

Introduction

WINDS OF CHANGE

If there's a book the South Sudanese cannot remove from their lives, it's the Bible. . . . [T]here are books that are very close to the heart of South Sudanese because of our suffering. So if the Bible then is made up of stories of suffering, 50 percent of it, the other 50 percent of the stories is the glory that follows suffering. That's our story. Maybe we are not enjoying the glory now, but we know it's coming.

—Joseph Taban, July 12, 2012

On February 3, 1960, Harold Macmillan stood before the Parliament of South Africa. After a month touring some of Britain's African colonies, the British prime minister opined to the MPs that a “wind of change is blowing through this continent and whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact.”¹ While British-controlled Somalia and Nigeria each obtained independence in 1960, they were not the first in sub-Saharan Africa to wrest free from Her Majesty's encumbrance after World War II. Though Ghana had entered the community of sovereign nations in 1957, Pan-Africanism's shining black star was not the first to achieve independence either. That distinction went to Sudan—formerly the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium—which became independent in 1956.²

Seven months after Macmillan's speech, the Anglican bishop of the Sudan referenced other winds of change. In Oliver Allison's address to

the Sudan Church Association, he remarked, “We . . . are living under a military regime . . . and the Sudan is a polite police State. The winds of change around and within the Sudan are sometimes not cool refreshing breezes but winds of gale force. The Church is not alone in being the prey of all sorts of forces.”³ Just months before Sudan became independent, the condominium had been almost ripped apart when southern Sudanese soldiers at Torit rejected orders to be transferred to the North. They mutinied, and hundreds were killed in the ensuing violence. The newly independent Sudanese government attempted to unite the country by promoting Arabism and Islam in South Sudan, a region with lengthy experience with Christian missionary work during the colonial era. With the government takeover of mission schools, the elimination of Sunday as a weekly holiday, and restrictions placed on mission work, life for Christians and Christian workers in South Sudan was becoming increasingly precarious by the time Allison made his remarks. In time a full-scale civil war broke out, and the government expelled hundreds of missionaries from the country.⁴

More than a half-century after Allison’s speech, another wind of change blew through the country. After decades of civil war, 98.3 percent of participants voted for independence in a January 2011 referendum.⁵ As one man remarked before the results were unveiled, “The Northerners have made us their slaves for a long time, and we are ready to show them that we can lead ourselves.”⁶ This reference to slavery was no mere rhetorical device; rather, it was rooted in real history. During the nineteenth century, Sudan’s economy was based in part on the slave trade, an enterprise that practically depopulated some areas of the South. To be sure, the Sudanese slave trade was not novel; Egyptian traders had previously taken enslaved persons from the Funj kingdom. Slavery, according to Jok Madut Jok, was never abolished during the Anglo-Egyptian colonial period or by the independent minority Arab regimes.⁷

On July 9, 2011, South Sudan celebrated its independence as the world’s newest nation. More than just a political occasion, independence was also a religious moment. Christian leaders argued that a prophecy concerning Cush from the book of Isaiah had foretold South Sudan’s independence, and a draft of the national anthem referred to the country as Cush, Eden, and a land of milk and honey. In February 2012 the *Sudan Tribune* reported that South Sudanese Christians had proposed to Vice President Riek Machar a pilgrimage to Mount Zion to further fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy (the Cushites, in the prophet’s vision, present gifts to God on Mount Zion after their suffering).⁸ I was in the capital city of Juba when the country celebrated its

first anniversary of independence. Then a doctoral student working on a cataloging project at the South Sudan National Archives, I was eager to attend commemoration festivities at All Saints Cathedral. As I sat among a throng of attendees, under enormous ornate cloths shielding us from the midday sun, the acting governor spoke. He shared that after John Garang's death in 2005, "God in his mercy [gave] us a Joshua with unique talent and wisdom who took us through the days of difficulty in the administration of . . . South Sudan."⁹ Garang had created the Sudan People's Liberation movement (SPLM), the South's dominant political movement and civilian organization. The SPLM paralleled the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), the southern rebel force that had fought against the northern-based Sudanese government in the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005). After Garang's death, Salva Kiir Mayardit—or Joshua—became the new SPLA commander and future president.¹⁰ Another speaker alluded to the Hebrew captivity in Egypt by thanking God for giving them independence, leading His children across the river, and ending their slavery.¹¹ It appeared impossible to divorce southern nationalism from biblical vocabulary.

* * *

With the Sudanese state's long history of Islamization policies, it is not surprising that the relationship between religion and political action in Sudan has been the focus of great inquiry.¹² The Sudanese state has attempted to fashion the country as an Islamic state on several occasions, but—as Jok Madut Jok has noted—the presence of a significant population of non-Muslims made such attempts highly problematic and destructive.¹³ Despite the prominence of biblical invocations leading up to and through independence, no book-length study focuses on the historical genealogy of such religiously infused political thought in South Sudan. This study shows that modern uses of the Bible are merely the latest iterations in a longer history of religious nationalism. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, Sudanese thinkers transformed Christian thought and theology into spaces where racial identities obtained potent spiritual power. Southern Sudanese used the Bible to provide a lexicon for resistance, a vehicle for defining friends and enemies, and a script for political and often seditious actions in their quest for self-determination and sovereignty. While the political imagination has not been exclusively Christian, some southern thinkers used the Christian Bible to forge a union between theology and nationalism. By doing so, they blurred the lines between secular

and sacred in the genealogy of their nation's political thought. Rather than approaching the history of South Sudanese nationalism as mere political history, I show that it is—for many people—a spiritual chronicle. In this vein, *Chosen Peoples* supports Lamin Sanneh's view that religious thought is deeply connected with the roots of the secular state.¹⁴

Beginning with the end of the Mahdist War (1898) and continuing through the early years of independence, *Chosen Peoples* investigates the ways in which Christian worldviews, organizational work, and theology informed the ideological construction of the South Sudanese nation-state. The Bible provided a critical lexicon of resistance and communal identity formation and was a source with which to levy spiritual critiques against the Arab Other. *Blackness* became an identity marker adopted by southerners of various ethnicities, resulting in a unique case in African Christianity whereby a liberatory, nationalist Christian thought was aimed against non-white and non-Christian co-citizens.

