

A quest for sustainable peace in South Sudan: the role of everyday religious practices, ceremonies and rituals in robust peacebuilding

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Abstract: Since 1955, South Sudan has had intermittent civil wars, and sustainable peace has been difficult to attain. There have been numerous attempts that include major international and national political and economic initiatives. Among the social initiatives, The New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC), perceived to represent all religious practices and people, was considered an essential tool in uniting all South Sudanese, ending conflicts and achieving sustainable peace both within the communities and nationally. However, the inclusion of the NSCC, which represents mainly Christianity and includes Muslim religious leaders, has not delivered sustainable peace. This article utilises ethnographic data to present a socioreligious perspective. It seeks to argue that other South Sudanese indigenous or cultural religious everyday peace practices of ceremonies and rituals can present a robust peacebuilding initiative in the region. It concludes that the inter-relationships of socioreligious practices, an aspect the NSCC peacebuilding processes ignored, are essential in delivering sustainable peace.

Keywords: Conflict, peacebuilding, sustainable peace, everyday peace, religion, ceremonies and rituals, South Sudan.

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Introduction

A quest for sustainable peace in South Sudan calls for a robust peacebuilding initiative that includes existing indigenous or cultural religious everyday peace practices, ceremonies and rituals of South Sudanese. Since 1955, numerous peacebuilding attempts have included major international and national political and economic initiatives (Iyob and Khadiagala 2006) and are found to exclude indigenous religious practices (Abu-Nimer 2001; Avruch 1998; Bedigen 2017; Jabs 2014; Zartman 2007). Among these initiatives, for example, The New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC) was included as an essential part of national peace negotiations (Agwanda and Harris 2009; Zartman 2007). However, the inclusion of the NSCC, which majorly represents one aspect of South Sudanese religious practices—Christianity—has not delivered sustainable peace. While the NSCC includes some local and religious leaders, it excludes their everyday peace practices and focuses mainly on conventional peacebuilding norms and mechanisms such as negotiation and mediation. Therefore, this article supports the view that context matters, particularly where conventional methods have been challenged and African Traditional Religion (ATR), ceremonies and rituals remain instrumental in inter-ethnic peacebuilding (Munive 2013). It highlights that, where the national or international actors have adopted ceremonies and rituals, this has been minimally weaved into the formal peace process, thus offering a narrow view of the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration programme (DDR) (Bedigen 2019). Yet, indigenous DDR includes post-conflict inter-ethnic cleansing rituals of healing in peacebuilding. With this in mind, this paper seeks to argue that the inclusion of other South Sudanese religious practices such as ceremonies and rituals within the NSCC or other peace agencies could present a robust peacebuilding initiative. The article concludes that inter-relationships of socioreligious everyday practices (i.e. religions, ceremonies and rituals) are essential and should be implemented along with other political and economic initiatives for robust peacebuilding in the region.

This study is important for many reasons. 1) South Sudan peace attempts have mainly included political and economic initiatives by regional and international governments and agencies but excluded socioreligious practices. 2) Where religion has been utilised, it is mainly the NSCC, perceived to represent others (so, Muslim, ATR, ceremonies and rituals remain largely excluded). 3) Conflicts damage social relations, and as Coe *et al.* (2013) indicate, religion can repair relationships. 4) Majority of South Sudanese live in rural areas, and socioreligious practices govern their everyday lives. Lederach's work (1997: 87) supports this by indicating that 'people and their cultural traditions for building peace are ... primary resources'. Moreover, most of these rituals are utilised in peer-to-peer, family, clan intra- and inter-ethnic peacebuilding—making them 'everyday' practices (Bedigen 2017; 2021; Mac Ginty 2014). Indicated by Mac Ginty (2014: 549), everyday peace is 'the routinized practices used by individuals

and collectives as they navigate their way through life in a deeply divided society that may suffer from ethnic or religious cleavages and be prone to episodic direct violence'. Everyday peace involves coping mechanisms such as preventative and cleansing ceremonies and rituals. From the 1990s, their use has progressed beyond ethnic conflicts to some aspects of national DDR ceremonies (Arnold and Alden 2007; Bedigen 2019). Adding to this, Jabs (2014) indicates a few have been applied to the modern conflict and civil war situations at local levels and in ex-combatants re-integration. Examples include *Gomo Tong* ('Bending the spear'), *Cieng* ('To put together'), *Mabior* ('A young white bull'), *Gurtong* ('To blunt the spear'), *Mato Oput* ('Drinking bitter herbs') and *Nyono Tong Gweno* ('Stepping on eggs'). Yet, these customs remain alienated in the national politically-led peacebuilding processes (Bedigen 2017).

Hunt (2017: 110) indicates that in the UN, robust peacekeeping refers to 'political and operational strategies'. He argues that it involves the use of force in self-defence and defence of the local vulnerable. There was a call for UN peacekeeping strategies to be robust was after failed interventions in Rwanda and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Tardy 2011). In sub-Saharan Africa, robust peacekeeping was implemented in Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan; however, such interventions lacked a holistic approach to peacebuilding inclusive of locals and their customs—which is not sustainable. This article interprets robust peacebuilding to include cultural religious practices of ceremonies and rituals (the processes of the latter two bring people together), for example, in local mediation, community projects such as road/school construction. Moreover, the UN's interpretation of robust peacekeeping or peacebuilding revolves around the use of force, coercion and formal negotiations. As such, they exclude a 'wider set of relationships, activities and initiatives' crucial in the peaceful transformation and sustenance of political, social, religious and economic situations (Philpott and Powers 2010: 31).

In order to address the quest for sustainable peace in South Sudan, this article will briefly provide the methodology, the theoretical conceptualisation of religious practices, ceremonies and rituals, and analyses of indigenous ceremonies and rituals that have been utilised in inter-ethnic peacebuilding and in some instances of the civil wars (i.e. the NSCC, Christian and the Muslim Judiyya system). It suggests that such beliefs and everyday practices should have been fully included under the NSCC for robust peacebuilding.

