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### DIVINITY ABROAD: DINKA MISSIONARIES IN FOREIGN LANDS

GODFREY Lienhardt begins his discussion of the activities of free-divinities in Dinka society with a vivid account of the tribulations of a young man, Ajak, son of a spear-master. Ajak had left home to find work and had then become estranged from his father, who died before the two could be reunited and reconciled. Ajak was troubled by his father's death and by his separation from his home and family. Late one night he was seized by a 'creator' (*aciek*) in his body and began rushing about, apparently oblivious to all about him. Those who gathered around speculated on the nature of the thing which possessed him, whether it was a Power, a divinity or a ghost. A minor spear-master tried to elicit some response by addressing it in turn as all three but received no reply.

The master of the fishing-spear then began to take to task the Power which troubled Ajak, as follows: 'You, Power (*jok*), why do you seize a man who is far away from his home? Why do you not seize him there at home where the cattle are? What can he do about it here? He is travelling in a foreign place, and he is with this European.'... Ajak mumbled unintelligibly; the spectators were clearly expecting something to speak through his mouth, and to tell us its name and business.... When I asked what 'it' was, I was told variously that it would be his (clan) divinity (*yath*), or the ghost of his father, or the free-divinity DENG, or 'just a Power' (*jok epath*). Since it would not announce itself, how could one know? By this time Ajak had become quieter and seemed to be becoming aware of his surroundings. The master of the fishing-spear, who had previously been speaking to the Power in the body of Ajak, now began gently to admonish him personally, as a man. Why had this happened? What secret wrong had he done, or what had he failed to do that he should have done? And why did he behave in this way when he was far away from his home, where it was impossible to deal

with the matter by bringing out a calf, invoking over it, and either dedicating or sacrificing it to the Power which troubled him?

Ajak became possessed twice more, and each time there was similar speculation among the onlookers about just what was troubling him. Finally Ajak returned to his home and sacrificed to Divinity, his clan-divinity, and his father's ghost. After that his mind was at rest, and he was troubled no more.<sup>1</sup>

By the late 1940s, when Godfrey Lienhardt observed and recorded Ajak's trials, the experience of possession by an unknown spiritual agent was familiar to the Dinka. Not only did family disputes bring out the worst in ancestral ghosts and clan-divinities, but there were now a number of independent and unattached Powers and free-divinities multiplying and seizing persons at random. It had not always been so. There had been a proliferation of Powers and free-divinities as well as persons who ministered to their desires or ameliorated their effects. The Dinka themselves attributed the spread of these new influences to their own expanded contacts with other peoples, beginning during the last half of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> The increased mobility of individual Dinka during the upheavals which began in mid-century brought with it exposure to other people's spiritual practices and ideas. Spirit possession and spirit divination do seem to have clustered round the new slave camps and slave communities of the Sudan during this time.<sup>3</sup> The experiences of such persons as Ajak, travelling abroad, cut off from their homes and families and often anxious about those they left behind, were multiplied several thousand times with the extensive slave-raiding of this period. Ajak was able to return home and re-establish contact with his family and their personal divinities, thus freeing himself from the thrall of a persistently troublesome Power. Many others before him were unable to revive such contacts. They had to create their own solutions wherever they were and among whomever they found themselves. It was in this way that new divinities and Powers became known, their attributes defined and the methods of dealing with them developed.

All of the first Dinka Christian converts in the nineteenth century were persons who similarly found Christianity in foreign lands. Many became actively involved in propagating their new faith. The very first Dinka priest, for instance, Daniel Surur Farim Deng, was a Ngok Dinka who had been captured by Baggara Arab raiders and taken to El Obeid, in Kordofan, where he met and was ransomed by Mgr. Comboni. Daniel Surur Deng was a gifted scholar, but by his own account his later life was spent mainly as a language teacher at Catholic schools in Beirut, Suakin and Egypt, rather than as a

1. Godfrey Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1961, pp. 57-62.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 64-7, 84, 104, 163-4, 169.

