Lifting the Curse of Isaiah: Pathways of incorporation of transnational Nuer Christians in the homeland and the US

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»They shall all be left to the mountain birds of prey and to the beasts in the land. The birds of prey shall summer on them and on them all the beasts of the earth shall winter.« (Isaiah, Ch.18)

Introduction

It was mainly to increase conversion rates that the first missionaries, who settled in the Nuer areas[1] in the 1960s, referred to the bible section from the book of Isaiah, Chapter 18[2] quoted above. They argued that Isaiah cursed the Nuer because they had not converted to Christianity by then. In the course of the civil war in Sudan from 1983 to 2005, and during the outmigration of thousands of Nuer to the US, the curse of Isaiah was subject to new interpretations. During the war, violence and death were related to it and so was their flight to neighbouring countries. When those Nuer who had outmigrated to

1 The Nuer, who are semi-pastoralist cattle herders belonging to the second largest group in Sudan and in Ethiopia, are considered as one of the minority groups. Their settlement areas strech from the Western Upper Nile area in Southern Sudan to Gambella region in Southwestern Ethiopia.

2 While chapter 18 is not part of the curriculum of Western theology colleges and Western theologists have largely ignored it, it forms a substantial aspect of East-African missionaries. As the area mentioned in chapter 18 refers to Ethiopia, and the curse to its inhabitants, missionaries in Ethiopia and Sudan have adopted it as a conversion tool. They commonly relate low conversion rates in those areas as a reason for marginalisation. (Interviews with Andrew Walls, St. Paul: 2007 as well as with various Ethiopians and Sudanese on their encounters with missionaries in Ethiopia, Gambella: 2003).

Western countries came into a position to reverse their role from aid-receiving refugees to that of remittances senders, the curse took on a new meaning for them. They uplifted it by disseminating transnational churches and by simultaneously involving in homeland and receiving country activities.

In my transnational approach to the Nuer[3] I draw on Glick Schiller's concept of a social field defined as an »unbounded terrain of multiple interlocking egocentric networks« (Glick Schiller 2004:455). This approach operates on the assumption that migrants live in a transnational field that is influenced, but not bounded by nation states. In their social field the Nuer settle permanently or temporarily as refugees or guests before and after the process of migration. Unlike other conceptualizations of transnational ›communities‹, this field has fuzzy ends as it embraces a ›transnational network‹ that is not conceptualized as consisting of ethnic communities, but of »chains of social relationships that are mapped by stretching out from the individual« (2004:455). In their role as nodal points between chains of Nuer dispersed across national boundaries, their churches offer opportunities to engage in global processes of exchange. Individual Nuer cluster around institutionalised kinship-based church congregations that maintain ties with other kinship-based Nuer church congregations in East Africa, the US, Australia and European countries. While some authors argue that not all migrants are involved in transnational activities (Portes/Guarnizo 2002), movement across space is in my notion not a condition of transnationalism. Not all Nuer in the US visit their homeland but are nevertheless involved in transnational identities by maintaining close relations with their kin, friends or professional partners within their social field. The type of transnationalism I am referring to here describes transmigrants who are simultaneously incorporated into homeland and receiving country. As these practices enable them to develop transnational identities and feel belonging to several locations this approach differs from the concept of diaspora. In my use of the term I do not emphasize de-territorialization, but simultaneous incorporation, a term established by Glick Schiller and Levitt (2004). The methodological implications for capturing this simultaneity were a multi-sited field approach (Marcus 1998) that involved research in the homeland and the receiving country. Two years of multi-sited fieldwork in Ethiopian refugee camps and Nuer villages between and within their new settlements in the Midwest of the US (Falge 2006) enabled me to witness the efforts Nuer invested in maintaining relationships with people or institutions in various specific localities and across national boundaries. This perspective has helped me to observe the process of the establishment of a transnational

3 I base this paper on 24 months of fieldwork (2001-2004) in the Ethio-Sudanese border areas and the Midwest of the US. The research was financed by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Halle and the Cusanuswerk e.V. to whom I am very greatful.

Christian network and to learn about the strategies Nuer Christians apply to make use of it. During my encounter with other African immigrants in the US while studying the Nuer I found that their case represents a growing number of African Christians who live as immigrants, citizens or refugees in transnational spaces. Many of them draw on Christianity as a stabilising institution that becomes a source of empowerment and revitalization in their process of migration.

By connecting congregations in the homeland with those in the receiving country, global Christian networks support people during their first steps within a foreign country and create meaning for lives affected by immigration policies and capitalist economies (Van Dijk 1997; Kalu forthcoming; Adogame 2002; Marshall 1993). Previous studies on transnational Christianity have described this role of Christianity in responding to Africans' experience of disempowerment by giving hope, facilitating outmigration and exerting pressure to send remittances (Levitt 2003; Nieswand 2005a; Glick Schiller 2007). In a context of social deprivation, Pentecostalism often is the most prominent among those Christian movements and often resists if not rejects a national identity in favour of a larger global Christian identification (for the case of Ethiopia see Kaplan 2005:100). Marshall describes how Pentecostalism in Nigeria, where large parts of the society are pushed into economic crisis, became an expressive and pragmatic act of individual and collective reconstruction (Marshall 1993:223). Some Christians also rearticulate their economic irritations and political instabilities by disentangling from the world, breaking up kinship networks or by becoming involved in an economy of prestige (Marshall 1993:226; Meyer 1998)[4].