Methodology

The study is based on field notes conducted by the author for her PhD research in conflict resolution between 2013 and 2016 among South Sudanese refugees in West Yorkshire, United Kingdom, and with others in the diaspora. Interviewees included

members of two religious groups—Muslims and Christians—and other ethnic groups, namely the Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk, Acholi and Anuak. Field notes from 15 interviewees affiliated with these religious groups and 15 culturally knowledgeable individuals who do not necessarily practise these religions are included. The notes consist of interviewees' responses on their involvement in religious peacebuilding events and cultural peace ceremonies/rituals. Interviewees' views were paraphrased or quoted in discussions. Only those ceremonies and rituals that appear to have links to Christian religious beliefs and have been utilised in inter-ethnic conflicts are summarised and included. The reason being, Christianity, through the NSCC, has been the religion of choice in the South Sudan national peacebuilding processes. Therefore, by re-examining interviewees' views on their religious and cultural practices in peacebuilding, the author incorporated socioreligious literature to provide a deeper, contextual understanding of the topic.

Theoretical conceptualisation

There is a fair amount of literature on religious practices, ceremonies and rituals in sub-Saharan peacebuilding. However, the majority analyse religion as a separate element to everyday peace ceremonies and rituals, and these are largely excluded in national peacebuilding. Yet, authors such as [Mac Ginty \(2014\)](#) indicate that everyday peace practices of local communities can significantly contribute to bottom-up peacebuilding in conflict-affected societies. [Abu-Nimer \(2001: 686\)](#), whose work encourages interreligious peacebuilding and training, further demonstrates that religion contributes 'social, moral and spiritual resources to peacebuilding'. He argues that 'religion influences the cultural behaviours and perceptions of an individual or group in varying degrees' ([Abu-Nimer 2001: 687](#)). He further highlights that religious values, norms and behaviours are an integral part of human interactions, which help to construct members' value systems and worldviews. Other authors indicate that conflicts can damage social relations; however, religious and cultural practices, including ancestral spirits, kinship, and rituals of reconciliation, are essential in repairing such broken relationships ([Coe et al. 2013](#); [wa Thiong'o 1986](#)). Also, work by [Schirch \(2015\)](#) shows that rituals and traditional religion are essential in peacebuilding because its symbolism, morals and reliance on cleansing help defuse tensions between disputants. [Bedigen \(2020\)](#) adds to these by indicating that religious cleansing rituals encourage conscience examination and forgiveness to enable sustainable peace.

Although religious practices have been found significant in national peacebuilding, they should be viewed in conjunction with community members' everyday cultural practices. Culture consists of members' learnt or created experiences organised by their owners and given interpretations (meanings) transmitted from past generations

to contemporaries (Avruch 1998: 17). In the context of this study, such cultures include ceremonies and rituals: *Gomo Tong*, *Cieng*, *Mabior*, *Gurtong*, *Mato Oput* (Bedigen 2017; Jabs 2014; Zartman 2000). In exploring their potential, both the literature and field notes reveal that they offer principles and values that can be applied in intra- or inter-ethnic conflicts or civil wars. At community level, they can be utilised in various disputes, such as cattle rustling, domestic, murders or massacres, as well as in post-war recovery, including disarmament (Bedigen 2020; Bradbury *et al.* 2006; Jeong 2005). The ceremonies may mark an end to peacekeeping and peacemaking, but further interactions and rituals contribute to peacebuilding. Ceremonies and rituals are particularly intended to appease the spirits, who, if angered, can afflict the community with invasions by others, deaths, diseases and droughts (Mbiti 1970; wa Thiong'o 1986). Such misfortunes can cause conflicts or civil wars in modern contexts—thus the need to provide an understanding of the significance of ceremonies and rituals in appeasing the spirits and averting calamities (Bedigen 2017).

Conceptualising religious practices, ceremonies and rituals in peacebuilding is significant because, in South Sudan, they have been utilised together in local or inter-ethnic peacebuilding but excluded from the NSCC's national peacebuilding processes. Also, religion, ceremonies and rituals are significant in robust peacebuilding because such practices are concerned with social life. In particular, the relationship of an individual/community to God/supernatural being believed to bring peace or disturbances to members (Evans-Pritchard 1953: 3). The belief in God through the South Sudanese indigenous religion, sometimes referred to as Animism or ATR, promotes morality and relationships between humans, God, spirits and the environment (Bedigen 2021). Such spiritual beliefs originating from members' religious experiences are inseparable from customary practices of ceremonies, rituals and peace (Bedigen 2017). In ATR, as mentioned earlier, evil spirits are believed to cause calamities such as drought, famine, plagues and intra-ethnic conflicts, all of which, including deep-rooted political and social divisions, have in one way or another contributed to South Sudan's intermittent civil wars. In local beliefs, calamities are shreds of evidence that the community lacks peace. Thus, the diviner is consulted to mediate and lead community members in the appeasement of spirits through cleansing ceremonies/rituals, leading to the eventual restoration of the community (Kamwaria & Katola 2012).

In inter-ethnic, and occasionally during the ethnic aspects, of civil wars, South Sudanese have approached peacebuilding through the Christian and Muslim religions. Examples include the Darfur Muslims who engaged in the *Judiyaa* (Muslim local justice system) and peace mediation (Bedigen 2020). In the Christian communities, such as East Equatoria, Christians' involvement in the Wunlit, Liliir and Abyei indigenous peacebuilding processes included biblical prayers and ATR practices of *Mabior* ritual cleansing. These peace deals, particularly Wunlit, lasted for a decade (Bedigen 2017; Coe *et al.* 2013). While these religious practices seem acceptable at inter-ethnic levels,

the NSCC has not incorporated them during national peace processes. Also, cleansing rituals have been significant in reintegrating ex-combatants, restoring public order and security in the Lord's Resistance Army inflicted area of Acholi, Northern Uganda, in Liberia and Sierra Leone (Bedigen 2017; Essien 2020). However, the NSCC, the body representing religious beliefs and practices, has continued to exclude these elements. Such pieces of evidence point to the need for the NSCC to include all religious practices, ceremonies and rituals of the locals. This article argues that doing so demonstrates the robustness of indigenous peacebuilding and its potential in delivering sustainable peace in the region. Next, it analyses indigenous ceremonies and rituals.