The prevailing context of the struggles against Sudanese governments meant that race (blackness) and religion (Christianity) became dominant identities that southerners of different ethnicities used to distinguish themselves from an enemy that was often framed as Arab and Muslim. Rather than separating race and religion as coexisting elements, I present theology as a crucible of race, a space where racial differences and behaviors were defined. Southerners envisioned themselves as a *chosen* people destined for liberation, while Arabs and Muslims were likened to oppressors in the biblical tradition of Babylon, Egypt, and the Philistines. With the end of the Second Sudanese Civil War (2005) and peace with the traditional northern enemy, however, ethnicity has superseded race as the more politically salient and important identifier in South Sudan's political arena. This reality is critical to understanding the present conflict as a violent referendum on the strengths and limitations of deploying race, religion, and ethnicity as instruments in the construction of a pluralistic democracy.

The racial and religious identity politics at play in this narrative—namely Arabness and Africanness, Christianness and Muslimness—is particularly fascinating when Christian and/or Western nationalism is understood to be about anti-Islamization. Samuel Moyn notes that since “the 1940s . . . Christian human rights have been not so much about the inclusion of the other as about policing the borders and boundaries on which threatening enemies loom.” While communism was once feared as the epitome of secularism (and was the target of religious struggle), Moyn contends that the Muslim has replaced the communist in Europe's contemporary imagination

(and particularly with respect to religious liberty).¹⁵ While the religious nationalism in this study was created and articulated against the backdrop of state attempts to fashion Sudan as an Islamic nation, some figures levied their critiques against the state, certain individuals, or a particular brand of Islam rather than that religion writ large. Furthermore, the use of scripture after the twentieth-century civil wars and into South Sudanese independence shows that southerners injected biblical language and spiritual thought into public forums long after Islamizing Sudanese governments (based in the northern city of Khartoum) ceased to be the target of their animus. I caution against a limited view of South Sudanese religious nationalism as one based exclusively in anti-Islamization. This notwithstanding, there is room to consider the connections between the rhetoric deployed against Arabs and Muslims in this study and discourses concerning Islam and the war on terror.¹⁶

Theological knowledge production in South Sudan was not the exclusive domain of clergy; rather, a tapestry of thinkers contributed. Rather than focusing on a specific subset of people or communities in the traditional vein of Sudanese anthropology, I follow in the path of Jonathon Glassman's work on Tanzania and Daniel Magaziner's in South Africa by examining a range of figures, including refugees, soldiers, politicians, students, and clerics, who placed themselves into biblical archetypes.¹⁷ Using circulating print media written by a diversity of authors allows for an examination of religious and political thought that extends beyond ethnicity and toward a more regional and international scope. Building on Steven Feierman's formative study of anthropology and history in Tanzania, I focus on the intellectual labor performed by South Sudanese writers.¹⁸ Intellectuals used print media to interpret their circumstances, define enemies, script action, and define the future through a theological framework—one that conflated spiritual liberation with material political reformation and revolution. Although various Sudanese regimes attempted to create an Islamic state, it is also imperative to recognize the ways in which people in South Sudan—while at war against Khartoum—used religion for their own political purposes.

And yet, after entering “the promised land” of independence, ethnic conflict threatened the nation that religious nationalism envisioned. Division and enmity between southern factions persisted following the end of the Second Sudanese Civil War, and matters came to a head in December 2013, when violence broke out between members of the presidential guard. This action precipitated violence throughout the new South Sudanese nation between forces loyal to President Kiir (of Dinka ethnicity, Sudan's largest

ethnic group) and former Vice President Riek Machar (of Nuer ethnicity, the South's second largest ethnic group). Tens of thousands perished in the conflict, which lasted until 2018.¹⁹ Thus, this study can't simply offer a new way of understanding religion's role in South Sudanese political imaginings; it must also consider ethnicity's political relevance in this narrative of religiously infused politics.

DIASPORIC CONNECTIONS: BLACK POLITICS AND THEOLOGY

This book is significantly informed by ideas that emerged from two other contexts in which blacks were socially and politically marginalized: South Africa and the United States. Desmond Tutu was present at the Independence Day ceremonies at All Saints Cathedral that summer day in July 2012. His presence encouraged me to search for the fusion of religious and political rhetoric in South Sudan. Minister of Information Barnaba Marial Benjamin addressed the former archbishop by saying that he (Tutu) had broken racial barriers, and that God had brought him to "your people." Tutu offered congratulatory remarks, pleas for peace, and concluded with a blessing in Xhosa.²⁰ It was a fraught diasporic moment that linked black South Africa's struggle against white oppression with the South Sudanese fight against Khartoum governments that had tried to create an Arab and Islamic state.