3. G. Schweinfurth, *The Heart of Africa*, New York: Harper and Brothers 1874, vol. i, pp. 331-2; B. R. Mitford, 'Extracts from the Diary of a Subaltern on the Nile in the Eighties and Nineties', *Sudan Notes and Records*, Vol. XIX, no. 2 (1936), p. 206; J. S. Trimmingham, *Islam in the Sudan*, London: Oxford University Press 1949, pp. 174, 176 n. 2.

preacher of the gospel.<sup>4</sup> For this reason we will instead concentrate on two other Dinka Christians, both contemporaries of his, who were the first to have the opportunity to preach their new faith to some of their own people as well as to others. Caterina Zenab and Salim Wilson both claimed to be children of Dinka spear-masters. Both were involved, in their different ways, in translating Christian beliefs into Dinka, though neither was formally incorporated into any religious order or hierarchy. Their lives are paralleled in some ways by the career of another Dinka exile, Deng Laka, the first prophet of *diu* among the Gaawar Nuer. Here we will compare their personal religious experiences as exiles from their homes and as missionaries of new divinities. It is through the lives of these first proselytes that we may gain some insight into the earliest response to Christianity by individual Dinka.

#### Caterina Zenab<sup>5</sup>

Caterina Zenab was born at the Kic Dinka village of Gog in about 1848, the daughter of a chief, a *piccolo re* (small king), Manyan e Agol.<sup>6</sup> It was near her home that the first Catholic mission, Holy Cross, was founded in 1854. The Austrian and Italian missionaries who worked there and at the mission among the Bari in Gondokoro suffered a high mortality rate. Those few who survived, led by Mgr. Comboni, struggled on, studying the Dinka language and customs, exploring such of the country as they could reach, and preaching wherever they could. 'The foot of the trees are our pulpit,' Comboni reported, 'which is always surrounded by chiefs and naked Africans armed with spears. They listen to God's word with great eagerness.'<sup>7</sup> But in January 1860 the missionaries packed up and returned to Khartoum, taking with them four boys and six girls, Caterina, or Zenab as she was then known, among them.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the Bari, the Dinka expressed sorrow at the priests' departure.<sup>9</sup>

4. E. Toniolo and R. Hill (eds.), *The Opening of the Nile Basin*, London: C. Hurst & Co. 1974, p. 196; L. Bano, *Mezzo secolo di storia sudanese 1842-1898, dall'archivio parrocchiale de Khartoum*, Bologna: Editrice Missionaria Italiana 1976 (Museum Combonianum, no. 31), p. 447; G. Vantini, *Christianity in the Sudan*, Bologna: Editrice Missionaria Italiana 1981, p. 244; 'Memorie scritte dal R. P. Daniele Sorur Pharim Dén', *Nigrizia*, Vol. V, nos. 5-6 (1887), Vol. VI, nos. 2-4 (1888).

5. This section, except where otherwise indicated, is based on the research of Fr. Elias Toniolo in the Comboni archives, which he has very kindly shared with me. Despite the material on Caterina Zenab in the *Missionaria Comboniani*, no mention is made of her in Vantini's *Christianity in the Sudan*, because she did not take religious vows.

6. F. Morlang, *Missione in Africa centrale. Diario 1855-1863*, Bologna: Editrice Nigrizia 1973 (Museum Combonianum, no. 28), p. 278, n. 6. R. Hill, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Sudan*, London: Frank Cass 1967 (2nd edn.), p. 232, mistakenly identifies Caterina as an 'Abyssinian'.

7. Toniolo and Hill, *Nile Basin*, p. 14.

8. Morlang, *Missione*, p. 239, n. 24.

9. Toniolo and Hill, *Nile Basin*, pp. 15-16.

The fate of Holy Cross and Gondokoro convinced Comboni that Christianity could best be spread in Africa by Africans.<sup>10</sup> It was in this endeavour that Caterina Zenab, baptized into the faith at Shellal in Egypt on 24 June 1860, became the first Christian Dinka evangelist. There had scarcely been a dozen Dinka baptized before her, and it was Comboni's intention that she should be educated to teach the Dinka. We do not know any account of her own which explains the attraction of Christianity which made her leave home when still a girl, but we do know from other accounts that as a young woman she was an energetic Christian. In Egypt she assisted Fr. Beltrame in compiling his Dinka dictionary and grammar and helped translate 'a bulky catechism containing the matter of dogma and Catholic morals' into Dinka. Being fluent in both Dinka and Arabic, she was then sent for further education in Verona, where she was confirmed in 1862. She returned to Egypt following Comboni's opening of two schools in Cairo in 1867. In Cairo she showed an apostolic fervour and was especially assigned to assist the catechumen of her own tribe. She returned to Khartoum in 1873, where Comboni described her as *una gran missionaria abilissima* (a highly skilled missionary).