Indigenous ceremonies and rituals

The South Sudanese indigenous peacebuilding consists of everyday ceremonies and rituals significant in peacebuilding. However, a single ceremony or ritual may not address all aspects of peacebuilding; thus, disputing parties must engage in other associated rituals to accomplish the necessary peace processes. Indigenous peace processes start from exploring roots to conflicts, that is, story or truth-telling, confession, cleansing and re-integration ceremonies/rituals (Bedigen 2017; Lacey 2013). More generally, the purpose of ceremonies and rituals is to address four principles of indigenous peacebuilding (i.e. consensus, harmony, justice and restoration) (Focus Group Field Notes, December 2013). Ceremonies and rituals are diverse, unique to conflict types and are said to offer resolutions to local disputes (Gebre & Ohta 2017; Jok 2011). While some, such as *Mato Oput*, are robust and can be utilised in all conflicts, ranging from family to civil wars and overall management of the community's political, social and economic needs, the majority are specific or limited. For instance, *Ekisil* is for inter-ethnic cattle rustling, *Nyono Tong Gweno* is for cleansing, and *Cieng* is mainly for a reunion. It is recognised that their specificity to the context can render them efficient or inefficient in addressing modern-day conflicts and civil wars. Perhaps this is the reason why the NSCC did not engage them in national peace processes. However, the interconnectedness of the principles and values they hold (i.e. consensus, harmony, justice and restoration) can significantly contribute to the national peace processes by bringing all individuals involved together for a common goal.

To gain more understanding of indigenous peace ceremonies/rituals and why this article considers them crucial and that they should have been embraced by NSCC at national levels of peacebuilding, the article highlights Kamwaria & Katola's (2012: 53) work, which indicates that such ceremonies:

restore the broken relationship by appeasing the spirits of the deceased, and settle them in proper status in the ancestral world. This is a crucial means of preventing any anger and

aggression by the spirits of the deceased. The rituals restore the health of the individual and the community by expunging the evils caused by the immoral acts of civil war ... The spirits of the dead are believed to interfere or intervene in the life of the living. If well propitiated, they protect and guide people, ensure harmony in the community, promote fertility of land and people, and give good agricultural yield.

As demonstrated above, cultures that embrace everyday ceremonies and rituals contribute to conflict prevention, building and making peace. Ceremonies and rituals help create harmony between people and spirits, subsequently minimising conflicts. In the light of Douglas' (1999; 2004) view of culture, the Nilotic utilisation of ceremonies and rituals is intended toward peace and social good. Bedigen (2017) indicate that international communities, including the US Agency for International Development, sponsored many indigenous ceremonies in the recent civil wars due to their significance. This act led to the re-integration of more than 12,000 ex-combatants from the Lord's Resistance Army and returnees into Acholi communities in Northern Uganda, unlike in South Sudan, where the NSCC mainly utilised prayers. On the other hand, scepticism surrounds the application of indigenous methods in stopping violence or conflict, for they are perceived to be weak (Gatkuoth 2010). For example, the Wunlit Dinka-Nuer peace conference of 1999 did not stop the violence until four years later (Bedigen 2017; Bradbury *et al.* 2006: 46). Also, it can be said that such negative perceptions contribute toward their exclusion and the prioritisation of international bodies such as the African Union and United Nations Missions to Sudan in South Sudan.

Yet, this work seeks to demonstrate that everyday religions, ceremonies and rituals should be regarded as core to South Sudanese peacebuilding, along with religious practices (i.e. ATR, Christianity and Islam). In this regard, because NSCC has been a tool in national peacebuilding, it is suggested that those ceremonies and rituals containing some aspects of Christian beliefs are discussed. They include *Gomo Tong*, *Cieng*, *Mabior*, *Gurtong* and *Mato Oput*. The discussions below will demonstrate that some of these ceremonies/rituals have been successfully applied in inter-ethnic and civil war situations by similar ethnic communities in Uganda. Moreover, these selected rituals have strong links to the Old Testament biblical scriptures from which the NSCC draws its peacebuilding values. Therefore this linkage justifies the need for the socioreligious approach and their inclusion by the NSCC in national peace processes (Bedigen 2017).

***Gomo Tong* ('Bending the spear')**

Gomo Tong prevents further wars and demonstrates weapons, destruction and forgiveness. Historically when spears were weapons, the Dinka and Nuer used them to resolve cattle raiding. However, in my village now a rifle can be exchanged for a goat cost the same price.

Anybody can afford it for family protection. For some years now, the guns are dismantled to make garden tools. Maybe we can say original *Gomo Tong* has been adopted.

Interviewees indicate that *Gomo Tong*, which translates as ‘bending of spears’, is a weapons destruction and future conflict prevention ceremony (Focus Group Field Notes, December 2013). It is a symbolic ceremony historically utilised by the Acholi communities in intra- and inter-ethnic conflicts to mark the end of a bloody conflict. Weapons of war (e.g. spears, machetes, rods and so on), are literally broken and burnt ceremoniously. The *Gomo Tong* practice aims at peacekeeping, peacemaking and the prevention of future conflicts. The ceremony requires that ancestral spirits are evoked, and vows are made by both parties never to go to war again. The *Gomo Tong* ritual is quite similar to the Old Testament scripture, Psalms 46: 9, ‘He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; he breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; he burneth the chariot in the fire’. Nilotic Lwo people believe that if either party lifts a spear, once again, against the other, without justified cause, the tip of the spear will turn against the perpetrator, implying that the perpetrator will lose the battle or be killed (Bedigen 2017). Significant to note, in Nilotic upbringing of children, kindness and non-violence do not start with the *Gomo Tong* ritual; these values are instilled in children through stories that teach conflict avoidance (wa Thiong’o 1986). While the NSCC has registered some success in forging unity between militia and political groups, no evidence of their involvement in weapons destruction exists (Agwanda & Harris 2009; Bedigen 2019). Therefore, the NSCC could benefit from embracing the *Gomo Tong* ritual.