Francis Deng once noted similarities between the Sudan and South Africa: "The Sudan has much in common with South Africa under apartheid. . . . In South Africa, apartheid excluded non-Whites. In the Sudan, Arabism both excludes, in the sense that it discriminates against those who are not Arabized or Islamized, and includes, in the sense that it fosters assimilation, which condescendingly implies rejection of or disregard for the non-Arab and non-Muslim elements."²¹ The efflorescence of religiously infused political rhetoric on South Sudanese independence echoed the union between religion and politics during the antiapartheid struggle. White Dutch Reformed clergyman Beyers Naudé founded *Pro Veritate* in 1962. Published in Afrikaans and English, it brought together Christians across racial and denominational lines who were opposed to apartheid. Along with the Christian Institute of Southern Africa, *Pro Veritate* is credited with facilitating the creation of the 1967 Black Theology Conference and the black consciousness movement.²² Daniel Magaziner writes that South African students, clergy, and activists "donned the prophet's mantle and spoke historical truths to the power of apartheid law" between 1968 and 1977.²³ In

1985 a group of laypeople and clergy (including Tutu) produced the Kairos Document, a theological treatise designed to develop a biblical model that would lead to action. The document argued that scripture condemns states that fail in their God-given duty and referenced Rome, described in the book of Revelation as Satan’s servant, as an example. The Kairos authors argued that when regimes become morally illegitimate, theological teaching compels Christians to remove them rather than compromise. God liberated the oppressed, and immoral states are not allowed to rule forever.²⁴

As Tutu’s appearance at the independence ceremony linked South Africa’s experience with South Sudan’s, the publication of an essay written by James Cone in *Pro Veritate* linked black theology with Christian antiapartheid opposition. Black theology was a term first used in the United States among a small cadre of African American theologians led by Cone during the second half of the 1960s. Cone’s first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, was published in 1969.²⁵ “Black Theology and African Theology”—an essay Cone co-authored with Gayraud Wilmore—notes that faith is the encounter between the divine and human in the historical context of oppression. The enslaved community recognizes that its deliverance is the divine’s work in history and, therefore, knowing God is “to know the actuality of oppression and the certainty of liberation.”²⁶ They add that God’s liberating acts directly inform his people’s position and responsibility: “He is the Liberator par excellence, who reveals not only who God is and what he is doing, but also who we are and what we are called to do about human degradation. . . . The free man in Christ is the man who rebels against false authorities by reducing them to their proper status.”²⁷

Theologian John Mbiti was critical of race’s infusion into theology. He criticized black theology and stated that in reading it, “one becomes sated by color consciousness. It is necessary to remind oneself that racial color is not a theological concept in the Scriptures.”²⁸ Importantly, Mbiti acknowledged that southern Africa was to a limited extent similar to the American context that produced black theology.²⁹ His critique of black theology and nod to southern Africa’s similarities to the United States open the door for one to consider how African thinkers elsewhere theologized their racial oppression.

To be sure, the decision within South Sudan to use Christianity to compete with race—or northern Arabism—has been recognized. During the height of the Second Civil War, Francis Deng noted, “the elite circles of the Christian South are promoting the idea that Christianity should be consciously cultivated as a pivotal element in southern identity. Christianity,”

Deng continued, “in combination with such other elements as English and vernacular languages, is the modern model competing with the Arab-Islamic model in the north.”³⁰ He also acknowledged the role of Christian education in creating an antinorthern nationalist sentiment.³¹ This study goes beyond the acknowledgment of Christianity’s politicization in South Sudan by investigating the discursive processes by which this took place. *Chosen Peoples* is interested in the manner in which southern nationhood was articulated through a biblical lens. By approaching religious thought as a space where racial and political subjectivities were fashioned and harnessed for revolutionary means, my study takes a new approach to South Sudanese social history. Rather than approaching race and religion—the two elements most often used to distinguish North and South Sudan—as separate entities, I analyze religion as a space where race was expressed, defined, and animated with power. South Sudan is an African context in which racial and spiritual identities were combined to argue for political liberation in an environment that was often understood to be made up of Arab rulers and black ruled. While resembling black theology and the ideology expressed in the Kairos document, the South Sudanese variation was aimed against nonwhite and non-Christian co-citizens (in contrast to South Africa). The religious thought under focus in this study, furthermore, was often articulated within the context of civil wars and preceded the creation of a new nation-state.

BEYOND THE NORTH-SOUTH DIVIDE

This study does not aim to perpetuate the general conceptual division of Sudan into an Arab Muslim North and a black, Christian, indigenous theistic South. Douglas Johnson, Cherry Leonardi, Peter Woodward, and Richard Gray have tackled the North-South binary in various ways.³² The terms *Arab*, *African*, and *black* are too malleable to be used to argue for firm regional distinctions. Arabism in North Sudan is contested and varied, with “Arabs” commonly identified with the Khartoum government, economically marginalized Arab nomads, and Arabs who live within the South and have long coexisted with southerners. Amal Fadlalla writes that “constructions of ‘Arabism’ are constantly negotiated, debated, and invented among many Muslim groups, including Darfurians.” She concludes that the question of one’s Arabness or non-Arabness is “complexly determined by ethnic and racial categories that take into account regionality and skin tone, as well as other bodily attributes.”³³

