ON DISCIPLES AND MAGICIANS
THE DIVERSIFICATION OF DIVINITY AMONG THE NUER DURING THE COLONIAL ERA

BY

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Evans-Pritchard recorded the proliferation of both free-divinities and magic among the Nuer during the 1930s.\(^1\) This trend continued after he left the field, and still continues today. Among the reasons why this proliferation was so marked during Evans-Pritchard’s time was that the government’s recent suppression of prophets among the Nuer had released the prophetic control over both the appearance of divinity and the use of magic in Nuer society. The removal of the major prophets from active involvement in Nuer religious life gave more scope for the activities of minor spiritual figures, at the same time that it confined those activities to the narrower social confines of individual sections within Nuer tribes. Government sanctions against religious figures helped to blur distinctions between different types of mantic persons, whether minor prophets or magicians.

The Nuer living east of the Nile experienced the release of prophetic control twice in the early part of this century: first, briefly, after the deaths of the Lou prophet Ngundeng Bong (d. 1906) and the Gaawar prophet Deng Laka (d. 1907); second, and more completely, after the government suppression of prophets during the ‘Nuer Settlement’ of 1929. This paper will examine the consequences of the release of that control after the death of Ngundeng and after the ‘Nuer Settlement’. It will look at the careers of mantic persons along the Sudan-Ethiopian frontier, which constituted the outer fringe of Ngundeng’s influence during his life. It will then examine the problem of the spread of lesser divinities and magic following the forced removal of prophets from most Nuer communities in the 1930s. We must begin by giving a brief outline of the effect of prophetic activity on other spiritual figures among the Nuer.\(^2\)
The first great prophet of the Nuer was Ngundeng Bong (fl. 1875-1906) who grew up among the Gaajok section of the Jikany Nuer along the Sudan-Ethiopian border, and subsequently rose to fame as a prophet among his mother’s people, the Lou Nuer. Nuer communities living east of the Nile in the latter half of the nineteenth century were a mixture of immigrant Nuer from the west and Dinka and Anuak inhabitants of the newly occupied eastern territories. Ngundeng was a Nuer earth-master (or ‘leopard-skin chief’) who was seized by the Dinka ancestral divinity DENG and became the mouthpiece of that divinity to the new Nuer-Dinka community. Ngundeng combined the role of the earth-master with the images, symbolism, and mythology of DENG and of the first Dinka spear-master, Aiwel Longar, to establish a new religious idiom of prophecy among the Nuer, and to espouse a message of social harmony which not only assisted the Nuer to settle peacefully with their former Dinka and Anuak enemies, but which helped to contain the internal feuds and divisions which had become so much a part of the Nuer migration into and occupation of the eastern lands. Ngundeng’s great contemporary was the Gaawar prophet, Deng Laka (fl. 1878-1907), who was originally a Dinka. Both were ultimately succeeded by their sons, Guek Ngundeng (fl. 1918-1929), and Dual Diu (fl. 1914-1968).

Prophets were seized by a free or sky-divinity (kuoth nhial) who spoke through them. Known as guk kuoth, ‘sack of divinity’, the prophet was one of a number of persons in Nuer society who had some special ability through an association with a divinity. These ji-kuthni (‘people of divinities’) or guan kuoth (‘owner of divinity’) included diviners (tiet) and persons assisted by a tutelary or clan-divinity, but they also included magicians (guan wal)—persons who owned and manipulated magical objects activated by lower, or earthly, Powers (kuuth piny). The diviners diagnosed illnesses, the other guan kuoth had limited control over various natural objects or events and performed sacrifices on behalf of the wider community, but the magicians employed their Powers for their own, private, ends.

The major prophets controlled the activities of many of these figures, and thus helped to regulate the appearance of divinity and spiritual power within society. A major prophet surrounded himself with a number of minor prophets, dayiemni (sing. dayiem), who were inspired by lesser divinities, became seized by them when the prophet was seized by his divinity, sang the prophet’s songs, and