Before the ritual, elders (Christian and traditional chiefs) meet to discuss and establish conflict roots and who the perpetrators are (Lacey 2013). A verbal agreement is made to end the conflict in order to keep the peace. After which, traditional chiefs order their warriors to stop killing. Preventative measures for possible future conflicts are discussed. At the end of these discussions, a spear is broken, or its tip is bent ceremoniously. Following that, a bull is slaughtered, cooked and eaten/shared to mark the end of the ceremony. After the fall of President Idi Amin of Uganda in 1979, this ritual was utilised in 1984 to resolve Acholi-Madi intermittent conflicts (Bedigen 2017; Harlacher 2009). Had this ritual been included in the Wunlit (Dinka-Nuer) peace conference, it could have ended the ethnic triggers to the South Sudan second civil war in 1999.

As demonstrated above, breaking, bending or destroying a spear or weapon can be an effective traditional form of disarmament because it engages cultural norms. It is an indigenous form of DDR. Authors Takeuchi (2011) and Ingelaere (2008: 43) indicate that local DDR has a more restorative component, unlike modern disarmament attempts that ignore such norms and have sometimes triggered weapons replacement among South Sudanese warrior groups. For instance, an interviewee

tells a story that during the second South Sudan civil war, the government of South Sudan (comprising of mainly the Dinka ethnic group) was determined to disarm their rival ethnic group, Nuer, whom they believed to be the aggressors. When the Nuer heard they would be disarmed using military force, they suggested the inclusion of everyday cultural peace processes such as *Gomo Tong*. This request was declined. However, to ease tensions, the NSCC intervened to encourage an inter-ethnic peace dialogue. The NSCC's intervention was not aligned with everyday peace practices, causing the Nuer to hide all their weapons. 'A few months later, they used these weapons against their enemies, the Dinka' (Field notes from Opor interview, April 2013; [Willems & Rouw 2011](#)).

Whereas *Gomo Tong* principles (i.e. peacekeeping, peacemaking and conflict prevention) are more suitable in the South Sudan civil war and post-civil war disarmament process, on this occasion, this government initiative did not bear fruit. This failure could be attributed to the argument that it was not a community initiative and thus was not authentic to the ex-combatants or communities involved. Further, [Harlacher \(2009\)](#) supports this argument by indicating that there had been poor mishandling of the disarmament processes in the Jonglei conflicts, as communities and rituals were excluded. Jonglei region is occupied by the Murle, Dinka, Anyuak and Nuer ethnic communities, whose youth historically practise cattle rustling and are inclined to revenge by raids ([Bedigen 2019](#); [Gebre & Ohta 2017](#)). It is suggested that holistic communities' involvement throughout *Gomo Tong* ritual and witnessing of symbolic bending of the tip of weapons or breakage of weapons is significant for the success of this ritual and eventual disarmament. Moreover, where authority and respect are given to indigenous structures, this ritual can deter members from restocking weapons and restarting conflicts.

Uniquely, this ceremony does not mark the end of the interaction because friendships that started during the ceremony continue. According to interviewees, 'interactions that lead to the rebuilding of relationships between disputants continue' through visits to each other's homes (Focus Group Field Notes, December 2013). Further, intermarriages between disputing communities are encouraged, followed by naming-of-children ceremonies and other initiation ceremonies. Significantly, apart from the re-establishment of social relationships, this ceremony enables the resumption of economic activities between warring communities. Therefore, *Gomo Tong* is a significant symbolic ceremony, which can be applied to weapons of war in modern conflicts to initiate sustainable peacebuilding outcomes. For example, it can be applied to cattle raids and banditry, the common types of conflict among Nilotic Lwo ethnic communities and their neighbours. Notably, this causes intermittent conflicts in the Jonglei region. These disputes are known to trigger intense inter-ethnic conflicts and civil wars ([Bedigen 2019](#)). Given the easy access to weapons and

cultural value attached to the protection of animals, as well as the sustenance of the environment, *Gomo Tong* could be the most viable disarmament method within NSCC peace processes (Ingelaere 2008; Takeuchi 2011).

Cieng ('to put together')

Cieng, a Dinka ceremony, is utilised in the re-integrating, purifying and cleansing of ex-combatants. Based on field notes, *Cieng*, as a word, translates as 'to put together', 'putting in order', 'reaching out', 'to look after', 'to live together', or 'togetherness' and it is an everyday cultural means of ensuring peaceful co-existence (Bedigen 2017). It captures the ideology of transformation, corporate responsibility and social cohesion (Mbiti 1970; Nyerere 1968). Its purpose is to restore the estranged relationship between people, God, spirits and nature destroyed by war. *Cieng* combines some other rituals, such as *Gomo Tong* and *Mabior*. When the ex-combatants return, they are believed to be inhabited by *Nueer*, an evil spirit that possesses a person who has killed or caused unspeakable atrocities in battle. Such persons must be cleansed of *Nueer* (evil spirit) to prevent them from causing harm while living in the community. The same ritual is believed to heal illnesses associated with evil, or abominable acts, committed while in battle. These acts include touching dead bodies, coming into contact with blood, and witnessing killing, among others. Those returning from war are believed to be haunted and unable to live a normal life unless they go through the ritual. Thus, the *Cieng* ritual, if applied within the NSCC peace processes, could benefit the spiritual and psychological rehabilitation of people in this conflict-prone region.

For example, during the 2013–15 civil war, this ceremony helped initiate and mobilise ex-combatants disarmed and demobilised by UN and African Union (AU) peacekeepers (Bedigen 2017). During the ceremony, *Mabior* cleansing took place, and some weapons of war were symbolically broken to mark the end of the war and deter the compiling of weapons. Some weapons were turned into farming tools, such as machetes, hoes and ploughs. *Cieng* bears similarities with the Old Testament laws where contamination by dead bodies and blood was forbidden, and forgiveness and unity are encouraged, yet the NSCC has not considered these benefits. While its benefits are commendable, *Cieng* has not effectively dealt with peacebuilding. *Cieng* is considered a Dinka ritual; thus, other ethnic communities' combatants did not show regard for its post-ceremony reuniting activities. This non-homogeneity across South Sudanese ethnic groups might explain its exclusion by the NSCC.

