

John Garang on air: Radio battles in Sudan's second civil war

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Abstract:

This article explores radio broadcasting and monitoring by and about Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) leader John Garang during Sudan's second civil war, focusing on the core period of Radio SPLA broadcasting (1984–91). Through oral history, memoirs, and international monitoring reports, the article analyzes radio conversations between Garang and his critics — northern Sudanese, southern Sudanese, and international — to argue that radio battles directly shaped the struggle for political authority between Garang and the Sudanese government, and within the SPLM/A elite. Radio allowed Garang to speak to a dispersed audience within and beyond Sudan, presenting an alternative history of Sudan, publicizing his vision of a New Sudan, and asserting his pseudo-sovereign control of SPLM/A-held territory. However, Radio SPLA did not exist in a vacuum; Garang's rivals responded on government and international radio to criticize his leadership in targeted, personal terms. Radio thus powerfully mediated between personal, national, and international politics during the SPLM/A's liberation struggle.

Keywords: South Sudan; Sudan; Ethiopia; Northeastern Africa; civil wars; media; biography; oral narratives

In February 1985, the recently founded clandestine Radio SPLA broadcast a speech made by John Garang, leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) then at war with the

Sudanese government, to ‘a youth gathering organized by the movement’. Speaking in Arabic, Garang emphasized the need to ‘unite Sudan’ and the importance of Radio SPLA for the movement:

We started Radio SPLA. [applause] ... We set up this radio so that Numayri, or someone else in Khartoum, does not tell us lies again. This radio is a big weapon and besides it is a political success ... We have achieved these successes both in the political and military spheres.¹

Over the next seven years, Garang used Radio SPLA to promote his non-secessionist idea of a ‘New Sudan’, condemn the ‘lies’ of the Sudanese government, and claim political legitimacy locally and internationally. Eschewing the widely used idea of a ‘southern problem’, which located Sudan’s dominant political divide between north and south, he invoked a deep history of ‘neglect and oppression by successive Khartoum-clique regimes’.² In turn, the government’s Radio Omdurman and the Sudan News Agency (SUNA) tried to discredit Garang as nothing more than

¹ Federal Information Broadcast Service, Daily Report Middle East and Africa, FBIS-MEA-85-029, ‘SPLA-SPLM Leader Addresses Youth Meeting on Goals’, *Radio SPLA* (Arabic), 8 Feb. 1985. Unless otherwise stated, Radio SPLA broadcasts cited were originally broadcast in English.

² British Broadcasting Corporation Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB), online via Nexis UK, Part 4: The Middle East, Africa and Latin America, ME/7800/A/1, ‘Sudanese rebel leader’s appeal to the people’, *Radio SPLA*, 10 Nov. 1984. For discussion of the ‘southern problem’, see J. Willis, ‘The Southern Problem: representing Sudan’s southern provinces to c. 1970’, *The Journal of African History*, 56:2 (2015), 281–300; S. Manoeli, *Sudan’s ‘Southern Problem’: Race, Rhetoric and International Relations, 1961-1991* (Basingstoke, 2019).

an ‘outlaw’ or ‘terrorist’.³ By late 1986, Radio SPLA’s broadcasts had provoked the government into launching a new radio station, rife with anti-Garang material, which broadcast on the same frequencies and at the same time as Radio SPLA. Five years later, two top SPLA commanders attempted to overthrow Garang by denouncing his leadership through the movement’s internal radio system, followed by an interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)’s Colin Blane. Their attempt to remove Garang failed but precipitated a major SPLM/A split which led to intense southern infighting, civilian devastation, and the government’s recapture of significant territory held by the SPLM/A.

Radio was a key domain in which Garang’s leadership was constituted and contested between 1984, when Radio SPLA went on air, and 1991, when the SPLM/A lost its transmitter in Ethiopia and the SPLM/A split into rival factions. Through oral history, memoirs and international monitoring reports, I analyze radio conversations between Garang and his critics — northern Sudanese, southern Sudanese, and international — to argue that radio battles directly shaped the struggle for political authority between Garang and the Sudanese government, and within the SPLM/A elite. Radio SPLA’s years on air were formative in Sudan’s second civil war (1983–2005) and in Garang’s rise to Sudanese and global prominence. Remembered equally for his political charisma and for his acts of alleged dictatorship and brutality, it is difficult to overemphasize Garang’s centrality to debates about Sudan’s conflicts and to internal SPLM/A

³ SWB ME/8453/A/1, ‘Sudan reports defections from SPLA: Role of army’, *Radio Omdurman*, 18 Dec. 1986; SWB ME/8345/A/1, ‘Sudan’s Mahdi says Garang uses terrorism’, *Sudan News Agency (SUNA)*, 21 Aug. 1986.