In Khartoum, as in Cairo, she taught at the mission and assisted at baptisms. She married an Italian carpenter, Cesare Ongano, in 1874 and gave birth to his daughter the next year, only a few months before his death. She then returned to the mission, where her daughter died in 1878. She continued her work in the mission until she went to live with the Austrian explorer, Ernst Marno, who was then employed by the Egyptian government. They had a son, Jacob Ernst, in Fashoda in 1880, and though they never married, the son was baptized in Khartoum the next year. Marno died in Khartoum in 1883, just as the Mahdiyya was gathering strength in Kordofan. Caterina and her son survived the siege of Khartoum and remained in the Sudan throughout the Mahdiyya. On the reconquest of Omdurman in 1898 she went to Cairo but returned to the Sudan in 1902 to act as an interpreter for the revived Catholic mission. It was then proposed to employ her in the new mission among the Shilluk, but her health did not permit. By now she seemed a disappointment to the missionaries who had returned to the Sudan. The Church had never been happy about her unsanctified union with Marno (for which she was also denounced as a 'bad lot' by general Gordon<sup>11</sup>); there had been rumours that she and others had renounced Christianity during the Mahdiyya; and despite the Church's willingness to take her on in its work in the Sudan, she seemed to prefer to do no more formal mission work and live instead on a grant from the Egyptian government as Marno's widow. She died in Khartoum in 1921.

This bare outline of her life gives us much to speculate on, without, however, enabling us to reach many firm conclusions. We know she was a skilled linguist, fluent at least in Arabic and Italian, and that at an early age she helped translate Catholic dogma into Dinka. She was specially trained to

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

11. Richard Hill, *Gordon: Yet Another Assessment*, Durham: Sudan Studies Society of the United Kingdom 1987, p. 26.

instruct her own people in Christianity and did so with enthusiasm. Her entire career as an evangelist was spent in Cairo, Khartoum and Omdurman, all cities with sizeable slave and ex-slave communities—the population of Khartoum was about two-thirds slave by 1883. It was among this population that she worked, and it was this population which was amalgamating, at precisely the same time, a variety of spiritual beliefs and practices, some of which were incorporated into such urban spirit-possession cults as the *zar*.<sup>12</sup> After the reconquest of the Sudan, the Anglo-Egyptian government repatriated as many slaves as possible, and it was during this time that a number of Dinka returned to their home areas and were reintegrated into their societies. It would not be surprising, therefore, if Christian tales of creation (some of which Caterina helped to translate into Dinka in the early 1860s) were brought back to Dinka society at this time by the former slaves she had tried to instruct. Christianity did not take root within Dinka society through Caterina, but with knowledge of her work in the nineteenth century it is not necessary to propose an ancient Christian link to account for Christian stories now told by Dinka elders as received from their fathers.<sup>13</sup>

#### Salim Wilson

Salim Wilson was born Atobhil Macar Kathish (which he transcribed as Hatashil Masha Kathish) among the Gok Dinka in the mid-nineteenth century. Of all early Dinka Christians we know most about him, because after settling in England he published three books giving various accounts of his life, and there are numerous references to him in missionary archives in this country.<sup>14</sup> He lived for a considerable time in Wakefield, Barnsley and Scunthorpe and became known as 'the Black Evangelist of the North'.

12. Trimmingham, *Islam in the Sudan*, pp. 174–6; S. Zenovsky, 'Zar and Tambura as Practised by the Women of Omdurman', *Sudan Notes and Records*, Vol. XXXI, no. 1 (1950), pp. 65–81; H. B. Barclay, *Burri al Lamaab*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press 1964, pp. 196–209; I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1979, *passim*.

13. F. Deng, *Africans of Two Worlds: The Dinka in Afro-Arab Sudan*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1978, pp. 81–4.