***Mabior* ('A young white bull' or 'A white heifer') ceremony**

Both Dinka and Nuer cultures utilise *Mabior* sacrificial ritual as an everyday peace practice to reach out to each other, or communities with whom they are in conflict. Before this ritual, negotiations and mediation, which include airing grievances, should occur, similar to other ceremonies/rituals discussed earlier (Zartman 2007). Within this ceremony are rituals, such as feet washing and handwashing in a calabash. Washings are biblical practices, suggesting the NSCC could have incorporated *Mabior* in its national peace processes (Bedigen 2019). The ceremony includes carrying chiefs on the head and stepping over a sacrificed bull. These rituals symbolise disconnection from the undesirable past. In context, the rituals mirror an essential aspect of Christian teaching regarding forgetting the past and choosing to move on. Both communities share the sacrificial meat, and vows are made to end conflicts (local peace activist interviewed January 2014). Also, the *Mabior* ritual can be utilised in celebrations for good things that happen. For instance, the Nuer utilised it to celebrate the return of their old-time prophet Ngundeng's rod (Bedigen 2017). Kamwaria & Katola (2012: 53) describe *the Mabior* ritual in peacebuilding:

If one engages in war as a fighter, one learns how to kill others and thus becomes afflicted by the evil. When such a person comes back to the village, he can hardly fit into the normal life. The angry spirits will haunt him throughout his life. He has to be treated to become his own self again.

As a cleansing ritual, *Mabior* is utilised as an urgent and necessary treatment for ex-combatants. Remarkably, some authors indicate it helps with the ex-combatants' psychological healing and social inclusion (Essien 2020; Stovel and Valiñas 2010). As many of them return to the community, they must fit in and resume their routine and socially accepted way of life. Returnees cannot choose to do this their way. They must go through these kinds of everyday community rituals, and they cannot rejoin the community without making their return known. It is argued that *Mabior* is one of the practical and culturally recognised forms of post-conflict ex-combatants and community rehabilitation ceremonies—thus is robust. It helps resolve complex inter-ethnic and civil war situations (Brewer 2010). Moreover, government rehabilitation programmes can be discriminative and take longer to implement due to delays in sourcing resources. Thus, if sustainable peace has to be realised nationally, faster and socio-cultural practices such as *Mabior* must be embraced by peace agencies.

After the *Mabior* cleansing ritual has taken place, elders assess losses and compensation or the return of stolen or raided property (animals) to victims. It is recognised that these conflicts have manifested extreme atrocities and untold suffering to the majority communities—thus, culturally, some victims cannot be compensated, but the chiefs recognise their plight. In so doing, the elders (traditional leaders) agree

on what is best for their compensation. This decision has to be in line with customary laws and what is acceptable to the community. For example, abductee wives can be married off to their abductor husbands when customary marriage requirements, which include dowry payments, are met. The *Mabior* sacrificial ritual was conducted in the Wunlit Dinka-Nuer reconciliation conference in 1999. After the Wunlit conference concluded, abductees' wives were married off, according to custom (Bedigen 2020). While these are everyday cultural practices that help carve peace within these communities, they can be classed as human rights abuses and therefore at odds with conventional terms and peacebuilding processes. Moreover, their non-holistic application by NSCC has furthered their ineffectiveness in delivering sustainable peace in the region.

***Gurtong* ('To blunt the spear')**

Field notes from 'Opor', an Anuak interviewee, describe *Gurtong* as 'a phrase composed of two words: a verb *gur* meaning "to grind" or "to blunt" and a noun *tong* means "spear". "*Gurtong*" therefore means "to blunt the spear" by grinding the sharp edges of the spear against something hard (usually a stone) until it is blunt' (Field notes from Opor interview, April 2013). The *Gur Tong* ritual is followed by an acknowledgement of the guilt by the guilty party. Once this acknowledgement is given, the cleansing aspect is performed. The guilty party is expected to compensate or pay a blood price, for instance, in murder cases. Machar (2015) indicates that this ritual aims to bring forgiveness, healing, reconciliation and unity. It is suggested that the act of blunting the spear reduces its edges, a symbolic lessening of the victim's pain, anger, guilt and shame (Bedigen 2017; Essien 2020). Additionally, due to the Anuak deep belief in the spirits (Mbiti 1970), spear blunting reduces the fierceness of the wrath of the gods on the guilty party.

Similar to *Gomo Tong*, Opor implies the origin of this ceremony is in the Old Testament book of Psalms. The Psalmist says, 'He breaks the bow into pieces and snaps the spear in two' (Psalms Chapter 46 verse 9). '*Gurtong* is still a powerful conflict resolution tool among the Sudanese Anywa' who have had little interference from external actors due to their remote settlements in hostile environments. The chiefs or elders take the lead in investigating the incident, for example, killing, followed by conflict negotiation and mediation. *Gurtong* is traditionally utilised in resolving murder cases during reconciliation ceremonies. He further explains that *Gurtong* practice has been perfected over the years to suit both intra- and inter-ethnic peacebuilding. Essien (2020) indicates the significance of culture in post-conflict healing. Thus although it is an Anuak everyday peace ritual, this work suggests the symbolic grinding could benefit NSCC's efforts to ensure a national healing processes.

Gurtong is an outstanding example of symbolism in peacebuilding. Parties to the conflict take turns to participate in the spear blunting until it is blunt. This act is followed by a cleansing ritual, resulting in reconciliation. While there has been minimal recognition of such symbolic rituals by the NSCC in South Sudan national peacebuilding, this work argues that *Gurtong* demonstrates the crucial principle of cooperation that must be considered if sustainable peace has to be realised. Also, it emphasises the need for the recognition of all parties to conflict as equal, possessing equal level standards in moral peace norms and values suitable for national peacebuilding. However, this is not the reality in the NSCC's representation of South Sudanese socioreligious practices, mainly because the NSCC places conventional protocols above cultural norms, values, ceremonies and rituals.