power struggles.⁴ From the formation of the SPLM/A in 1983, his emergence as chairman and commander-in-chief was contested and, throughout the war, he faced numerous internal challenges to his leadership.⁵ Notwithstanding these challenges, he developed a larger-than-life persona as the SPLM/A's eloquent, PhD-educated figurehead and remained its most important personality until his premature death in a helicopter crash in 2005, an event which has only amplified political debate about his life and legacy. He continues to offer a complicated touchstone for South Sudanese politics and recent years have seen a proliferation of historical work — much of it partisan — on Garang and his political thought.⁶

However, there are few academic studies of the media through which Garang's near mythical stature was cultivated, both at home and abroad, or indeed of SPLM/A media output more

⁴ For insider critiques of Garang, see L. Akol, *SPLM/SPLA: Inside an African Revolution* (4 edn, Khartoum, 2018); A. Wantok, *Invasion of the Nile Valley 3100BC-1804AD* (Ongata Rongai, Kenya, 2019); and D. Joak, *The Rise and Fall of the SPLM/SPLA Leadership* (North Charleston, SC, 2015).

⁵ R. Bayissa, 'The Derg-SPLM/A cooperation: an aspect of Ethio-Sudan proxy wars', *Ethiopian Journal of the Social Sciences and Humanities*, 5:2 (2007), 24–9; D. Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars: Peace of Truce* (2 edn, Woodbridge, 2011), 65–6, 91; A. M. Arop, *Sudan's Painful Road to Peace: A Full Story of the Founding and Development of SPLM/SPLA* (Charleston, SC, 2006), 199–211.

⁶ For pro-Garang accounts, see L. Deng, *Power of Creative Reasoning: The Ideas and Vision of John Garang* (Bloomington, 2013); F. Deng, *Visitations: Conversations with the Ghost of the Chairman* (Trenton, NJ, 2020). For more neutral studies, see K. Garang, 'Political ideology and organisational espousal: a political-historical analysis of Dr. John Garang de Mabior's "New Sudan Vision"', *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society*, 7:2 (2019), 10.26806/modafr.v7i2.258; E. Thomas, *South Sudan: A Slow Liberation* (London, 2015), 114–25.

generally. One recent exception is Christopher Tounsel's work on Christian discourse and imagery in the popular *SPLM/SPLA Update*, published in Nairobi from 1992, which considers the power of comparisons between Garang and Moses.⁷ Before 1992, however, the SPLM/A's print media had limited circulation.⁸ Whereas Radio SPLA is ubiquitous in memories of the civil war, the earlier *SPLA/SPLM Newsletter* and aborted *Newsudan* magazine do not figure in South Sudanese or expatriate accounts. Indeed, while other state and anticolonial radio stations in Africa drew content from print publications, the reverse was true of the SPLM/A.⁹ The *SPLA/SPLM Newsletter* and *Newsudan* reproduced speeches and news from Radio SPLA.¹⁰ Radio SPLA was the movement's foremost outlet for news and propaganda in the early years of the war, and thus deserves close attention.

Two works on Radio SPLA offer groundwork for this article. Wendy James has given an important overview of the rise of Radio SPLA and its shift from more 'homely' broadcasts to a 'harsher political style' which engaged directly with the claims and counterclaims of the Sudanese

⁷ C. Tounsel, *Chosen Peoples: Christianity and Political Imagination in South Sudan* (Durham, NC, 2021), 99–100, 110–12.

⁸ Interview with Atem Yaak Atem, phone, 15 Jun. 2021.

⁹ A. Reza, 'Reading the radio-magazine: culture, decolonization and the PAIGC's Rádio Libertação', *Interventions*, 24/6 (2021), 13; J. Brennan, 'Communications and media in African history', in J. Parker and R. Reid (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern African History* (Oxford, 2013), 501.

¹⁰ Interview with Atem Yaak Atem, 15 Jun. 2021; SPLM Information Department (London office), *Newsudan*, pilot issue (Oct. 1986), 8; SPLA/SPLM Department of Information, *SPLA/SPLM Newsletter* 6:86 (15 Aug. 1986), 5.

government.¹¹ Sebatso Manoeli's diplomatic history of Sudan's 'southern problem' has demonstrated the effectiveness of the SPLM/A's "'New Sudan" discourse' — which adopted a materialist approach to history to explain Sudan's political problems as the result of underdevelopment in all 'marginalized' areas — in undermining an older narrative of southern exceptionalism.¹² She also offered preliminary insight into Garang's emphasis on the 'importance of the SPLM's propaganda production' and the significance of Radio SPLA in allowing Garang 'to show his "internationalist" view'.¹³