Nor should *Arab* be used interchangeably with *Islam*. The notion of an *Islam noir*—an Africanized variety of Islam that was somehow diluted from authentic Islam and infused with traditional African beliefs and practices—emerged in French West Africa during the early twentieth century. The colonial French administration was suspicious of Islam after its role in mobilizing anticolonial resistance in Algeria. The administration kept Muslim clerics under surveillance, with files synthesized by Paul Marty, who directed French West Africa’s Office of Muslim Affairs in the early twentieth century. These files comprised a series of studies on Islam in French West African colonies, studies that contributed to the conceptual formulation of *Islam noir*’s existence.³⁴ Robert Launay suggests that though the French may have been comforted by the idea that they did not have to worry about Islamic danger, the idea of *Islam noir* had damaging consequences for anthropology’s study of Islam in French West Africa: “Once ‘African Islam’ could be reduced to its component parts—Arab Islam and African ‘fetishism’—then the study of Islam could be properly left to Orientalists, leaving to anthropologists the task of decoding more ‘authentically’ African beliefs and practices.”³⁵ Rhetorical distancing between Africa and Islam is evident in Sudan, where an Arab-Muslim North is distinguished from a black African South. Against the historical backdrop of *Islam noir*, Rudolph Ware notes that Islamic studies have traditionally marginalized Africa, despite its deep Islamic history and African Muslims’ demographic strength. The racial elements of this tendency are transparent in the actions of colonial administrator Marty, who was “routinely appealing to the logic of race . . . tapping deeply held stereotypes of black civilizational and intellectual inferiority.”³⁶

The division of Sudan into two regions comes with an implicit assertion that the South is a uniform entity. It is not. Juba-born journalist and author Steve Paterno once shared with me that a sense of nationhood did not exist until the onset of colonialism. “Otherwise,” he continued, “South Sudanese were simply tribes, which . . . to some [extent] still exist today as most cannot [grasp] the idea of nationhood but rather fall to their tribes or clan so as they belong.” Paterno added that “the thought of nationhood is for the most part confined within the elites, the so-called educated class. These basically compose of military, politicians, [and] clergy.”³⁷ Jok Madut Jok asserts this sentiment in his *War and Slavery in Sudan*:

Southerners . . . have always referred to themselves in terms of their ethnic nationalities. . . . Most rural Southerners have linked themselves to

these cultural and ethnic roots and do not even reach the level of the state when talking about their world. They do not identify with a polity called Sudan, nor is there any consciousness or political decision to be part of Africa. The history of the effort to identify with Africa is recent and is confined to the literate. It grew out of the history of unfriendly contact with Northerners.³⁸

Throughout the twentieth century, the Sudanese state—along with its political and military opponents—struggled to establish governmental legitimacy. Cherry Leonardi notes that experiences of war, military government, aid, urbanization, local government, and national politics each simultaneously harden and dismantle local identities.³⁹

This book does not ignore these realities and makes no attempt to argue that Christianity, blackness, or “southernness” have so enmeshed themselves in the South that they have replaced or eliminated the effects, utility, or meanings of ethnicity. Nor do I attempt to say that all or most southerners, regardless of their ethnicities, ascribe to the religious and racial liberationist thought that rests at the forefront of this analysis. Rather, *Chosen Peoples* shows the ways in which literate elites encouraged indigenous cultures, discouraged “tribalism,” posited a shared racial identity, and articulated southern separatism and communal identity through the mediums of Christian work and thought. If nationalism, as Paterno and Jok put forth, has primarily been the work of the literate elite, it is still important to understand how their racial and religious imaginings informed their revolutionary political work and vision.

During the Anglo-Egyptian period, colonial officials sought to shield the South from Arab-Islamic influences and encourage the continuance of indigenous cultures and languages. This was done in various ways but primarily through linguistic work; education was conducted in vernacular languages, missionaries produced vernacular dictionaries, and vernacular newspapers were produced. In this vein, the Christian project not only sponsored African or southern self-identification but also invited people to see themselves as constituents of smaller, ethnic communities. What followed was a tension between the ethnic identities encouraged and buttressed by missionaries (and Africans), an emerging southern consciousness that was grounded in a shared history of slavery, African rather than Arab identification, and political marginalization. In response to specific historical circumstances like midcentury Sudanization, Arabization, and Islamization, *race* became a way of thinking about self and community that

superseded others. With changing times, however, race has lost the salience that it had when it was used to distinguish South from North. Given the intimate connection that religion has had with race in Sudan (embodied most often in the division between an Arab Muslim North and a black Christian South), one must consider the ways in which Christians in South Sudan—whether Euro-American or African—have used their faith to inform their approach and use of racial and ethnic identities for political purposes.

Ethnicity's historical realities, debates, and power in the South demand a disavowal of the North-South polarization and an honest recognition of the ways in which the terms *southern*, *black*, and *African*—potent and pervasive as they are—become tenuous when used to describe everyone throughout the region. This study escapes the North-South polarization by showing how ethnic identities in South Sudan continued to be significant in discursive and social spaces that swirled with competing social, racial, religious, and national identities. I employ *the North* rather than *Arab-Islamic North* in my effort to detach the racial and cultural term *Arab* from Islam. I use *the South* to describe the collective regions of Upper Nile, Bahr el-Ghazal, and Equatoria.