14. Hatashil Masha Kathish, '*Jehova Nissi*': *The Life Story of Hatashil-Masha-Kathish, of the Dinka Tribe, Soudan*, Birmingham: C. Caswell 1901 (2nd edn.); *The Ethiopia Valley: The Story of the People Called the Dinkas*, Birmingham: C. Caswell n.d. [c. 1908]; Salim Wilson, *I Was A Slave*, London: Stanley Paul & Co. n.d. [c. 1939]. See also the archives of the Bible Society in the Cambridge University Library and the CMS archives in the Birmingham University Library. Daniel Appiah-Kubi, a Ghanaian student at the University of Hull and later at the Institute of Social Anthropology, Oxford, undertook some investigations in Scunthorpe in 1970 at the request of Godfrey Lienhardt. His notes have been made available to me. I would also like to acknowledge the kind assistance of Miss Kathleen Cann, the Bible Society's archivist, for generously providing me with copies of the Society's correspondence.

According to Salim Wilson, his father was a chief (whom he subsequently elevated to 'Chief of the Gok province of the Country'), and it was from watching his father perform sacrifices that Salim first learned about God. In around 1876, his village was raided by Arab slavers. Salim witnessed his father's murder and was carried off as a slave and given his Arabic name. He spent about three years as the personal slave to an Arab merchant until the revolt of Sulaiman Zubair in 1878–9. Salim's master was induced by Romolo Gessi's successes against Sulaiman to side with the government, as a result of which Salim was eventually freed by the Egyptian army. His village having been destroyed and his family killed, Salim, still only in his early teens, had nowhere to go and elected to stay with the army until the two CMS missionaries, Charles Wilson and R.W. Felkin, passed through Daim Zubair on their return to England from Uganda. Salim was taken on as Wilson's servant and went with him to England in 1881. It was there that he was baptized and confirmed in 1882. He retained the name Salim as his Christian name, but added to it his benefactor's names, Charles Wilson. Thus he became Salim Charles Wilson.

Salim describes his gradual coming to God by reference to his early religious experiences before being abducted into slavery. The Dinka, he later explained, knew and worshipped 'God as the Father of men—as the Creator of the Universe—and as a Spirit whom they addressed as "Yasth," [*yath*] that is, "reverend," "holy," "pure," "the breath of God."' As a child he and others used to imitate the religious rituals they observed, 'and I often played the part of the Priest', using snail shells as cattle, pretending to sacrifice them, repeating the invocations he had heard his father use.<sup>15</sup> As a slave, however, he found himself mixed up with many other peoples, removed from the worship of his own clan-divinity (*yath*). What he could remember did sustain him:

One day I climbed a tree, and while I sat and watched the cows, I began to think of home. The remembrance was too much for me, and as I thought upon the happy days of childhood—as my Mother and Father came back to my mind, I burst into tears, and wept as though my heart must be broken. At this time I recalled my Father's prayers, as with uplifted hands he would cry, 'Oh, Thou great Eternal, Unknown Creator of Heaven and Earth.' Then I cried to the God of my Father, and asked Him to consider my affliction. My tears and prayer proved the means of greatly relieving my mind....<sup>16</sup>

Once in the employ of the Revd Wilson, he did not immediately turn to the Christian God. At the village school in Pavenham, where they first lived, he was somewhat slow at learning and occasionally quarrelled with the local boys: 'what I read in the Bible I did not understand. Like my countrymen mentioned in the Acts, I needed the teaching of God's Holy Spirit.'<sup>17</sup> This Holy Spirit, he later claimed, was already known to the Dinka as 'the cause of

15. '*Jehova Nissi*', pp. 14, 17.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

life', existing 'in the air, which we drink in or breathe'<sup>18</sup>—in other words, *wei*.<sup>19</sup> It was this Holy Spirit which gradually penetrated his soul and overcame his ignorance, until at last 'I asked God to make me better'.<sup>20</sup>