Building on the work of Manoeli and James and a growing literature on antigovernment broadcasting, I make three contributions to the study of clandestine radio in Sudan and more widely. First, I elaborate on the relationship between radio diplomacy, physical warfare, and territorial sovereignty, arguing that Garang used radio to simultaneously broadcast a non-secessionist stance domestically and internationally, and to advertise the SPLM/A's control of southern Sudan's airspace. Beyond Sudan, scholarship on clandestine broadcasting has demonstrated how liberation movements used radio to challenge colonial and minority governments. Radio uniquely allowed movements in exile to 'address their supporters instantly

¹¹ W. James, 'The multiple voices of Sudanese airspace', in R. Fardon and G. Furniss (eds.), *African Broadcast Cultures: Radio in Transition* (Oxford, 2000), 201.

¹² Manoeli, *Sudan's 'Southern Problem'*, 158, 165.

¹³ *Ibid.* 157–8.

and directly behind enemy lines'.¹⁴ Unbounded by borders, radio was also key to diplomacy. Clandestine broadcasters targeted international listeners and received training, money, and broadcasting time from Pan-African or Cold War sponsors.¹⁵ As Matthew Connelly has demonstrated for the FLN in Algeria, and Paul Sturges et al. for SWAPO in Namibia, these diplomatic battles could be more important to anticolonial struggles than physical warfare.¹⁶

Following African states' transitions to independence and majority rule, government media monopolies continued to provoke challenges from clandestine and 'diasporic' broadcasters.¹⁷ Like anticolonial movements, these broadcasters — including Radio SPLA — used radio to contest government narratives and cultivate international support. However, I emphasize that, for Garang, radio diplomacy was never far removed from military action. In his study of the Indochina War,

¹⁴ S. Lekgoathi, T. Moloi, and A. Saïde, 'Radios of the liberation struggle in southern Africa', in S. Lekgoathi, T. Moloi, and A. Saïde (eds.), *Guerrilla Radios in Southern Africa: Broadcasters, Technology, Propaganda Wars, and the Armed Struggle* (Lanham, MD, 2020), 1.

¹⁵ R. Heinze, 'SWAPO's Voice of Namibia as an instrument of diplomacy', in Lekgoathi, Moloi, and Saïde (eds.), *Guerrilla Radios*, 137; M. Chikowero, 'Broadcasting Chimurenga - Engineering a postcolonial Zimbabwe', in Lekgoathi, Moloi, and Saïde (eds.), *Guerrilla Radios*, 67.

¹⁶ M. Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford, 2002), 4; P. Sturges, M. Katjilingua, and K. McHombu, 'Information in the national liberation struggle: modelling the case of Namibia (1966-1990)', *Journal of Documentation*, 61:6 (2005), 10.1108/00220410510632068.

¹⁷ See M. Moorman, *Powerful Frequencies: Radio, State Power, and the Wold War in Angola, 1931-2002* (Athens, OH, 2019), 143–64; E. Ndlovu, 'The re-emergence of diasporic radio in independent Zimbabwe', *Ecquid Novi*, 35:3 (2014), 10.1080/02560054.2014.957225.

Christopher Goscha highlights how information technology, including radio, was central to Vietnamese nationalists' 'consolidation and operation of their fledgling state and the projection of its national sovereignty'.¹⁸ Radio communication allowed the Vietnamese to coordinate their war against the French, both by waging complex military operations and immediately implementing ceasefires signed abroad.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the Voice of Vietnam 'announced ... the transition from one sovereignty to another: "This is the Voice of Vietnam, broadcasting from Hanoi, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam"'.²⁰ Similarly, the broadcasting practices of Garang and Radio SPLA attempted to delineate new lines of national belonging through language and physical threats to national and international actors who entered SPLM/A territory without permission.

However, local reactions to Garang's radio presence were mixed. My second intervention highlights the diversity of listener experience in complex civil wars. Scholarship on listening is less developed than on broadcasting. Key studies by Marissa Moorman and Sekibakiba Lekgoathi have captured memories of 'clandestine listening' in Angola and South Africa, where anticolonial and anti-apartheid broadcasts allowed listeners to explore new political ideas and maintain a

¹⁸ C. Goscha, 'Wiring decolonization: turning technology against the colonizer during the Indochina War, 1945–1954', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 54:4 (2012), 799.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 799, 813.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 811.