***Mato Oput* ('Drinking bitter herbs')**

Harlacher (2009) describes *Mato Oput* as the final ritual performed to reconcile disputants after a murder has taken place, and Bedigen (2017) indicates its use is diverse. Indicated by p'Bitek (1966: 104), *Mato Oput* is 'the oput-drinking peace-making ceremony' that takes place after a homicide. It is a ceremony and ritual that involves 'drinking' *Mato* of *Oput* ('bitter herbs') mixed with blood, in pairs, each from either side. It involves ritualistic eating or sharing of goat and sheep liver pieces, and other foods, in a secluded location (Baines 2007). Continuation of the ceremony involves the offering and sharing of foods and drinks in the disputants' homes. Most Acholi claim that this ceremony has religious origins. In support of this claim, items utilised in the ritual are like the biblical guidelines on peace offerings, sacrifices, compensation and reconciliation. When a conflict arises, this reconciliation ceremony must take place for normal family relationships to resume (p'Bitek 1966: 104). For example, Okot p'Bitek illustrates in a poem that Ocol should recognise the '*Oput*-drinking peace-making ceremony' because it is an everyday reconciliation ritual among the Acholi. He writes that:

Ocol does not enter
His brother's house.
You would think
There was homicide between them
That has not been settled,
You would think
That the *oput*-drinking peace-making ceremony
Has not yet taken place ...

In Acholi culture, when a premeditated or accidental killing occurs, the two disputing communities immediately suspend all socio-economic interactions purposely to

avoid the risks of violence, assault or revenge killing (Baines 2007; p'Bitek 1966). The Acholi believe that the spirit of the dead will torment the perpetrator, his family and his clan if the ceremony does not take place. When an incident occurs, the ceremony waits until the offender must narrate their version of the story to their family member or an elder. After, negotiation and mediation between victim–offender communities take place. The offender and his clan acknowledge and accept responsibility for the wrongs committed. This is demonstrated by showing a willingness to compensate. Lederach (1997: 26) supports this by indicating that guilt acknowledgement is decisive in the indigenous reconciliation process. This is because it is one thing to know; it is another to acknowledge—yet the NSCC's peace initiatives have not emphasised guilt acknowledgement in their negotiation and mediation efforts. Moreover, with *Mato Oput*, apart from acknowledging the crime, the perpetrator must demonstrate their readiness and ability to pay compensation—which, in indigenous peacebuilding, equates to justice.

Mato Oput could be incorporated within the NSCC peace processes. This is because it bears similarities to biblical texts: Numbers Chapter 5, Verses 6–7, says that 'When a man or woman commits any sin against another, that person acts unfaithfully toward the Lord and is guilty. The person is to confess the sin he has committed. He is to pay full compensation ... and give it to the individual he has wronged'. Like in the biblical texts, the strength of *Mato Oput* is in the promotion of forgiveness; however, it insists on compensation. Forgiveness is evident in the chief's end-of-ceremony statement, which says, 'let us end this bitterness and continue to live with clean hearts'.

Additionally, the symbolic drinking of the *Oput* brew in pairs demonstrates the willingness of disputing parties to share in their bitter past and future peace—a symbolic act that could, in reality, benefit the Dinka-Nuer historical amenity and counter-attacks. In addition, drinking in pairs symbolises the need to recognise mutual respect and partnership and reverence for the environment (i.e. plants, herbs and roots in the reconciliation process). While the *Mato Oput* principles of truth, accountability and restoration of relationships are aspects that could benefit the NSCC's efforts in South Sudan national peacebuilding initiatives, they have been minimally regarded. Thus, perpetrators continue to lead ethnic/militia groups and hold government political positions (Baines 2007; Bedigen 2017; Coe *et al.* 2013; Machar 2015). The inability of peace actors in ensuring that parties to conflict adhere to truth and accountability has meant sustainable peace remains elusive. Although hybrid forms of peacebuilding, which are inclusive and mainly similar to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, have been proposed as a means to achieving sustainable peace in the region, this idea remains impractical. The reason being that the diverse and unique nature of South Sudanese ethnic customs requires a local representation such as the NSCC. Moreover, unless the

NSCC's initiatives are mixed with socioreligious aspects (religions, ceremonies and rituals), sustainable peace will remain elusive (Gebre and Ohta 2017; Mac Ginty 2010; Millar *et al.* 2013).

In the following sections, the two religions utilised in national peacebuilding Christianity, represented by the NSCC and the Muslim (Judiyya) system, are discussed.

The New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC)

After Sudan's first civil war, from 1955 to 1956, most South Sudanese or Christians did not want to remain under the oppressive sharia laws in the post-colonial Arab Muslim North/Khartoum government (Bedigen 2017). Therefore, the Addis Ababa agreement was held to forge North–South unity and end political/ethnic intermittent conflicts (Agreement 1972). The agreement provided for the Declaration of Principles (DoP) that was aimed at identifying essential elements necessary to a fair and comprehensive peace settlement in the nation and region. One of the items in the DoP was to include South Sudanese cultures and religious practices in peace negotiations, particularly Christianity. Thus, in July 1997 and at the peak of the Sudan second civil war, Churches in Southern Sudan (later known as The New Sudan Council of Churches, NSCC) were commissioned to establish and implement a chaplaincy programme mainly for conflict prevention, peacemaking and peacebuilding. Together with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), the then recognised political group in South Sudan, they agreed to establish a secular, democratic government. The NSCC includes: Episcopal, Catholic, Presbyterian and African Inland churches, and Sudan Pentecostal Church, and community leaders, including Muslim leaders. Thus, the NSCC became a representative of all cultures and religions (Agwanda and Harris 2009; Leonardi *et al.* 2010). Since then, it is recognised as a neutral body with key responsibilities of facilitating community and national-level dialogues (Agwanda and Harris 2009). The groups' other purposes included fighting against marginalisation, supporting the liberation struggles, advocating for human rights, promoting unity, equality and peace among the diverse peoples of Southern Sudan (Gebre and Ohta 2017; Jok 2011).

Moreover, the DoP provision for inclusion of South Sudanese representative religion (Christianity) was violated by the Arab-North Khartoum government, whose mission was to convert the South Sudanese Christians to Islam. Also, everyday peace cultures and rituals were not mentioned. However, in 1998, the Khartoum government endorsed the DoP—furthering support to include South Sudanese local cultures in peacebuilding. Khartoum's delays in recognising the DoP and Addis Ababa's failure to reinforce the agreement meant that wars continued, giving room for the NSCC to spearhead national peacebuilding (Shinn 2004).