With Salim Wilson, to accept Christianity was to become an evangelist. He attended Hume Cliff College, a missionary training institute in Derbyshire, before accompanying the Revd Wilson to Palestine in 1883. He returned on his own and rejoined the college. During the Sudan troubles of 1884–5 he toured the north of England with the superintendent of the college, exhibited in a leopard skin, *jallabiyya* and turban as a Sudanese redeemed by Christ. After leaving the college in 1886 he lived in London and worked on behalf of the YMCA and the British Women's Temperance Journal. In 1887–8 he accompanied Graham Wilmot Brooke to the Congo in a vain endeavour to penetrate the Sudan and bring the gospel to the Azande and Dinka. Back in England, he spent some time addressing CMS missionary gatherings in the Forest of Dean. In 1893 he went on an independent mission with two evangelists from Bolton to Tripoli, again with the intention of penetrating the Sudan. There, to his surprise, he met a small group of Dinka resident in Tripoli and found he could still communicate in their mother tongue.<sup>21</sup> He eventually returned to the north of England and made at least part of his living as an evangelist, at one time holding a bishop's licence as a lay reader in the diocese of Wakefield. By 1901 he was already known as 'the Black Evangelist of the North'. During World War I he moved to Scunthorpe as an itinerant jeweller, stayed on as a grocer, continued his preaching with some success and married a local widow. He died in the mid-1940s.

It was his great desire to return to the Sudan to bring the gospel to the Dinka but, aside from his brief encounter with Dinka slaves in Tripoli, this never took place. The closest he came to presenting the word of God to the Dinka was his correction of a translation of the Gospel of St Luke for the British and Foreign Bible Society. This itself was based on an earlier translation published by Dr J.C. Mitterrutzner in 1866,<sup>22</sup> which was in turn based on the work of the Catholic missionaries from Holy Cross,<sup>23</sup> derived in part from Caterina Zenab and other Dinka informants.

18. *The Ethiopia Valley*, p. 46.

19. Given the difficulty later Italian missionaries among the Dinka had in appropriating *wei* for 'the Holy Spirit', it is interesting that Salim Wilson made this transfer on his own. But unlike the Dinka of the Bahr el-Ghazal in the twentieth century, he may not have been fully aware of the subtleties of Dinka religious vocabulary. Cf. Deng in this volume and R. G. Lienhardt, 'The Dinka and Catholicism', in J. Davis (ed.), *Religious Organization and Religious Experience*, London and New York: Academic Press 1982 (ASA Monographs, no. 21), pp. 90–4.

20. '*Jehova Nissi*', p. 48.

21. Letter from Salim Wilson, 2 February 1905, Bible Society archives.

22. J. C. Mitterrutzner, *Die Dinka-Sprache in Central Afrika*, Brixen 1866.

23. Cf. T. H. Darlow and H. F. Moule, *Historical Catalogue of the Printed Editions of Holy Scripture...1903–1911*, p. 294, Bible Society archives; 'British and Foreign Bible Society: Minutes of Editorial Sub-Committee: Dinka, 1905', Bible Society archives.



Salim Wilson as a 'Missionary Exhibit', wearing a leopard skin



Salim Wilson at the Wilberforce Centenary, Hull, 1933

It is somewhat puzzling that he was never chosen for missionary work in the Sudan, given his oft-expressed desire to return to his people. The CMS had used him for 'missionary exhibition work' in England but ceased this after the reconquest of the Sudan, hoping 'that genuine missionary zeal would take him back to his own country now that it is free from all restrictions'.<sup>24</sup> Yet there seems to have been no serious proposal to include him in one of the CMS's own missions, and Salim continued to do what he described as 'missionary' work in Yorkshire, Lincolnshire and even Buckinghamshire, attracting many audiences.

It was, perhaps, his very determination to adopt Christianity on his own terms which made him appear an unreliable and contentious man to his benefactors. Journeys abroad with English missionaries tended to end in disputes. His trip to Palestine with the Wilson family was curtailed by 'circumstances' which 'compelled' him to return home. In the Congo with Graham Wilmot Brooke, he again returned home on his own because 'Mr. Brooke had been for some time gradually changing his Theological views, and we were no longer able to see eye to eye in matters of doctrine.'<sup>25</sup> The correspondence from both missions now in the CMS archives throws little direct light on these clashes. Charles Wilson refers to Salim only indirectly, as his servant, and it is clear that in Jaffa the servants were dissatisfied with their accommodation. Graham Wilmot Brooke was a zealous missionary with a grandiose but ill-informed scheme to evangelize Africa. He had an unrealistic and exaggerated perception of the importance of his mission and his own capacity to achieve it. That there was a painful disagreement between Brooke and Salim, which was part of Brooke's disillusionment with his project, is clear from the fragments of Brooke's letters and diaries which have been preserved. At the time, Brooke thought Salim had 'done wrong', but all details of the dispute were carefully omitted from his papers which were later deposited with the CMS. Perhaps on reflection he later concluded that the dispute did him little credit as well.<sup>26</sup>