Many studies present immigrant churches mainly in terms of ethnicity and homeland ties providing coping strategies of emotional support and material assistance to migrants traumatised by the experience of dispersal (Gifford 1998; Ter Haar 1998; Brodwin 2003) – a bias which risks »… downplaying migrants' own religious logic and the way their religious beliefs shape settlement and incorporation, locally, nationally, and transnationally.« (Glick Schiller/Karagiannis 2007:144).

This paper is about the specific meaning transnational Christianity offers to the Nuer and about the way they engage with this form of Christianity. It deals with the roles the transnational churches of Nuer migrants in the US provide for them at home as well as in the receiving country. This will be done by describing the process of dispersal and incorporation into the receiv-

4 An economy of prestige implies status growth through an outward avowal of material prosperity by clothing and hair styles as well as decorative adornment. One of the forms it takes among Pentecostal Christians is the ›doctrine of prosperity‹ where the spiritual and material fortunes of a believer are dependent on how much he gives, spiritually and materially to God (Marshall: 1993).

ing country as well as the complex interactions between homeland and receiving country in a sense of a transnational field that is constituted of Christian identities, institutions and resource flows.

Transnational relations in the condition of rupture

To the missionaries who came to the Nuer areas in the 1960s the apparent resemblance of the cursed nation described in Isaiah provided the bibilical proof of God's curse laid upon the ›pagan‹ Nuer. Only conversion to Christianity, the missionaries argued, could achieve a waiver of God's curse (see also Scroggins: 2002:208). This was pronounced in the context of the Sudanese civil war which became one of the most violent and long-lasting wars of the African continent, causing the death of almost two million people. In the face of decades of war, internal displacement and evacuation into refugee camps, urban areas in East Africa and the rest of the world, many Nuer could not help but similarly explain their misery by the assumed curse. Young Nuer Christians began to draw on the missionary idea about Isaiah and chapter 18 became one of the most quoted biblical passages in Nuer Christian circles.

During the civil war in Sudan, aid dependance in the camps and the unplannability of daily life has steadily weakened peoples' economic and political agency. In these conditions of rupture, widespread destruction and disintegration the church remained a conspicuously viable civil institution manifested by Southern peoples' vigour, growth and creativity. The dramatic growth of the Christian Church in Sudan, which has been described as the fastest growing church in Africa, is one of the widely recognized developments in the last phase of the Sudanese war (Wheeler 1997:11).[5]

Outmigration to the Western world, where the Nuer gained access to salaried jobs, education and health-care, helped many of them to regain control over their lives. The flow of remittances that reached their home communities and the impressions they left among their kin and friends as educated, prosperous achievers made the homeland communities pin their hopes on them. Elders in the homeland forward their reciprocal claims to the diaspora by referring to the instable cattle economy. One example of this is the sacrificial blessing of Gwenpar – an elder from Fangak – as he adressed his son along with a group of other video-filming Christians in Western dress during a home visit from the US:

»You! The ones who are going for writing, clear their eyes, oh God of the country. … They will not suffer like us. We were born in vain, because our fathers died with-

5 Though I collected rich ethnographic material on the importance of the church during rupture, I have to limit myself here to a general level.

out benefiting from us, without eating something from us. Before, we refused education, because we wanted to take care of our cows. But where are the cows? Now, we ourselves are the ones who are ending up in the wilderness.« (Gwenpar, Pangak 2004)

The young generation, who outmigrated to the Western world, is seen as a shield against the wilderness which stands for the fragilities of the cattle economy under the conditions of war. What is striking in Gwenpar's statement is his denial of the elders' power as it contrasts with the generational conflict between cattle-rich elders and young Christians. In this conflict the elders' power is symbolized by cattle and that of the young Christians by literacy. The blessing does not only acknowledge the benefits of education but values literacy over cattle. By including literacy in the Nuer economy as an additional tool the elder empowers as well as warns the transmigrants not to ignore their reciprocal claims in a world beyond the cattle economy. The empowerment which the Nuer from the Western countries have experienced creates meaning and elevates their status from former aid-recipients to that of nurturers of people in the homeland. Their responsibility to care and nurture has a vitalizing and status-creating effect as they feed their transnational relations. What the visiting Nuer experience here has been coined by Nieswand as the ›status paradox of migration‹ in which the gain of status in one country is achieved by a simultaneous loss of status in the receiving country (Nieswand 2005b: 250-255). My empirical material will show that Christianity is at the centre of the status paradox by facilitating status gain through transnational activities. It elevates Nuer migrants from the bottom of US society as unskilled labourers to the status of achievers as modernized Christians in their vernacular churches and when visiting their relatives in the dusty ›bushes‹ of the homeland.

When in 1992 the first Nuer refugees began to migrate to the US and were resettled by US churches, Christian networks confirmed their viability by offering them support during the early days of arrival. Unlike many other Africans, who often face deadly and lifetime-consuming challenges by surmounting Western shields against non-Western migration, the resettlement process enabled them to quickly establish life in the receiving countries. From the very beginning, their special conditions enabled them to invest in the building-up of a transnational church network to support their homeland communities.

