

Healing, Protestantism and Cattle Sacrifice in the Ethiopian-South Sudanese Borderlands



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Yotam Gidron received his PhD in African History from Durham in 2020. His research, supervised by Cherry Leonardi and Jacob Wiebel, dealt with Evangelical Zionism and Nuer political life in western Ethiopia. He is the author of *Israel in Africa: Security, Migration, Interstate Politics* (Zed Books, 2020).



Boys and cattle in a village in Lare, Ethiopia.

It is a given in many societies across the world that spirits affect the health and wellbeing of humans and other animals, either directly or by influencing the state of the environment in which they live. Indeed, the appeal of many faiths lies precisely in their promise to provide humans with the necessary knowledge, tools and techniques to seek healing, protection and recovery. However, how humans can and should engage with spirits is a complicated question, to which different faiths provide radically different answers: the objects or practices one faith deems legitimate for engaging with the divine, other faiths dismiss as superstitious, idolatrous or satanic.

My PhD thesis examined the evolution of Protestant Christianity among Nuer communities living along the South Sudanese-Ethiopian borderlands in north-eastern Africa. Here, as in many other parts of Africa, born-again churches—a label that refers to a range of conservative Evangelical Protestant groups—gained considerable popularity over the past three decades with far-reaching social and political implications. Drawing on a year of ethnographic research in the west-Ethiopian region of Gambella, my thesis examined the emergence of several Messianic groups whose members seek to emulate the form of Christianity practiced by the first followers of Jesus in New Testament days.

One reason that the rise of Protestant Christianity among Nuer communities is significant is that this faith understands the relationships between people, and between humans and God, very differently from the faiths that historically prevailed in Nuer society. While Protestant Christianity typically focuses on the individual believer's interiority, intention or bodily dispositions as the locus of engagement with the divine, Nuer norms focus on interpersonal relations and pragmatic rituals in which the ultimate tools for communication with spirits or God are cattle and spirit mediums. These differences impact, in turn, both how people understand the causes of sickness and how they seek healing.

Before the spread of Christianity, Nuer sacrificed cattle in order to deal with all sorts of misfortunes and challenges: infertility, famine, sickness, the death of a person by lightning, and, perhaps most importantly, after homicides and cases of incest, which were believed to cause deadly (and potentially contagious) bodily pollutions known as *nueer* and *rual*. Cattle sacrifice could amend relations between humans, and between humans and spirits, because the lives (and more precisely, the blood) of humans and cattle were intertwined, serving as an extension of each other; cattle exchange was an avenue for forging kinship ties (hence, for example, the practice of transferring cattle as bridewealth during marriage among Nuer), and cattle could also substitute humans 'in sacrifice, or in other words in relation to God.'¹

Over the past century, under the influence of Christianity, markets, and the state, the place of cattle as media that connect humans both to each other and to God has been increasingly undermined. When American Presbyterian missionaries first settled among Nuer communities in the early twentieth century, they anxiously tried to convince them that cattle sacrifice represented a misguided attempt to communicate with God. For missionaries, the resort to cattle sacrifice was evidence that Nuer were 'thousands of years behind.'² Meanwhile, the increasingly popular practice of selling cattle in regional markets in Sudan and Ethiopia or consuming it as food in urban areas, coupled with government interventions in which cattle was primarily framed in economic rather than spiritual terms (as court fines, tax and tribute) also led people to reconsider their relationship with cattle.

Not many Nuer were persuaded by missionaries to become Christian during the colonial period (1898-1956), but since the 1960s, and particularly during Sudan's second civil war (1983-2005), conversion rates have skyrocketed. However, not all misfortunes could be explained by the Christian doctrine, and not all hazards could be mitigated without cattle sacrifice. Anthropologist Sharon Hutchinson has argued that as late as the 1990s, conversion to Christianity continued to leave people with 'ritual and explanatory lacunae', leading many to resort to cattle sacrifice despite the campaigns of Nuer evangelists to eliminate the practice.³ When faced with complicated diseases or misfortunes that their new faith could not explain or solve, Christians often opted for ('traditional') sacrificial rituals rather than silent (Protestant) prayer and trust in the Word of God. From the Protestant perspective, this turn, from inner belief 'back' to pragmatic rituals, represented a failure.

The repertoire of practices born-again Christianity has brought to the region since the late 1990s, as I came to understand it, is much richer and better suited for offering alternatives to 'traditional' rituals. To a large extent, I think, this is because contemporary born-again faiths, while they still focus on the individual and dismiss cattle sacrifice, are far more open to rituals and experiential forms of worship than the more ascetic type of Protestantism missionaries introduced a century ago. For a generation of young Christians who grew up under the influence of born-again churches in refugee camps and urban areas—away from their families' cattle *rey ciërj*, in the 'village'—a wide range of activities such as Bible study, charismatic prayer sessions, lengthy fasts, nightly vigils, church development work and healing and deliverance programmes filled the 'ritual and explanatory lacunae' Hutchinson described.

1. Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford, 1956), p. 260.

2. Eleanor C. Vandevort, *A Leopard Tamed* (New York, 1968), p. 167.

3. Sharon E. Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War, and the State* (Berkeley, 1996), p. 325.



Christian Temple Church on a Sunday morning, Gambella town.

In the Nuer language, the relationship cultivated with God through constant religious work and self-mastery is referred to as *maar*—the same word used to refer to bonds of kinship historically established through blood ties or cattle exchange. The starting point of this relationship is at the moment of baptism (*buony*), when one is 'born-again'. But being 'born-again' is not a status one achieves and then simply retains. It is a never-ending process. After baptism, the relationship with God has to be maintained through practices that usually focus on the body of the believer and the senses: from studying the Bible, praying and praising (including singing and playing instruments in church), through 'doing God's work' (hoeing the church's compound, helping with the construction of new church buildings, going out to evangelise, organising conferences), to the disciplining of the flesh (fasting, refraining from sugar, coffee, alcohol and smoking). While many of these activities are carried out in groups, and in this sense are explicitly social, their focus is on the individual.

Cattle, under these circumstances, have increasingly been desacralised and relegated to non-spiritual spheres of Nuer life, where they are treated primarily as a religiously neutral index of 'ethnic' identity and an economic resource. No Nuer marriage is ever complete, for example, without the transfer of bridewealth cattle, even though cash has been increasingly used to replace real cows in this context. Cattle sacrifice also still takes place, although it is increasingly rare. This usually happens following cases of incest which include, according to Nuer law, any sexual relations between individuals genealogically related five to seven generations back. But even in this context, it seems that the ritual has been largely desacralised and is viewed as an operation whose spiritual dimensions are rather ambiguous. Some Nuer born-again Christians argue that intense prayer sessions and extended fasts can prevent the sickness associated with incest and obliterate the need for sacrifice in this context too.



Seventh-day Adventist baptism in the Baro River, Gambella town.

The evolution of the relationship between humans, cattle and spirits highlights the (perhaps now-obvious) point that 'all religion is material religion,' regardless of how concerned it is with immaterial entities and forces.⁴ But it also demonstrates the historicity of the materiality of religion: how religious objects and practices are entangled in various legal, economic and social processes that transform not only the nature of religious life but also the very parameters of what is considered 'religious' or faith-related in the first place. The ways in which humans engage with spirits or God to promote their wellbeing, then, are historically dynamic and deeply political. There is a great deal we can learn from studying how they change.

4. Matthew Engelke, 'Material Religion', in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. by R. A. Orsi (Cambridge, 2011), p. 209-229.