RACE AND RELIGION IN MODERN SUDAN

In 2004, Makau Mutua stated that “race—not religion—is the fundamental fault line in Sudan, though religion has certainly added fuel to the fire in the south. Indeed, since independence from the British in 1956, the demon of Sudan has been race.”⁴⁰ Some have noted that several historical factors inform the importance of Arabism (and race more generally) in the North. Arab-African antagonism can be traced to the Turco-Egyptian period, when Arab nomads allied with the Egyptian army and government to mount raids to find slaves for military and domestic use.⁴¹ Northerners crafted racial ideologies favoring Arabs over Africans, defining who could be free and who could be enslaved, as some developed genealogies that allowed them to claim Arab descent. These stipulations were racially defined, as Arab ancestry defined freedom while those with darker skin or who adhered to indigenous beliefs were connected with servitude. Amir Idris has maintained that racialized states transformed the cultural identities of Arab Muslim North and African Christian indigenous religious South into political identities through precolonial slavery, colonial indirect rule, and postcolonial state-sponsored Arabization and Islamization. Arabism and Islam became foundational to the northern-based nationalism of the postcolonial Sudanese state.⁴²

How, then, did race inform South Sudanese understandings of the political circumstances that they had to confront, circumstances largely precipitated by European and Arab actors? This study employs a conceptualization of race most closely aligned with the work of Christopher Lee, who notes that “race is understood to be a marker, as well as a phenomenological schema—a structure of thought for explaining the world. Race is irreducible to any single context or explanation—what Ann Laura Stoler has called its polyvalent mobility—with each of the aforementioned issues carrying historical and pedagogical significance.”⁴³ For many in South Sudan, race—principally Arab and black/African—marked ruler and ruled, favored and marginalized, and, in the spiritual sense, oppressor and oppressed.⁴⁴ This study not only shows how racial and religious rhetoric was often blurred but also explores how Sudanese Christians acted as racial architects, fashioning race through a crucible that allied racial with spiritual identity and difference. By looking at the role of African Christians in the formation of racial thought, my focus differs from those who have looked to the role of missions in this regard. Derek Chang once went so far as to note that the mission project “made race” through a language of religion, culture, nation, and transformation, and because of the perceived centrality of the colonial state in the history of race and racism, scholars have noted ways in which missions were involved in the construction and implementation of racial and ethnic projects.⁴⁵ While missionaries were involved in maintaining ethnic boundaries, my study shows that Sudanese Christians, long after the condominium period, employed biblical idioms and theology when describing elements of a racial conflict. They were racial and religious thinkers outside the mission context.

In this vein, *Chosen Peoples* builds on studies that have discussed indigenous thinkers fashioning racial thought before, during, and after the colonial period. Africans were innovative in their understanding and navigation of colonial rule’s racially fraught environment. Rather than merely receiving imposed ideas, behaviors, and vocabularies from the colonial state, they had precolonial practices of organization and self-identification and were able to transform racial ideologies during and after the colonial period for their own purposes.⁴⁶ I examine South Sudanese thinkers who blended racial and religious thought to articulate solidarity and distinction from North Sudanese. While colonialism played a role in institutionalizing and policing the Arab-African divide, I am most concerned with southerners and their differing responses to northerners, Arabs, Islam, and the prospect of political unity with or separation from the North.

Given my argument that southern nationalist thinkers largely perceived the liberation struggle as a racial conflict, the current explosion of ethnic politics demands serious consideration of ethnicity's role in the interplay between race, religion, and politics in South Sudan. The potency of ethnic identity in the South amid a shared black identity suggests a limit to race's ability to bind distinct cultural communities or implies that people believe that ethnicity addresses certain questions, situations, or problems that race does not. In *Citizen and Subject*, Mahmood Mamdani makes the following inquiries concerning the nature of anticolonial nationalism and the roles of ethnicity and racial domination:

Rather than just uniting diverse ethnic groups in a common predicament, was not racial domination actually mediated through a variety of ethnically organized local powers? If so, is it not too simple even if tempting to think of the anticolonial (nationalist) struggle as just a one-sided repudiation of ethnicity rather than also a series of ethnic revolts against so many ethnically organized and centrally reinforced local powers . . . was not ethnicity a dimension of both power and resistance, of both the problem and the solution?⁴⁷

In one sense, South Sudanese ethnicities are vestiges of colonial power—the condominium government and missionaries were determined to maintain indigenous cultures in the South, which explained their encouragement of vernacular language use in classrooms and for “Native Administration.”⁴⁸ In another sense, southern ethnicities are symbols of state resistance—the rebel SPLA relied on indigenous chiefs to organize provisions and enlist young men and boys into its forces during the Second Civil War, and ethnicity played a key role in South Sudan's postindependence conflict (one headlined by the Dinka and Nuer).⁴⁹

* * *

“Even if implausible to some,” writes David M. Gordon, “the spirits of the invisible world—including ancestors, nature spirits, God, the Holy Spirit, Jesus, and Satan—hold implications for realms of human agency.” Rather than setting out to write a history of institutionalized religion in his *Invisible Agents: Spirits in a Central African History*, Gordon frames his text as a history of the spirits understood to have influenced this world.⁵⁰ While this study is not principally concerned with ancestors or nature spirits, *Chosen Peoples* supports Gordon's assertion concerning the spiritual implications

of human agency and is not an organizational Church history. Rather, it is concerned with how South Sudanese understood Sudan's fractious post-colonial history as a spiritual chronicle: one in which people represented God as an agent working on southerners' behalf, portrayed Satan as working behind the scenes, and invoked biblical precedents to fit contemporary history. From the perspective of many South Sudanese Christians, there was no clean demarcation between the natural and supernatural in the quest for political liberation.