Local, national and transnational pathways of incorporation in the US

The research emphasis of many scholars of African immigrant Christianity on mega-Pentecostal churches tends to overlook the depth and nuances of African Christianity in its engagement to build up religious networks in the Western world. The types of churches Africans may select and the meaning they create for them, however, depends on their own religious identities and social organisation, the immigration policy of the receiving country, the settlement locality itself and their chosen patterns of inclusion to it. Africans in the Netherlands for example formed independent churches because the structures of former mission churches appeared to them less adaptable (Ter Haar 1998:132). In her study on Pentecostal churches in the East-German town of Halle, Glick Schiller shows how these churches have provided Africans with not only legitimacy to transnational movement but also claims to rights in Germany (Glick Schiller/Karagiannis 2001:160). In similar ways to the latter, the Nuer were also incorporated in US churches. While the Africans in Halle have included Germans into their missionary project, intermarried with them and made them join their Pentecostal congregations, most Nuer congregations solely consist of Nuer. Also their marriage patterns are endogemous (?). Out of their religious understanding to be part of a global Christian family, however, they attach as vernacular[6] congregations to mainline[7], white US middle class churches. The majority of Nuer churches are attached to either the Lutheran or to the Presbyterian church, due to existing ties between them. Those Nuer migrants who joined the Lutheran church did so because it acted as one of the main resettlement agencies in the Midwest, helping in the initial phase of migration. Clinging to this church was seen as fulfilling a reciprocal obligation to an institution that had once helped them: »Nuer value friendship a lot, after they [the Lutheran Church] welcomed us, we did not want to break the friendship again« (Parkwol, Omaha 2003). The link with the Presbyterian Church went back to the first missionaries in Sudan. Their memories of a shared past and existing relationships with the missionaries who had once lived in their villages has constituted an entry point for renewing this relationship in the receiving country. Similar to the Africans in Halle, their attachment to those institutions familiar with them is a claim to rights in America.

6 By vernacular I am referring to immigrant congregations who conduct church services in their local languages.

7 By mainline church I am referring to the dominant mainly white middle class churches in the Midwest like the Lutheran and the Presbyterian churches.

Transnational Nuer churches in the US

The new settlement area of the Nuer, the Midwest, where people from African origin hardly make up more than five percent, sharply contrasts with other areas like New York or Washington DC where a dense pattern of immigrants from Africa caused an explosion of Pentecostal African immigrant churches in the past 15 years (Kalu 2008, forthcoming). However, despite their low number, the Nuer as well as other Africans in the Midwest have built up a considerable church landscape and developed a vibrant church-life. Though they were settled across different US states, the majority moved to the Midwest – an area with an ageing population and a shortage of unskilled labourers. Omaha in Nebraska became the largest settlement area where Nuer would settle from all over the US. Here, a group of Nuer was granted state-funding and established a resettlement agency that, by dealing with family resettlement, has triggered processes of chain migration. Ten years after the first arrival, the Nuer community in Omaha had grown considerably. One can participate in the most vibrant Nuer church services where professional choirs sing the latest hymns from the homeland, and attendance is high. During monthly unity prayers or annual feasts up to 400 people may attend a church service. Large religious, political or social community meetings frequently take place so that the buoyant community life also became a reason for many Nuer to move to Omaha, a city with which the Nuer strongly identify for its welcoming structures. Other »pull factors«[8] are low-cost housing and jobs in meat-packing plants.

Many people who arrived in the city of Omaha from other states had already established churches in the US and were familiar with the processes of church foundation so that between 1996 and 2001, many new churches were established (see table 1 on pages 62-63). In most immigrant-friendly churches the prerequisite to open a vernacular service is a minimum of 60 people and basic knowledge of the bible. Provided with those assets an applicant is accepted as a church leader and granted the right for his congregation to use the church's facilities. The mainline churches allocate to the Nuer rooms in their basements to conduct temporary vernacular services until their language skills have improved and they can participate in the English service. Hence, vernacular services are tolerated by US churches mainly under the premise of ›integration‹ and the monthly obligation to attend the main church's service aimed at the final dissolution of the vernacular services. Many Nuer attend the

8 The ›push and pull modell‹ explains the emergence of a pressure for migration out of the difference between two locations. Push factors like economic degradation, unemployment or war etc. force people to leave one location and the other location offers pull factors like economic wealth, employment and peace. The pull theory goes back to E.S. Lee 1972.

monthly services of the mainline church and in return, the pastor of the mainline church visits their services. Some Nuer are also represented in the church committees of the mainline churches and individuals of both groups maintain mutual relationships with each other. However, many Nuer view their church as a permanent institution and by regarding it as a means of nurturing their cultural identity that should be maintained for future generations, they want to pass it over to their children. At the same time, each congregation maintains close ties with several homeland congregations through regular phone contacts, visits as well as the sending of remittances. Despite this homeland orientation, their relationship with the US church matters as well. What we are dealing with here is a simultaneous incorporation, underlined by joint visits of Nuer church leaders and white US pastors from the mainline churches to the partnership congregations in Ethiopia that the Nuer leaders have newly established with the help of the mainline congregation.

To strengthen their internal ties and their position within the Lutheran church on the national level, Yiech, a Nuer pastor from Des Moines, has formed the ›Sudanese Task Force‹ – a network of Lutheran Nuer churches that connects them on the national US-level and offers first contact points to new arrivals. So far, the Sudanese Task Force connects 27 Lutheran Nuer congregations in nine US States which maintain national relationships with other Nuer and non-Nuer Lutheran members in the US.

Incorporating to the Midwest (Iowa, Minnesota and Nebraska)

In the Midwest, the level of racial and class segregation as well as discrimination against African-Americans is very salient. Their presence in white neighbourhoods still provokes the evacuation of the white populations and African-American neighbourhoods are recognized by strikingly poor housing.