Meanwhile, decades of wars had impacted the country and its neighbours significantly. Thus, at the regional level, Uganda, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Kenya utilised the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) to pursue national and regional peace initiatives (Bedigen 2017). Nationally, the NSCC continued to influence much of IGAD's work (Agwanda & Harris 2009; Bol 2014). For instance, in inter-ethnic conflicts, the NSCC led and facilitated the process of peace and justice among pastoralist communities through dialogue and peace agreements (Agwanda & Harris 2009). However, rather than adopting local peacebuilding methods, the NSCC continued implementing conventional-style negotiations and peace agreements due to international preference, for example, the 1994 peace agreement between South Sudan and the Khartoum government. While such conventional approaches registered some successes (e.g. the signing of the DoP and the inclusion of NSCC), the socio-cultural influences of Sudan's conflicts made peacebuilding too complex for IGAD or NSCC; it never achieved much in its nine years of involvement. Mainly because not all religious and everyday cultural practices were part of the NSCC peace processes.

Further, the NSCC did not only get involved with IGAD but the AU—formed in 2002 to promote peace, security and stability in Africa. The AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) was established in 2004. The AU's specific function is mediation (African Union, 2004: Article 6, 3), a mechanism adopted from the UN Security Council. Since then, mediation has become a common mechanism within the AU and UN peacebuilding processes. Moreover, the NSCC helped bridge the gap between locals and these external mediation actors. For example, in Darfur, mediation was often utilised during the crisis in pseudo socioreligious processes (Gatkuoth 1995). This was evident when a PSC decision led the AU to undertake the political responsibility to mediate between the government of Sudan and militia groups, the Justice and Equality Movement and the Sudan Liberation Army/Movement (Bedigen 2017; 2019). However, this mediation process did not produce any tangible resolution. It is recognised that such processes and mechanisms needed strengthening through holistic inclusion of locals and their everyday cultural practices (i.e. indigenous peacebuilding ceremonies and rituals). This article argues that these indigenous practices can reduce South Sudanese political, cultural diversities and rebuild relations (Webel and Galtung 2007).

Overall, the NSCC's role as a religious leaders' organisation to represent all South Sudanese at national peace negotiations and provide mediation allude to Galtung's view that culture and religion play a significant part in peacebuilding. The NSCC put forward a political argument that South Sudanese culture (African) and religion (Christian) justified their separation from Sudan. Such calls and support from the international community eventually led to South Sudan achieving autonomy in 2005 and eventual independence in 2011. From the onset of the civil war in 1983, NSCC worked tirelessly to bridge the gap between the SPLM/A and other political/militia

groups, IGAD, the Sudan government and the international community. The NSCC's role in peacebuilding is commendable for the following reasons. 1) It brought to light the religious capability in peacebuilding. 2) It influenced other key conventional regional structures, namely, IGAD and AU. For example, the IGAD-led peace deal signed in Addis Ababa in January 2015 ended the worst humanitarian crisis in the region (Bedigen 2017). 3) It mobilised and incorporated some local religious leaders, including Muslims—thus reducing socioreligious tensions to some extent. 4) It successfully mediated the Wunlit People-to-People Peace Conference, organised in 1999 and the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 (Redekop 2007).

However, the NSCC's role in peacebuilding remains controversial. For instance, the majority of NSCC leaders belong to the dominant ethnic/political/militia groups (Dinka warriors and Nuer White army), and thus are not neutral in their 'inclusive' representation role (Bedigen 2019). For example, they selected only a few religious leaders from their own ethnic groups (Dinka and Nuer) or urban areas and largely ignored rural cultural leaders or failed to include ceremonies and rituals from other religious and ethnic groups such as the Acholi *Mato Oput*. Also, their way of approaching peace mainly through conventional-style agreements, such as Addis Ababa, has been known to further conflicts because it does not focus on addressing the ethnic conflict roots (Gurr 1995). Consequently, the NSCC's limitations have indirectly contributed to further deaths, lootings, rapes, raids, internal displacement and an influx of refugees to neighbouring countries (Shinn 2004). An inclusive socioreligious approach of ceremonies and rituals could prevent these and offer a more sustainable solution because they focus on victim, perpetrator and community rehabilitation or healing.

Judiyya

Among some Nilotic Lwo communities, such as Dinka communities and their neighbours (Darfurians and Kordofan), a common traditional institution for peacebuilding is the Islamic version, the Judiyya system. It refers to local negotiation (El-Tom 2012; Bronkhorst 2012) and typically utilises indigenous mediation mechanisms (Gatkuoth 1995; Zartman 2007). In most communities, Judiyya institution leadership comprises of chiefs, elders, community leaders, women, intellectuals, military and, at times, militia leaders. While it is currently utilised in protracted conflict mediation, historically, the judiyya system was utilised amongst ethnic pastoralist communities for natural resource sharing and management, notably, in situations of scarcity and conflict between and within groups of pastoralists and farmers. Also, it was helpful in the resettlement of refugees, usage of natural resources, ownership rights, deaths, injuries/damages and civil war crimes (Bradbury *et al.* 2006; Bronkhorst 2012). While Muslim Abyei and Jonglei regions of South Sudan have utilised protocols instituted

by international organisations to resolve similar instabilities, it is suggested that Judiyya system could offer a more sustainable solution, as it has historically done (Sudan Tribune 2018; Wahab 2017). Moreover, the Judiyya system was excluded from the NSCC peace processes, except for some of their leaders.

The South Sudan conflicts are mostly ethnopolitical (Gurr 1995), therefore requiring both ethnic and political solutions. The Judiyya system appears to provide both, for it includes various leaders and aims to restore peace in communities, making it a viable everyday peace practice that ought to be included within the NSCC (Bradbury *et al.* 2006). The elders are expected to be neutral at all times, and it is their duty and responsibility to ensure their decisions are followed. At times, this means putting pressure or coercion on the worrying parties to comply with the final decision. While coercion is not generally accepted in conventional peacebuilding, it is executed according to the binding societal customs and customary laws requirements in local contexts. This article argues that coercion can be useful, mainly where disputes are based on shared resources, which can positively impact livelihoods.