How did southerners use biblical language when describing themselves and their northern neighbors before 2011? How did they use theology to define and augment their efforts to achieve self-determination and separation? Although R. O. Collins and Lilian Sanderson write about missions and education in their general histories of condominium-era Sudan, these questions are largely unaddressed in those studies. While Collins invites readers into the social environment that was Christian mission education, Christianity and missions were only elements, not the primary foci, of his condominium-focused monographs. His *Shadows in the Grass*, furthermore, concludes with 1956, eliminating the space to explore the mission project's postcondominium impact. Conversely, Lilian Sanderson's voluminous study concerns both the condominium and early independence eras, but—like Collins—does not discuss exactly how southerners used the Bible for their own identity politics or sociopolitical action.⁵¹ *Chosen Peoples* is unique in its chronology (beginning in the late nineteenth century and ending in the twenty-first century) and in its primary focus on how biblical literacy and faith informed sociopolitical action. I am interested in how southerners used their faith as a *political technology*. Beth Coleman once encouraged a contemplation of race as technology, an idea that shifted from biological and genetic systems that dominated race's definition toward questions of technological agency (or the ways by which external devices help us navigate the world).⁵² I propose that South Sudanese Christians put their religion to practical sociopolitical uses within the contexts of colonialism, independence, and civil wars.

Richard Gray once noted that religion in Africa has long been understood to have political elements; it can legitimate the status quo, possess a prophetic dimension, provide a base from which to levy attacks against those in power, and legitimate revolution.⁵³ The Bible could be used to provide templates for action that Africans could implement in their particular contexts. David Chidester and Elizabeth Elbourne highlight how Africans wielded agency by reinterpreting the Bible to incorporate it with

established beliefs, using Christianity to move within and against colonial regimes.⁵⁴ Kikuyu readers and converts in colonial Kenya supplied a grammar and vocabulary for new popular politics; young people, by identifying with biblical subjects, were equipped to articulate anticolonial sentiments.⁵⁵ I continue in this vein of confirming the Bible's dissident political utility in Africa by investigating how southerners used Christianity to define themselves in relation to the North, criticize the government, script futures, and forge new identities.

Scholarship on southern political and social history has taken disparate approaches to religion's role in the conflicts between North and South Sudan. Rolandsen notes that anthropological studies on Sudan tend to focus on the local scene, following in Edward Evans-Pritchard's footsteps. As studies from the Second Civil War explore how the conflict has affected local societies, much work on southern religious life and change during that war is consequently localized.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, there is a way to examine religious change at the local or ethnic level and link it to organizational uses of theology and the Bible at a wider, regional level. This study moves in this direction by focusing on the ways in which religious thought was and continues to be articulated by a host of actors in a range of print spaces. Rather than limiting my focus to a specific community or ethnic group, the actors in my study include mission students, clergy, politicians, and others from a wide range of ethnicities.

ARGUMENT

Christianity was essential to the southern resistance struggle. A wide swath of South Sudanese actors employed Christian discourses, metaphors, and imageries in various ways. Christian discourse was used to define the Arab Other and black/African Us; Christianity was envisioned as a bond that could unify disparate ethnicities; songs and poems with biblical messages appeared outside devotional contexts within public, circulating print media. Christian print discourse not only provided a lexicon that encouraged an imagined understanding of a South Sudanese nation but also, by positioning God as a God of the black and southern oppressed, Sudanese writers claimed him as being uniquely theirs and themselves as especially his.

And yet, without being confined to the Arab Muslim North versus black Christian South paradigm, religious thought has also been employed to address interethnic relations among southerners. Within the last ten years,

the leaders of Sudan's Catholic and Anglican communities have publicly stated that God created diversity and ethnicities.⁵⁷ Taken together, the theologies presented in this study have broader relevance for discussions concerning the role of religion in political action and identity formation, the role of religion in the public sphere, and the use of religious thought to encourage inclusion and distinction.

* * *

“Religious identity,” wrote Lamin Sanneh, “is one form of self-understanding among many, such as gender, class, or race, and where religion cuts across multiple forms of identity, as it does in Sudan, it can be a mobilizing force for good or for ill.”⁵⁸ Francis Deng notes that religion has “become a symbol of identity of power sharing, even of the management control of our resources, and certainly, of the culture that gives us our sense of who we are and to whom we relate . . . in the world. . . . It has become the symbolic embodiment of all these other issues we talk about.”⁵⁹ Building off Sanneh, Deng, and Gray, this study offers an intimate look into just how Sudanese and non-Sudanese figures marshaled Christianity to create and cut across identities, mobilize southerners in their wars against the North, and govern interethnic relationships. During each of the civil wars, South Sudanese lay and ecclesiastical thinkers used the Bible to find historical precedents for their circumstances and a lexicon for resistance. In using the Bible to provide a script for liberation, they came to see themselves as a “chosen people” destined for liberation like Old Testament Israel. While North Sudanese were repeatedly—directly and indirectly—positioned with the biblical Egyptians, Babylonians, and other enemies of Israel, southerners crafted biblical oppressor-oppressed parallels along racial lines, resulting in the demonization of Arabs and the sacralization of black Africans.

The South Sudanese political struggle would have been different without Christianity's injection in several ways. First, an important element of the struggle's righteous moral positioning would have been lost. It is one thing for a group to claim that its politics are superior to those of another group; it is different when the group claims that its opponent is on the wrong side of a spiritual battle between good and evil. As Joseph Taban's quotation at the beginning of this chapter conveys, southerners gravitated to the Bible because of its message of forthcoming glory. The Bible provided scripts at various moments of the struggle that could provide hope when the outcome was uncertain.

The concept of *chosenness* at the core of this study speaks to Christianity's importance for politics. Various scholars have shown how modern nationalist movements adopted the idea of God's chosenness (first experienced by the biblical Israelites). Chosenness has underscored and justified political actions and provided a spark for political and national liberation.⁶⁰ South Sudanese appropriations of biblical Israel during the twentieth-century civil wars supports the idea that adopting a sense of *chosenness* remains a viable political stratagem. And yet, South Sudan is a secular state (although, as Noah Salomon has written, the meaning of religious freedom in the new nation is debatable).⁶¹ Nevertheless, this study echoes Sanneh by contending that religious thought is enmeshed with the roots of the world's newest secular state. This reality speaks to the continued power and potential of religious discourse in the political sphere in South Sudan, Africa, and beyond.