While the Nuer maintain social relations with the mainline churches there is high tension between them and African-Americans, which expresses itself in occasional street fights between former Nuer or Dinka child-soldiers and African-American youth gangs as well as mutual discrimination. Recent immigrants from Africa who settled in the Midwest (Kenyans, other Sudanese like Dinka and Anywaa, Ethiopians and Eritreans) have taken up the essentialising, racialized US-discourse that blames African-Americans for being poor as a result of an assumed ›laziness‹ or ›inferiority‹, pushing them into criminality, drug abuse and unemployment. Hence, they share their outwardly expression to be distinct from African-Americans who in return devalue them as ›primitive baboons‹ – unfamiliar to cope with American lifestyles. The Nuer preference for mainline churches underlines their intended distinction

from African-Americans and devaluing them helps to veil their own exclusion from the middle class and constraints against upward mobility.

It is interesting that in a context where African-Americans are confined to their ghettos and excluded by white middle class structures, Sudanese refugees – who in the US-discourse of race belong to the same category of people of African origin – are warmly welcomed as new American citizens. America's support and protection of the Nuer can not only be explained by their willingness to incorporate into white mainline churches, but emerges from an anti-Muslim identification of US Christians. Built on the model of a Muslim/Christian division of the world and by reducing the Nuer to victims of Muslim persecution they legitimize their support. The fact that Christians view the Sudanese as hard working, honest people grants them the right to »be helped by Americans«. Several of the white American Christians I talked to described their new ›brothers-in-Christ‹ to me as God's ›blessing‹ to the American people: »These guys are very hard working. Especially here in Iowa with a huge problem of an aging population they are a blessing to the country!« (Pastor Sam, Des Moines 2003). The first Nuer who arrived in the US were resettled by church members, supporting them practically and materially, while starting life in the US. Attached to a church, arrivals from Africa receive donations from the members of the mainline congregations and are ›flooded‹ with charity items like second-hand cars, clothes and furniture. Church members also organise for them house-construction projects in middle-class areas. During handing-over ›rituals‹ of the houses organized by white church leaders, the future house-owners had to undergo a status reduction in which they are declared paupers of US charity. Though the Nuer are often alienated by their status degradation during those rituals, they undergo these demonstrations of American mercifulness because to them the house constitutes an important asset to become part of US society. Purchasing a house shows their ambition for permanent settlements in the US which most of them are aiming at, despite the ambivalence of an ›immigrant dream of an eventual return‹. However, in face of their long-term ›careers‹ as aid-dependant refugees they try as hard as possible to become self-reliant. Having arrived in the US in an understanding of being equal members of a Christian community, they are disillusioned by the issue of class and the pauper image attached to them. Though they need support in the early days, they dislike the image associated with it and cannot wait to become self-reliant. They also withdrew from being resettled by white sponsors and instead took responsibility for resettling those friends, families and other Southern Sudanese (Nuer, Dinka, Maban, Nubians).

›Networks of trust‹

Soon, Nuer pathways of incorporation (Glick Schiller et al. 2005) in the US began to be characterized by lineage-based neighbourhoods[9]. Newcomers are hosted by their kin and as soon as a house in the neighbourhood is free they move over. These networks of trust have helped people to get settled, find houses, jobs, security and get emotional support through kinship ties and a commonly shared past. Over time, pockets of Nuer neighbourhoods have come into existence in a number of Midwestern towns, mostly with meat-packing industry – the main job source for unskilled immigrant labourers.

When it comes to the question of ethnicity, from the national perspective within the US, an outsider who is unfamiliar with Nuer lineages would categorize the Nuer congregations as ethnic, because of their exclusive Nuer members. An insider will realize that Nuer churches consist of families or lineages (*cieng*) attached to US churches. Even during the annual Christmas and New Year celebrations when all Midwestern congregations unite and collectively celebrate in Omaha they identify as Gajaak differing from the other large Nuer tribe – the Gajiok – who celebrate in Texas. Though fragmentation is a general phenomenon among Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, the level of fission among the Nuer is striking. There is no church that has not yet undergone processes of fission in which a formerly large congregation broke into smaller and smaller segments by attaching to other churches. Hence, from 1996 to 2001, the growth of the Nuer community in Omaha along with processes of fission caused a growth of Nuer churches from two to 16 (!):

Table 1: Establishment of Nuer Church Congregations in Omaha, Nebraska.[10]

	Year of Establishment	**Name of the Congregation**	**Name of the dominant family**
1	1996	Seven Day Adventist I	Cieng Wau,Ceing Chany
2	1996	First Covenant (Evangelical Covenant)	Cieng Reng
3	1997	Zihion (Lutheran)	Cieng Nyäjaani
4	1998	Mountain View (Lutheran)	Cieng Nyälieth (Gajiok)
5	1998	First Lutheran	Lou (Mor)
6	1998	St. Joseph (Catholic)	Western Nuer Bentiu,
7	1999	Emmanuel	Cieng Wau (Hoth)

9 Though the majority were Nuer, there was also a sporadic settlement of Dinka.

10 Half of the Nuer churches in the above table are Lutheran – known to them through the process of resettlement and nearly all the others belong either to one of the three missionary churches known from the homeland: the Presbyterian, Catholic and Seventh Day Adventist church. In 2001 when the mainline churches were already ›occupied‹ by existing Nuer congregations the first previously unknown church – the Babtist church – was established.

