuer reconstruct their moral economy in war and exile and at the significance religious movements take in this process during times of social upheaval in the past and today. The paper specifically alludes to the various ways with which different actors who participate in these movements try to strike a balance between an outward and an inward orientation as a non-Western alternative to social transformation. Christianity and reasons for conversion as well as re-conversion among this group of Nuer thereby radically differ from those previously described among the Nuer in Sudan.

By examining the strategies this group develops to transform their societies, it also highlights the young generations’ simultaneous belonging to different social spheres. Hence, the article argues that the young generation, despite existing intergenerational conflict, competition, disagreements with and partial exclusion of their elders, nevertheless simultaneously harmonizes and cooperates with the latter. It is in this way that the article also re-thinks the overall proclamation of intergenerational conflict in Africa.

Zusammenfassung


Durch die Untersuchung der Strategien, die die jungen Nuer zur sozialen Transformation ihrer Gesellschaft anwenden, wird ihre gleichzeitige Zugehörigkeit zu unterschiedlichen sozialen Sphären hervorgehoben. Der Artikel argu-
mentiert, dass die junge Generation trotz Generationenkonflikt, Wettbewerb, und einem teilweisen Auschluss ihrer Ältesten dennoch mit letzteren harmoniert und kooperiert. In diesem Sinne geht es auch darum, die gegenwärtige Hervorhebung eines Generationenkonfliktes in Afrika neu zu denken.

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