This study's relevance for studies of religion and politics beyond Sudan is illustrated by its engagement with certain bigger questions. Ruth Marshall posed important queries in her study on Pentecostalism in Nigeria: Can religious revival be understood primarily as a response to material crises, a response to crisis in moral or symbolic regimes, or some combination of both? Why should solutions to crisis be sought in the religious theater? Marshall contends that if we invoke situations of material crises like social exclusion to explain religious revival, we see such movements in terms of their functionality—as modes of political combat or languages to translate and understand the real, among others. While she acknowledges that religious movements can meet these functions, Marshall asserts that they are insufficient as an explanation for contemporary religious revival and its political meaning.⁶² “Born-again Christianity operates in Nigeria within a terribly crowded religious field. What sort of inquiry will enable us to understand why *this* particular form of religious practice develops here and now, and uncover the secret of its remarkable success? What question(s) is Jesus really the answer to?”⁶³ My study asks similar questions for the Sudanese context. Why did this brand of political theology develop during this time of Sudanese/South Sudanese history?⁶⁴ Was it a response to Islamizing government incursions or something else? What did (and does) theology offer to southerners as a solution to experiences of war, exile, and racial-religious oppression?

It is my hope that this book can widen our understanding of how ostensibly secular spaces can be charged with important religious meaning. During the Enlightenment, violent wars and dynastic struggles waged in religion's name contributed to a shift of religion from the public to the

private sphere. One argument for this need rested in the belief that religion lives in the domain of passion and faith, a space in which rational argument and interest-guided action could not nor should have a place.⁶⁵ During the 1980s, however, religion entered the public sphere in several ways; reasons behind this phenomenon included Iran's Islamic revolution, Poland's solidarity movement, and Protestant fundamentalism as an American political force.⁶⁶ When discussing the Sudanese government's efforts to create an Islamic state, Abdullahi A. An-Na'im argues that whenever monotheistic creeds are conflated with government, they make citizens of their adherents but subjects of those who do not follow that faith. Furthermore, efforts to make such creeds the basis of a civil order have resulted in violence throughout history—more recently, in Sudan.⁶⁷ Is the union of religious and political thought the friend, enemy, outgrowth, or foundation of secular states? Do religious projects and rhetoric carry empty dreams for forging national community or, conversely, have a legitimate—if not necessary—role in fostering healthy, socially pluralistic states?

On the latter of those questions, the religious discourse concerning ethnicities and ethnic conflict in this study has wider resonance beyond Sudan and Africa. How should one reconcile one priest's comment that there were no longer ethnic separations between Dinka or Nuer—now all were one in Christ—with another by the archbishop of Juba that tribes were “gifts of God”?⁶⁸ What does it mean when God is used in one breath to argue for cultural unity and, in another, for cultural diversity? Such a question has particular meaning in global contexts where interracial or interethnic relations are or have been fraught; the multiracial American church's engagement with the Black Lives Matter movement presents an interesting point of contrast, as those who claim that “all lives matter” based on humanity's sharing God's same image and likeness could run up against those who highlight God's creative work in fashioning distinct tribes, tongues, and peoples. Thus, the question of when one can or should reference God or scripture in encouraging unity, diversity, sameness, or difference has broader relevance way beyond South Sudan's borders. Furthermore, the decision made by some condominium mission officials to pose ethnic conflict as a spiritual problem can be placed in conversation with other contexts in which certain social ills like racism, economic inequality, or war have been described or condemned in spiritual terms.⁶⁹

Finally, one of this study's most significant interventions in the field of Sudanese religious history is my contention that South Sudanese religious nationalism was essentially gendered. “One important conceptual prob-

lem,” write Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, “concerns the danger of reifying the ‘nation’ and the ‘ethnic’ or ‘racial’ group, by treating them as totally independent and separate and not considering how they intersect with other modes of differentiation such as class and gender.”⁷⁰ To be sure, the connection between gender and Sudanese nationalism is evident. In North Sudan, the Anglo-Egyptian administration introduced modern education to develop government administrators and those who could run the cotton schemes. The male educated class led Sudan’s nationalist movement (and, along with sectarian leaders, led the postcolonial state), and mostly male elites from Central and North Sudan dominated the military regimes and democratic governments that have ruled the country since 1956. These dominant groups defined the nation’s identity as Arab and Islamic, and—given that condominium administrators defined the public sphere as male—the ruling social group was exclusively composed of men. Nada Ali notes that while much has been written on how condominium rule created regional disparities in the country, few have focused on colonialism’s gender-specific impact on Sudanese women and men. She contends that the politics and resistance discourses of Sudanese and South Sudanese women’s organizations in exile (particularly in Egypt and Kenya in the 1990s and early 2000s) offer the chance to examine how intersections of gender and other identities shape women’s and men’s experiences of oppression and resistance.⁷¹

This study of religious thought is largely about men—men who taught at an elite mission school and their male pupils; men who wanted to halt the spread of Islam up the Nile by creating a military regiment; men who fashioned a liberatory theology in exile during the 1960s; men who expressed a martial theology in the SPLA newspaper in the 1990s; male soldiers, clerics, refugees, students, and a host of other intellectuals who infused religion into their racial and regional politics. The rich—though heavily male-authored—print media contained in the archives I visited over the course of this research informs this male focus and, by association, the gendered nature of the thought examined here. As predominantly male contexts must not mean the absence of gender, this book shows that masculinity courses throughout this study, from the militaristic uniform and sporting activities encouraged at the all-male Nugent School (including the Boy Scouts) to the particular biblical figures and narratives that writers referenced and the specific groups tabbed for the purposely un-Islamic Equatorial Corps.