8	1999	St. Michael (Lutheran)	Cieng Nyajaani
9	1999	St. Paul (Lutheran)	Cieng Chany
10	1999	Pacific Hill (Lutheran)	Cieng Wau (Cieng Kueth)
11	2000	St. Richard (Catholic)	Mixed
12	2000	First Presbyterian	Lou and Pangak (Lak)
13	2001	Seven Day Adventist II	Mixed
14	2001	King of King (Lutheran)	Cieng Chany
15	2001	Missionary Baptist	Cieng Wau, Gaajiok
16	2002	Memorial (Lutheran)	Pangak , (Pow)

The lines of fission, which continue to reflect kinship sections, result from struggles over and search for leadership as well as economic resources – mainly scholarships or money. Although these processes emerge from conflicts, fission itself is not viewed in a negative light. By regarding it as ›seeking greener pastures‹ it becomes a familiar behavioural pattern traditionally applied to cope with scarcity by diversifying resources. However, not only the Nuer, but also non-pastoralist African immigrants I talked to in the Midwest and Europe support the view of Christian fission as a constructive process. They legitimize the creation of a link between a US and a homeland congregation as part of an ›African tradition‹[11].

»*ciengdan cä thok*« (our families are destroyed/finished) is a statement that dominates Nuer worries in their transnational field and the lineage-based church pattern is an attempt to counter family destruction due to the war and dispersal by replacing families with distant lineage members. Since from the distance of the US the most distantly related kin seems still close enough, people – avoid of close kin – cope by treating people of distant lineage sections as if they have a close relationships with them.[12] This results in the identification of most churches with a certain lineage. Again, each lineage-based-church adapts the name of the mainline church and is linked to its specific location. Examples for these identifications in Des Moines are the Cieng Thul congregation in the »Trinity Lutheran church on University (Ave)« or the Cieng Col Mut congregation of the »Evangelical Lutheran on Hickman (Road)« with which its members identify. Like their houses and neighbourhoods, these churches and the relationships with its members are ways of incorporating to and identifying with US localities that help to reconstruct their families and counter processes of de-territorialization.

11 Personal communication with Kalu 2007.

12 Again, I have to limit myself here to the level of abstraction. For further details on the issue of Christian fission see Falge: 2005:171-194.

The challenges and failures of simultaneous incorporation

The transnationalization of Christianity on a global scale is sometimes viewed in the light of an increase of ›Southern‹[13] missionary activities and a growing number of ›Southern‹ missionaries to the ›global North‹ (Kalu forthcoming, Shenk 2001, Levitt 2004). The increasing number of African missionaries in Asian countries or of Latin American and Asian missionaries in Africa are described by some as an outflow of missionary impulse from the ›global South‹ to all parts of the world. The ›South‹, it is argued, is turning into a new Christian centre for Northern visitors and short term missionaries (Kalu 2008:5). As they religiously identify with a global Christian community, many Nuer in the US see themselves as both, missionaries to the homeland and to the US. Several transmigrants have received theology scholarships in Minnesota, Iowa and Nebraska with plans to build up missions in the homeland. Consequently, the most desired job of many second generation Nuer youth is becoming a missionary. Not all churches are welcoming to immigrants, but those which are, like the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church, a conservative branch of the Lutheran church of America, train immigrants as missionaries and invest in the establishment of Lutheran missions in their homeland. The Missouri Synod also invests in the members of those newly established churches in the South by granting them theology scholarships to qualify them as leaders for those churches.

Nuer pastors in the US may be trained and sponsored by US congregations or they may be unsalaried pastors from the homeland. Most of the former village pastors from churches in the homeland might never have received any formal training, and as they are not formally employed by mainline churches they have to earn a living. Therefore, many of those pastors are only so during leisure time. As unskilled labourers with basic literacy skills, they depend on high-risk/low-status jobs. Wife and husband hardly see each other as they take different shifts, unable to afford day care for their children. In order to bring up their five children for example, Deng from the Evangelical Church in Des Moines and his wife Nyachuol rarely see each other as they work during alternating day and night shifts in meat-packing. The stressful and repetitive work[14] in the plants where communication is reduced to short

13 Here, I am referring to the global North-South divide, which embraces a division of the world into Southern marginalized countries and Northern countries that participate in and benefit from the global economy. I chose this slightly outdated approach to the world, by drawing on the literature of reverse flows which operates with this perspective.

14 Repetitive motion, high speed and physically demanding assembly lines in meat-packing jobs lead to the highest injury rate of any US industry which lies

breaks and with very limited workers' rights, the churches offer comforting and status reversal. On Sundays, in their church, Deng and Nyachuol experience a status reversal by involving in an economy of prestige. Arriving in a big family car, dressed up as advanced achievers they display their status reversal from dehumanized refugees to self-reliant citizens in the Western world and dehumanized workers in US plants to well-to-do Christians who have become the economic foothold of many people in the homeland. The church services are comforting forums which people use to express their matters of concern. By standing up to freely talk about good or bad experiences from the past or presence Christians release their sorrow or share their happiness during services. During one of the church services I attended in the Trinity congregation in Des Moines, Deng Yier, recalled a dream in which all kin from his village that were killed during the war had regained their lives. The empathy that members of the congregation expressed to him due to their shared past and collective relation to those people helped Deng to overcome his sorrows from the past and presence. Their transnational life-styles often lead them to their endurance limit and especially some women face great difficulties in facing the double workload of domestic and labour activities in the US. Nyamaar, a single mother of five children, illiterate and working in meatpacking without child support faces great difficulties and does not want to incorporate to the US. She is longing for the homeland, expressed during a prayer during church service:

»…My father, be with us in this situation. Be with us in our life in America my father and protect us. My father our life is very difficult here and our life in Africa is better. We are very tired in this country my father. God father we are almost to disappear here. We are not able to live in America. Father, why don't you take us back home? Father, if there is a way, take us back, we are almost about to perish. Why should we perish (?) in the middle of the bush?« (Nyamaar, Omaha 2003).