Bradbury *et al.* (2006) identify two types of Judiyya systems in South Sudan: government-sponsored (which is run by state-appointed elders) and communal (run by local elders). Unlike in Christian religious practices, in Judiyya, payment of compensation is central to peacebuilding. In resolving political-ethnic conflicts, for example the Zaghawa–Rizeigat conflict, the Khartoum government paid part of the compensation that the Rizeigat were supposed to pay (Bradbury *et al.* 2006). Such an act furthers the marginalisation of some communities and intensifies animosities between ethnic groups. The government's unfair involvement in the Zaghawa–Rizeigat peacebuilding was not taken lightly by the Zaghawa, as questions regarding the government's neutrality were raised. This example implies that sponsorship of indigenous processes by third parties could breed further conflicts or leave the other party dissatisfied with the process. This is because, in indigenous peacebuilding, the aggressor has to show sincerity and readiness to pay compensation. This manner of third-party involvement can have adverse effects, in that remorse and sincerity are overshadowed by the third party's actions or ability to sponsor the process. It is argued that the NSCC has been largely sponsored by Christian agencies and international governments such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom (Bedigen 2017), implying that its mode of engagement needed to reflect donors' ideas and practices. Yet, it suggested that third-party involvement should not obstruct indigenous justice or marginalise existing local systems but support societal norms of the peace processes. Also, it is highly likely that Judiyya's emphasis on compensation caused its exclusion from the NSCC's national peace processes.

While this article is critical of the NSCC failures in peacebuilding, South Sudan's situation has been more complex due to a combination of other factors, such as the existence of several disunited militia groups, regional and international actors inclined

to top-down approaches, and economic and leadership incapacities. The SPLM/A, who represent the ruling political party, government forces, and other militias have had major difficulties promoting national peacebuilding due to its Dinka composition and historical ethnic divisions (Bedigen 2019). For instance, whereas the majority of South Sudan delegates to IGAD (Iyob & Khadiagala 2006) are political leaders from the Dinka and Nuer ethnic groups, other minor groups (e.g. the Acholi, Shilluk and Lotuho) are excluded (Sudan Tribune 2018). In 2005, IGAD involvement led to the CPA, which granted autonomy to South Sudan and recognised customs as the basis of its governance, but this largely remained on paper (Bedigen 2020). Scholars indicate that South Sudanese political leaders' involvement provides an opportunity for them to draw from their customary peacebuilding cultures, yet they have continuously engaged in Western top-down negotiation and mediation approaches (Flint and de Waal 2008; Bedigen 2020). Moreover, national peace cannot happen unless a stronger sense of citizenship and unity of purpose exists. For example, the *Cieng*, *Mabior* and *Mato Oput* socioreligious practices include all community members (men, women, youth, children, and their customary practices) of peacebuilding (Jok *et al.* 2004). Thus, it is argued that the NSCC's consideration of other actors' failures and inclusion of socioreligious practices will likely provide robust peacebuilding.

Conclusion

The discussions above indicate that scholarship in South Sudan or sub-Saharan conflicts highlights the significance of religion (i.e. Christianity and Islam) in peacebuilding (Ouellet 2013; Schirch 2015). However, the majority ignores the dominance of indigenous religions and their linkages to community everyday ceremonies and rituals in peacebuilding. The discussions demonstrate that, in the NSCC's national peacebuilding processes, the inclusion of Christianity, Islam and ATR religions remain at the peripheries, while ceremonies or rituals are largely excluded (Bedigen 2017; 2020; Hancock 2017). Moreover, political and economic initiatives by external NGOs are seen as crucial in the planning, implementation and achievement of national peacebuilding strategies. Yet, this article argues that the implementation of religious and socio-cultural practices presents a robust means of contributing to delivering sustainable peace. As Munive indicates, context matters and, generally, conventional methods have been challenged in South Sudan; thus, this article argues for socioreligious inclusion (Munive 2013).

It is recognised that in South Sudan, religious beliefs and cultural practices are as diverse as the ethnic communities that practise them (Jok 2011). Also, they are specific to ethnic customs and may not be flexible or adaptable to protracted conflicts. Perhaps this led to the choice for a local representation by the NSCC in national peacebuilding

attempts. However, the discussions demonstrate that spiritual beliefs, derived from people's own experiences of divine revelations, are inseparable from everyday customary peace practices and crucial in delivering sustainable peace. Yet, the NSCC, an organisation that is religious-based excluded them. When conflicts occur, religious, socio-cultural ceremonies and rituals influence the examination of conscience, forgiveness and healing—attributes prevalent in Christianity (Bedigen 2020).

While religious practices (Christian and Muslim), cultural ceremonies and rituals have been implemented in inter-ethnic, and occasionally during the ethnic aspects, of civil wars, their implementation is usually an afterthought and sometimes incoherent (wa Thiong'o 1993). Also, these ethnic conflicts have political dimensions, making them complex for a 'one size fit all solution' (Gurr 1995). Examples are the Darfur Muslims, who engaged in the *Judiyaa* (Muslim local justice system) and peace mediation. In the Christian communities such as East Equatoria, Christians' involvement in the Wunlit, Liliir and Abyei indigenous peacebuilding processes included biblical prayers and ATR practices of *Mabior* ritual cleansing. Socioreligious inter-ethnic peace ceremonies, for example the Wunlit, lasted for a decade, highlighting their potential in national peacebuilding (Bedigen 2017; Coe *et al.* 2013). This article highlights that the complex interlinkages between ethnic and civil wars, indigenous ceremonies and cleansing rituals have been found significant in the disarmament, re-integration of ex-combatants, and the restoration of public order and security (Brewer 2010; Ingelaere 2008; Takeuchi 2011). For example, the *Mabior* and *Cieng* in the Dinka-Nuer reunion and *Mato Oput* in the Lord's Resistance Army inflicted Acholi communities in Southern Sudan and Northern Uganda. Such pieces of evidence demonstrate that the NSCC should have included South Sudanese religious everyday peace practices, ceremonies and rituals. Considering the past failed national peacebuilding attempts (i.e. international, national political and economic initiatives), it is suggested that socioreligious practices (i.e. cultural religious practices, ceremonies and rituals) are holistically represented for robustness in sustainable peace delivery in the region.

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Field notes:

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