Citing Judith Butler as inspiration, Alicia Decker writes that she sees gender “not only as an intentional act that illuminates the agency of social actors but also as a performative act that creates identity.”⁷² In her study

of women, gender, and militarism in Idi Amin's Uganda, Decker contends that new constructions of masculinity and femininity emerged from militaristic practice and acknowledges that militarism is particularly common within societies that have experienced military coups.⁷³ This book pivots from Decker by looking at how gender informed religious thought and performance just north of Uganda, in a South Sudan that has been rife with military conflict for the better part of the last half-century. My argument that religious thought was a crucible through which racial identity was defined is coupled with my contention that militarism cannot be separated from the development and substance of southern religious nationalism. The reality that many of the religiously infused political views expressed in circulating print media were not only classed (elite) and raced (black) but also gendered reflects the exclusive nature of who possessed power, public platforms, and privileges.

CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

In the early twentieth century—the infancy of the condominium period—the Church Missionary Society (CMS) established mission schools in South Sudan. Of all the educational institutions it founded, the Nugent School stood out from the rest. Chapter 1, “The Nugent School and the Ethno-Religious Politics of Mission Education,” provides insight into the life and legacy of the Nugent School. The school illustrates several important elements of the South Sudanese mission enterprise that relate to the broader narrative of Christian and ethnic politics in the region. First, it was founded to assist in halting the spread of Islam up the Nile. Second, efforts were made at the school to uphold ethnic identities. Third, the presence of ethnic conflict there and at other mission sites highlighted the tension between efforts to protect diverse social identities and encourage a common Christian identity. This dynamic leads to the fourth and final point: the idea that ethnic conflict was a spiritual problem that Christianity could (and should) conquer.

On August 18, 1955, the Equatorial Corps at Torit staged a mutiny. The Torit mutiny was a defining moment in South Sudanese self-determination, an event that has been commonly, albeit inaccurately, used to mark the beginning of the First Civil War. Using sources that include private correspondences, unpublished memoirs, interviews, and court documentation, chapter 2 discusses the causes, conduct, and consequences of the Torit mutiny. The mutiny was not only an emancipatory action to prevent the

history of past enslavement from repeating itself; it was also a moment in which members of the corps—a unit created against the backdrop of the Egyptian Army’s presence and Islamizing tendencies—rejected an order to be sent North and replaced by northern soldiers. While Christian feeling was not the primary impetus behind the mutiny, Governor General Reginald Wingate had created the corps in an attempt to eliminate the military’s Islamic culture. This sentiment is essential for understanding the mutiny as a moment when colonial religious visions had violent, separatist consequences, resulting in a widening chasm between North and South and closer union between a diversity of southerners.

Chapter 3, “Liberation War,” examines the liberatory religious thought that emerged during the First Sudanese Civil War. Building off of Cone’s black theology and the Kairos document, the chapter explores the ways in which southern activists infused spirituality into the language of racial resistance, an important development in the evolution of South Sudanese political thought. In addition to understanding their struggle against the state as a racial conflict pitting Africans against Arabs, activists also understood it as a spiritual contest. In this vein, figures like soldier Joseph Lagu and priest Paolino Doggale conceptualized southerners as a community defined not only by their racial and cultural identity but also by their favorable position in a narrative of oppression and liberation. These streams of thought encouraged the idea of an imagined community united by race, politics, and spiritual experience; they also provide a lens into how southerners understood their history and national identity at a moment of great trial.⁷⁴

Situated during the Second Sudanese Civil War, chapter 4 shows how editors and contributors to the *SPLM/SPLA Update*—the SPLM’s official newspaper medium—were creative intellectuals who sought to organize a unifying account of events amid internal splits and factionalism. The Bible provided a foundation from which people divided by language, politics, and ethnicity could envision themselves as sharing a common heritage through the lens of the ancient (and biblical) Kingdom of Cush. The chapter uses the *Update*, a propaganda form whose content had not been seriously examined until my 2015 article of the same name, as a means to examine the roles of Christianity and theology in SPLM/A ideology and politics.⁷⁵ In doing so, it shows the central role that the South Sudanese diaspora had in defining the conflict in spiritual terms.

Chapter 5, “The Troubled Promised Land,” is bookended by the end of the Second Civil War (2005) and the end of independent South Sudan’s internal conflict (2018). Less than three years into independence, South

Sudan found itself embroiled in an internal conflict drawn along ethnic lines. What became of the liberation theology that was supposed to reach its poetic conclusion with political sovereignty? While the conflict debunked any notion that southerners felt a sense of pan-Christian solidarity strong enough to subsume ethnicity or prevent ethnic tension, it also produced a dynamic crucible of religious thought. While the 2005–18 period was distinct for the efflorescence of ideas that appeared online, the notion that intergroup fighting was a spiritual “evil” and that uniting under God was the solution to this problem recalled a similar train of thought conveyed during the condominium era. Though the traditional enemy from the North was absent, religious thought still functioned as a political technology despite the changed scope of who and what constituted us and them, good and evil, heroes and villains.

The conclusion reexamines the argument and offers implications of how the history presented confirms and challenges understandings of South Sudan’s liberation struggle, the role political theology may have for the nation moving forward, and how this narrative may shed light on religion’s role in the public sphere internationally.