The picture which emerges, then, seems to presage the experiences of many Dinka in the modern Sudan which Dr Deng describes in the preceding chapter. In Palestine, Salim Wilson found himself a servant among other local Arab servants; an ex-slave speaking slave Arabic among persons who would be contemptuous of his race and his slave background. In the Congo, he began as an equal partner in Brooke's missionary enterprise, but he had no equal voice in the direction the mission was to take. We can imagine him thinking—if not saying—'Dignity, *dheng*, remain; indignity, *yuur*, let us go!' Back in England, he continued to annoy his colleagues by refusing to accept the subordinate role offered him. One wrote of him somewhat disparagingly, 'I believed him to be a

24. Letter from H. G. Mallaher, 17 January 1905, Bible Society archives.

25. '*Jehova Nissi*', pp. 55, 73.

26. See the records of the Palestine mission, G3 P/O 1884; and Wilmot Brooke MSS, Acc. 82: F2, F3/1, F3/3 and F5, bundle 3, letter to 'My dearest Pappy', 3 March 1888, all in the CMS archives, Birmingham University Library.



Christian man but he was so very full of life—and so excitable that he was not the quiet sober minded man whom I have met with in other Africans.... He is a clever man no doubt.<sup>27</sup> He lacked the deference which was expected of an African subordinate in an English mission at this time. He was fully confident in his own ability to spread God's word, even to the English themselves. The explanation for his confidence, or perhaps his justification for it, is revealed in his recollections of Dinka religious life.

It was in England that Salim Wilson was taught about African 'heathenism'. The late Victorian Sunday-school image of the heathen was of a person devoid of love, ignorant of God's love and supremacy, who worshipped idols of wood and stone. By this definition, which Salim accepted, the Dinka were not heathen. Salim referred to the love he felt for his parents, and they for him. He also noted that the Dinka knew no idols but had direct experience of God the creator, and even the Holy Spirit and the afterlife. Dinka life, before the Arabs came, was marked by honour, morality and temperate living—very much an Eden before the Fall of Man.<sup>28</sup> The chiefs—of which his father was one—were priests and warrior-leaders in the Patriarchal style of ancient Israel, performing blood-sacrifices in a manner reminiscent, so he thought, of the Hebrew patriarchs.<sup>29</sup>

The Patriarchal comparison was one he returned to again and again. Since the Dinka were not 'heathens', they must be either ancient Israelites or ancient Egyptians. He proposed this tentatively in his first book and developed it at greater length in his second.<sup>30</sup> By the 1930s, when his first two books were amalgamated and expanded into a single autobiography, he had the additional authority of Charles Seligman to which he could refer. His general account of the Dinka borrows many phrases from Seligman, such as a 'congeries of tribes', 'rainmaker' and 'divine king'. He cites Seligman's description of Dinka facial features as evidence of the Dinka's 'Semitic', as opposed to 'Negroid', origin.<sup>31</sup> He then elaborates on his very first comparison between the Dinka and the Patriarchs:

...the Dinkas worship an imaginary and spiritual god of their own, who they call 'Yasth', which signifies 'holy' or 'pure', and they regard their god much as the Jew of the Old Testament regarded Jehovah—as the Creator of the Universe, the Father of Man, and as a spirit whom they know and address personally.