The way Nyamaar's prayer emotionally affected people in the church and the tears many people had to wipe from their faces when listening to her, showed that transnational lives, despite many of its revitalising aspects does not work for all. It contains unsoundness and brokenness that on the surface can easily be overlooked. My attempt here is not to veil the fractures and the suffering in transnationalism which definitely exists. My intention is to unveil the other side of those fractures, a space that previous migration studies overlooked.

half below the average injury and illness rate for all US manufacturing (GOA: Workplace, Safety and Health 2005).

Establishing transnational churches in the homeland

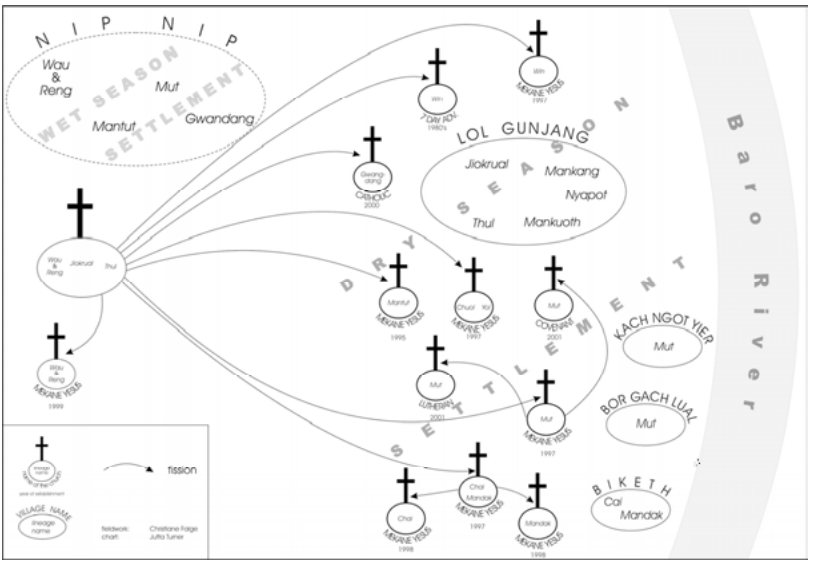
Transmigrants' congregations aim at sending its pastors or other leaders on homeland missions for building up partnership congregations and Nuer missionaries from Iowa and Nebraska have dramatically changed the church landscape in Gambella. Depending on their educational background their travel is sponsored by the vernacular or the mainline church, or both. They usually travel in groups, with other Nuer church leaders and often together with ›white‹ pastors from the mainline church. Prior to their arrival, the Nuer missionaries from the US contact their relatives and assign them as leaders of their churches. A leader who represents a US church with enough money and scholarship promises and the ability to speak (*ruac*) has good chances to attract a number of followers. The photographs of an established congregation and its members serve as proof to be sent to the US and to attract visits by the missionaries. As soon as the missionaries come they will apply to the Ethiopian Mekane Yesus church in Gambella for the recognition of their church and once it has been granted they will be permitted to establish further churches in the villages.

Regular phone calls, remittance flows and visits connect the US congregations with the Ethiopian churches – a pattern that repeated itself among all the other US congregations until its founders gained US citizenship. Since 2000, Nuer church leaders from the US have personally engaged in short term missions and the building up of partnership congregations of their US churches in the refugee camps and their former villages. Among the first people who established transnational churches in Gambella was a group of Nuer and Americans from various congregations in Des Moines Iowa and Minnesota. Their transnational activities via phone, email and postal mail started already in 1999, because by then they lacked US citizenship. In a joint application asking permission to establish branches of their churches in the region they approached the Mekane Yesus church in Gambella. Arguing on the grounds that transnational churches would benefit Nuer society by diversifying resources in their areas by connecting them with the Western world convinced the Mekane Yesus leaders. The group also involved the Council and in the same year the governor of Gambella officially allowed the establishment of transnational churches in the region. In 2001 the first Lutheran church was established in the village Lol Gunjang and some month later I met there two of the group members during a visit. One was Simon Yiech, the pastor of the Trinity Lutheran[15] church in Des Moines and the other one was Koang, a member of

15 For the official presentation of its Sudanese congregation on the website of the Trinity church see: http://www.trinitydesmoines.com/.

his congregation. Their church in Des Moines is associated with the Thul family of the Cieng Chany lineage from the village Lol Gunjang. Both were from the family of Thul, one of the major lineages in the village. The members of the Lutheran church in the village were fromYiech's sub-section Mut whose members he had assigned during a telephone call to break away from the larger group of Cieng Thul in the Mekane Yesus congregation and build a Lutheran church. By the time I visited the village, two transnational churches had been established by former members of Mekane Yesus congregations:

Figure 1: Diversifying church landscape in the village Lol Gunjang



When Yiech and Koang arrived in the village they were euphorically received by Christians and non-Christians as their returning children and after Yiech's father had sacrificed a bull, the villagers, together with their visitors spent the whole day feasting. Yiech and Koang distributed the money collected by their US congregation to the age-grades, the village church as well as to the Mekane Yesus church in town. Having spent two days in the village they returned back to Gambella town. Similarly to Yiech and Koang, the other group members, including the Americans visited their villages and the branches of their congregations, distributed money and strengthened their relationship with the church and the villagers. Similarly, their joint missions with American pastors in the homeland strengthen their multiple incorporations with different localities and social spaces. The collectively experienced hardship and the life encountered during this mission strengthened their relationship with the white pastors and their mainline churches. Though they were from differ-

ent churches, all of them jointly contributed money for the large church building of the Mekane Yesus church in town – the first made of concrete financed by US Nuer congregations.

Resulting from the transnational activities, between 1996 and 2001 the number of churches in Gambella increased from formerly 3 to more than 20 (!), with each church establishing a steady flow of donations from the US congregations. The remittances flowing into the region during that time have remarkably expanded the Nuer settlement in Gambella town, hosting all the new church headquarters.

Many Christians in Gambella however complained about the splendid waste of remittances for conspicuous consumption and alcohol. The amount of money brought (up to 10.000 $ per church) and the way it perished in the hands of individuals involved all members of the US churches in long discussions with people in the homeland about a more strategic use of those resources by channeling them to education and health projects.

Back in Des Moines, Yiech and all the other returning visitors shared their impressions from the homeland by organized fundraising activities during which they procured further remittances – a practice that is currently establishing itself among many returning homeland visitors in the US. Up to today members of the Trinity Nuer congregation continue to send church-based remittances to the homeland churches and often spend many hours on the phone by sharing with the members of their churches in Gambella problems, gossips and developing future strategies about ›advancing‹ their homeland. The case of the Trinity church shows that the type of transnationalism practiced here already began prior to Yiech's and Koang's movement while churches were established by long-distance operations. It also shows the fuzzyness of the transnational network consisting of chains of social relationships that stretched from members of the Mut lineage in Lol Gunjang and the Mekane Yesus leaders in Gambella to the congregation in Des Moines – just like the relationships between the other group members who established churches with lineages in their villages. The case also demonstrates the strategic use of Christianity in terms of the channelling of resources to the homeland. Transmigrants make collective contributions for the construction of the Mekane Yesus church in Gambella town, distribute remittances to the villages and jointly with Christians in the homeland reflect about an improved use of remittances. And finally, by conducting fundraising activities back in the Des Moinian mainline churches they signalled belonging to those churches by claiming rights in them in terms of fundraising.

During these fundraising activities in the mainline church and the Nuer congregations many ›returnees‹ show presentations with slide shows and film screenings about poverty in the homeland during large community events like memorial services, weddings or religious holidays.

While I was still in Gambella when Yiech and Koang organized their fundraising in Des Moines, I had the chance to attend another fundraising event in St. Paul, Minnesota organized by Gatwech, another returning homeland visitor. This fundraising was conducted during a memorial service for a Nuer pastor who had recently died in Ethiopia. Gatwech, who is the founder of the Sudanese resettlement agency in the US and in a process of establishing an NGO operating in Ethiopia, presented to the audience a slide show from the homeland. By displaying ›images of backwardness‹ he appealed to the Nuer audience to compare the life of their society with that of Americans. The slides showed various pictures of rural life in Gambella, such as cattle herds, naked children and mud huts or food being cooked on an open fire. Demonstrating the positioning of the Nuer in Gambella, with a lifestyle less secured than that of Americans who have achieved a positioning beyond the question of survival the status paradox of migration once more reverses their status.

›Help us make them wear neckties‹ was the metaphorical statement with which Gatwech concluded his presentation to the necktie-wearing congregation in their assumption to be positioned on a higher level of ›advancement‹. To transform the homeland communities towards a Western lifestyle is the obligation many transmigrants address and encourage them and their children to become agents of change for their homeland communities. Gatwech's concluding warning »even if you are here, all your family is there« metaphorically brings the qual importance of homeland and receiving country incorporation (even if you are here and enjoying your family continues to suffer) to the point. It also links up with Gwenpar's warning quoted at the beginning of this paper about the lasting ties and obligations toward the homeland. The lower the status in the US, the more important the homeland and the sending of remittances became, partly to the disadvantage of their own and their children's living conditions. Hence, when temporarily fundraising activities reached a level of obsession that began to affect household economies community leaders intervened by prohibiting certain exaggerated fundraising practices.

During a discussion over fundraising and the role of remittances in this context some Nuer pastors from the US told me that their outmigration to the Western world manifest the end of Isaiah's curse. To underline their statement they were pointing at the role of remittances which, as they argued are mentioned in the Isaiah 18 where it reads:

»*Then will gifts be brought to the Lord of hosts from a people tall and bronzed, from a people dreaded near and far, a nation strong and conquering, whose land is washed by rivers – to Mount Zion where dwells the name of the Lord of hosts.« (African Bible:1219)*

The gifts are the remittances which free the homeland from the curse. For me, this was the first time that a Nuer would refer to the book of Isaiah by pointing to this text passage. All preceding discussions I had in the camp and villages on Isaiah would point to the part quoted at the beginning of this paper. To those pastors and to some other people from the diaspora, however, it is clear that they are the tall and bronzed ›remittance senders‹. Migration to the Western world has empowered them to accumulate knowledge and wealth and through the churches they channel it to the homeland as almost every Nuer in the diaspora is involved in the sending of remittances to rectify socio-economic marginalisation. The project of homeland transformation is a project that shows a strong vigour to regain agency over their lives.