All these points, it will be noted, convey a strong suggestion of a Semitic origin, and this is further strengthened by the fact that the high priest of the tribe (who is usually also the chief) uses invocations in addressing Yasth which bear a strong resemblance to those used in similar Jewish ritual even to-day—usually embracing the names of some of the founders of the nation, as 'the God of

Abraham, of Isaac, and Jacob'. But stranger evidence, perhaps, than any of the foregoing, is the faith the Dinka has in his God as a God of Battles.<sup>32</sup>

The Christian God is Salim Wilson's God because it is the God of both the ancient Hebrews and the Dinka at the same time. More than that, Salim Wilson is a preacher because his father was a priest. He stresses this point by reference to the patriarchs, but it is a continuation of a Dinka idea. Dinka spear-masters have Flesh as their clan-divinity (*yath*). It is Flesh which awakens in their bodies during sacrifices; it is Flesh which cools their tongues and inspires them to speak the truth and give good counsel.<sup>33</sup> In Salim's case the Word had not just been made Flesh, it had been made *his* Flesh.

Salim remembered the words for God which he heard his father invoke: *yath*, or clan-divinity, and 'creator', a direct translation of *aciek*. These are also the names invoked over the troubled boy, Ajak, when an expectant crowd waited to hear which divinity or Power would reveal itself. Salim Wilson may have accepted Jesus, but this was in some ways the revelation of the name of a new divinity to be incorporated among the old. His supreme self-confidence that Jesus was his personal saviour and that he could speak forth the word of the Lord, even in a foreign tongue, to those who might otherwise take the credit for bringing him to the Lord was a product as much of his religious experience as a Dinka as of his Christian faith. The personal pedigree which he asserted, linking him to the God of Abraham, made some of his religious teachers—in a land where pedigrees are highly valued and jealously guarded—feel distinctly uneasy.<sup>34</sup>

### Deng Laka<sup>35</sup>

Deng Laka was a Ngok Dinka from the Khor Fulluth area in modern Upper Nile Province. As a boy, he and his mother and sisters came as refugees to the Gaawar Nuer. His religious experiences help us to assess further the cultural response to Christianity of the early Dinka converts, as there are a number of intriguing parallels.

Deng Laka was born Deng Cuol, but when he was brought into Gaawar society in the late 1850s or early 1860s, he was adopted by a man named Lek and thus became known as Deng Laka. When he grew up, the local Gaawar ally to the Arab slavers, Nuar Mer, abducted Deng's mother and sisters and sold them into slavery. Deng Laka thus joined a growing band of Gaawar who had a grievance against Nuar. After Nuar Mer's allies were forced to leave the

27. Letter from T. F. Allison, 1 February 1905, Bible Society archives.

28. *The Ethiopia Valley*, pp. 42–7.

29. 'Jehova Nissi', pp. 10, 17; *The Ethiopia Valley*, pp. 23, 48–51.

30. 'Jehova Nissi', p. 17; *The Ethiopia Valley*, pp. 22–3.

31. *I Was A Slave*, pp. 9–16.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

33. Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience*, pp. 136–46.

34. Letter from J. E. Linnell, 3 February 1905, Bible Society archives.

35. See D. H. Johnson, *Nuer Prophets* (forthcoming).

region, one Gaawar claimed possession by a divinity and organized a raid to try to kill Nuar and seize his large herd of cattle. Deng Laka joined this party but was disappointed that the erstwhile prophet thought better of his audacity and aborted the raid before reaching Mogogh, Nuar's village. Before returning home with his companions, Deng Laka climbed on top of a large termite mound and sat facing in the direction of Mogogh. Just as the sight of his master's herd at nearly this same time reminded Salim Wilson of his lost father and Divinity, so the thought of another herd of looted cattle brought to Deng Laka's mind his lost mother and Divinity. 'Why did Divinity [*kuoth*] catch a coward?' he asked aloud. 'If it caught me, me Deng Laka, would I leave those cattle behind at Mogogh?' He then raised his hands to the sky, saying, 'Father, you keep all of yourself in the sky without providing me with the thing you can give me.'

On returning home, Deng Laka immediately fell ill and for some time would go out into the bush at night in a state of possession. He was seen playing with snail shells as cattle, much as the young Salim Wilson played at being a priest. Finally, Deng Laka's age-mates arranged a sacrifice to cure him of his malady, and it was then that he announced that he was possessed by a new *kuoth* called *diu*, by whose name he then became known. He proved his possession by successfully raiding Nuar Mer, killing him, scattering his following and seizing his cattle. This was the beginning of Deng Laka's career as the main prophet of the Gaawar Nuer, which lasted from about 1879 till his death in 1907.