Christianity itself is part of the gift, enacted through the establishment of a transnational religious network with churches as its nodal points. People's engagement on missionary activities with churches as the bases for development activities back home is at the centre of their transnationalism. What is most important to the type of transnationalism I am discussing here, however, is the fact that the gift is its simultaneity by being subscribed to three effects: 1. the spreading of churches in the homeland and with them 2. the arrival of schools, water and medicine to the homeland, and 3. teaching Americans about Nuer Christians' morals. The logic in the network is that by increasing the nodal points (churches) resource flows increase while simultaneously reverse flows are meant to positively affect US society. Several Nuer in the US I talked to are struggling with what they perceive as a ›sale out of morality‹ in a sense that everything, including charity, is monetized. They related the lack of ›free‹ charity directly to the unexpected level of secularism encountered by them in the US. This understanding of their religious identity turns them into powerful agents of change for US citizens who need to relearn about the human face of Christianity through an African morality that cares for the people free of charge.

Conclusion

With this article I wanted to make two points. I wanted to 1. show that reducing transnational Christianity to its cushioning effects against traumatic migration would ignore the multiple other meanings it creates for immigrants and to 2. challenge previous studies on immigrant Christianity and their presentation of immigrants as de-territorialized, isolated ethnic groups.

By looking at the various meanings attached to their religious identity as global Christians I showed that next to the significance of churches as institutions the importance of Christian identities also lies in its strategic use for status production and resource flows. Rather than Christianity being a mere ›soother‹ for the trauma of migration and life in the US, extremely hard work-

ing and living conditions are endured in order to build up their new lives and help the homeland communities via transnational churches. Christian churches are not only comforting, but help connecting various social spaces and times that create meaning to them by channelling resources to the homeland as well as linking a perceived past in the homeland with a perceived advancing presence in the US.

However, despite the strategic use of Christianity for revalorization and status gain as well as the pivotal role of resource flows, the challenges posed by life in the US are at the edge of endurability. Extreme working conditions paired with excessive domestic demands for bringing up large families as shown in the case of pastor Deng and his wife Nyachuol or Nyamaar can prevent certain forms of incorporation. The breaking up of families, domestic violence, suicide and mental depression hint at the fractures of incorporation. Especially Nuer women in the US are suffering from the double workload of night-shifts and domestic activities as only few men are willing to shake off the ›traditional‹ divisions of labour.

Despite these cases, I intended to draw attention to the ways Nuer Christians managed to maintain homeland ties and to build up ties in the receiving country by developing a densely interconnected and multi-directed pathway of incorporation. By having drawn equal attention to homeland and new land incorporations I found that transnational immigrant churches can neither be seen as niches for an isolating homeland-dreaming immigrant community unwilling to ›integrate‹ to the receiving country, nor as people impatient to assimilate to it by cutting off their homeland ties. I pointed this out by:

1. Showing how their identification with a global Christian community helped them to incorporate into regional, national and transnational networks beyond national boundaries and colour lines. Members of the Trinity church in Des Moines developed such multiple pathways with US Americans in the mainline congregations, with Nuer from Lutheran congregations across the US, with Nuer congregations from different churches during Christmas ceremonies in Omaha or during fundraising activities in different cities and with their Ethiopian partnership congregations from the Lutheran as well as from the Mekane Yesus church in Gambella. These multiple chains of relationship created a dense network that embraces Nuer and non-Nuer people in the homeland and in the receiving country. Though some may limit their level of incorporation to participating in the monthly mother church services while others are building up friendship with members of the mother congregations they all signal a form of belonging to localities in the receiving country.

2. Following Nuer pathways of incorporation from first contacts in the US over long-distance proselytization in Ethiopia and their personal engagement in missionary homeland activities together with their mainline churches. Here,

churches served as nodal points for chains of Nuer and Americans stretching out within that field.

3. Depicting that their pathways of national incorporation to the mainline churches did not exclude the maintainance of a cultural, in a sense of an ethnic (but not isolated), identity and hence that incorporation neither meant assimilating to American culture nor adhering to isolated multiculturalism.

4. Illustrating their deep sense of belonging to the Presbyterian church which is rooted in the creation of a shared history with the former missionaries from those churches, indicating their opening up toward the receiving country and articulation over claims to America. Hence, by maintaining a transnational tradition with Christian churches and prosyletization efforts I showed how Nuer Christians made use of already existing transnational ties in order to follow up their own interest.

The obvious existence of a homeland bias at this early stage of migration and the existing hardships and ruptures encountered in the US should not be misunderstood as an unwillingness to be part of American society. Their identification with the mainline churches, joint missions with Americans to Gambella, explicit rejection of an African-American identity and of a pauper image along with their struggle to become self-reliant in order to be considered as equal citizens prove otherwise. Despite simultaneous incorporation and the cushioning effects of transnational Christianity I highly doubt that its capacity will suffice to help people like Nyamaar cope with the brutality of life in the US and the breaking up of her family. Unless the US supports her and other new African immigrants by providing help in the receiving country to familiarize with a new system, many of them are doomed to fail.

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