The Gaawar had never heard of a *kuoth* called *diu* before, and to this day assume it is a Ngok Dinka divinity—for which there is as yet no proof. But they explain Deng Laka's contact with divinity in another way, claiming that he came from an 'earth priest' (*kuaar muon*) lineage among the Dinka, which was why he was able to assume the role of earth priest, and prophet, among them. This is the standard explanation the Nuer often give about any Dinka who becomes a Nuer earth priest, and it is perhaps significant that it usually refers to persons whom the Nuer have displaced in their own conquests of Dinka land. The Dinka 'earth priests' are brought in to give Nuer conquests legitimacy and safeguard the land they now occupy. In any case, it was important for the Nuer to establish retroactively a link between Deng Laka and an 'earth priest' lineage, just as it was important for Salim Wilson to establish a link between himself and an ancient priestly lineage. This link having been made, Deng Laka was able to speak on behalf of *kuoth* to the Nuer, in Nuer.

### Conclusion

The religious experiences I have described were individual, but not entirely unique. All three of the persons described here brought with them into exile

something from their own culture of the direct experience of Divinity which, certainly in Salim Wilson's and Deng Laka's case, they clung to for the rest of their lives.

It was in the nineteenth century that the communal worship of clan-divinities among the Dinka came under repeated strain. The sacrifice of cattle from family herds maintained the link between the the clan-divinity, the individual and the community. In the nineteenth century, captives in slave raids and tribal wars were removed, not only from their kin, but from their herds, thus inhibiting the maintenance of their ties with their clan-divinities through sacrifice. In the cases of both Salim Wilson and Deng Laka, it was in contemplating cattle which belonged to someone else that their own cattleless state overpowered them, and they turned first to despair and then to Divinity.

The bond between man and *yath*, already loosened by human action, was freed by divine action. The *yath* freed themselves, seizing persons independently, becoming the 'free-divinities' which Godfrey Lienhardt describes. The same term is used in Dinka for both; some well-known clan-divinities (Deng, Garang) now appear as free-divinities. The persons possessed by them can announce their names and speak their words, just as Deng Laka did when seized by *diu*. Though possession is theoretically the choice of the new divinity or Power, it can be sought, as the example of Deng Laka shows us. A person can deliberately choose a new divinity, even if that choice is represented as compulsion.

With Christianity, the seeking of a new divinity can be more openly deliberate. Baptism replaces possession, and as in possession a new name is adopted by which a person both announces and identifies a new relationship with Divinity. The adoption of new names by our three proselytes brought with it not just the ability but the responsibility to proclaim the words of that new divinity. For both Salim Wilson and Deng Laka, acceptance of a new personal divinity (Jesus in the one case, *diu* in the other) was a way each could incorporate his previous religious experience into an idiom which spoke directly to his new circumstances. In adopting the religion of their hosts, each made it peculiarly his own and repaid his benefactors with an interest which was unexpected.

Caterina Zenab and Salim Wilson were, or claimed to be, the children of spear-masters. Deng Laka was also assumed to be from a similar priestly lineage. The priestly virtue of Flesh, inherent in all members of the lineage, even if active in only a few, can impart an extra ability to experience Divinity and speak on its behalf. It is perhaps significant that the first ordained Dinka Christian priest, Daniel Farim Deng, did not claim to come from such a lineage. Rather, he traced his descent from a Nuer family absorbed into the Dinka following an earlier war.<sup>36</sup> It may be stretching the point to suggest that this was a reason why he did not become a noted missionary—he was not a *bany* in either the traditional sense, or the Christianized sense the Dinka later adopted. We need only suggest that membership of a priestly lineage probably

36. *Nigrizia*, Vol. V, no. 5 (1887), pp. 151-2; Vol. V, no. 6 (1887), pp. 170-2.

had an important influence on two of the most renowned Dinka Christian evangelists of the last century, as well as on a Dinka who became one of the first Nuer prophets. An inherent experience of Divinity was translated by them into new religious expressions. 'Free-divinities' found them in their exile, and made them truly free.

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