connection with movements in exile.²¹ These audiences listened in secret: behind closed doors, at night, or via recordings of past broadcasts circulated on cassettes. I encountered similar stories of secret listening in Juba, and Radio SPLA is still celebrated for educating and mobilizing SPLM/A recruits; however, some interviewees remembered listening to Garang's broadcasts more sceptically, pointing to one limitation of comparing Radio SPLA to anticolonial radio. Ethnically divisive rhetoric in Sudan's southern regional government in the early 1980s, the violent consolidation of Garang's leadership in the SPLM/A, and SPLM/A violence against civilians were all reasons to doubt the movement. Moorman has described listeners' nuanced engagement with antigovernment broadcasting during Angola's postindependence civil war, depicting more varied attitudes towards rebel messaging than in her discussion of anticolonial radio. I build on Moorman's recognition of critical listening in civil wars to disaggregate Garang's audience and show that personal experience determined how listeners heard Radio SPLA.

My third intervention argues that radio battles mattered as much to personal politics within the SPLM/A as they did to the SPLM/A's war with the government. While recent scholarship has included more focus on 'social histories of [guerrilla radio] stations' and the experiences of individual broadcasters, little attention has been paid to how *internal* rivalries within antigovernment movements shaped broadcasting policy and radio's political effects.²² One

²¹ M. Moorman, 'Guerrilla broadcasters and the unnerved colonial state in Angola (1961-74)', *The Journal of African History*, 59:2 (2018), 251-5; S. Lekgoathi, 'The African National Congress's Radio Freedom and its audiences in apartheid South Africa, 1963-1991', *Journal of African Media Studies*, 2:2 (2010), 143-50.

²² Lekgoathi, Moloi, and Saïde, 'Radios', 3.

informative study, albeit one that focuses on competition between rather than within resistance movements, is Ali Hlongwane's analysis of broadcasting by South Africa's PAC in exile. Hlongwane highlights the PAC's underrepresentation vis-à-vis the ANC's Radio Freedom in scholarship on anti-apartheid broadcasting, revealing a bias toward the radio presence of movements which later captured state power, and a tendency to underestimate dissonance within opposition broadcasting.²³ While Garang's rivals never operated their own station, they criticized him on government and international radio. Through a mix of international monitoring reports and oral history, described in the next section, I show that radio was central to Garang's emergence as the national and international voice of the SPLM/A and also that radio, by nature difficult to control, offered a platform for Garang's southern Sudanese opponents to challenge his authority in an international arena.

Sources

In the absence of a Radio SPLA archive, I use monitoring reports produced by BBC's Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB), accessed via the Nexis UK database, and, to a lesser extent, the American Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS).²⁴ Like other colonial and foreign archives produced to serve interests outside Africa, SWB and FBIS reports present obvious

²³ A. Hlongwane, 'In search of PAC footprints in broadcasting', in Lekgoathi, Moloi, and Saïde (eds.), *Guerrilla Radios*, 230–55.

²⁴ The Nexis UK interface allows for efficient analysis and organization of broadcasts. FBIS reports are cited only where they provide additional information unavailable from SWB.

methodological problems in scope and format. As international monitoring is closely tied to intelligence and foreign policy, the frequency of Garang's appearance in these reports usefully reflects British and American interest in his emerging impact on Sudanese politics, echoed in American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) assessments which draw on SWB/FBIS intelligence.²⁵ However, the reports offer only a partial record of Radio SPLA broadcasting. While Radio SPLA broadcast in English, Arabic, and several Sudanese languages, the material available from SWB and FBIS includes a limited number of non-English broadcasts. Out of over 1,000 monitored Radio SPLA broadcasts, SWB summarized only 96 in Arabic, 45 in Latuka, 20 in Bari and none in any other languages. In addition, the monitoring reports include only English translations or summaries, without audio recordings or original transcripts, and the monitoring content skews towards political and military events, omitting cultural programming and songs.²⁶ Despite these limitations, international monitoring reports remain useful for studying Garang's English-language speeches. Like other liberation movements, Garang and Radio SPLA staff were aware of the amplifying effect of international monitors.²⁷ These speeches reveal how Garang

²⁵ Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room (FOIA), Directorate of Intelligence, 'Sudan: Roots and Future of the Southern Insurgency', Feb. 1986, 7. On the history of SWB and links with Anglo-American intelligence, see S. Bardgett, F. Kind-Kovács, and V. Kuitenbrouwer, 'The act of listening: radio monitoring, 1930-1990', *Media History*, 25:4 (2019), 391–3; A. Webb, 'The sound of revolution: BBC monitoring and the Hungarian uprising, 1956', *Media History*, 25:4 (2019), 450–2.

²⁶ Cf. Moorman, *Powerful Frequencies*, 151.

²⁷ Interview with Atem Yaak Atem, 15 Jun. 2021. Cf. Heinze, 'SWAPO's Voice of Namibia'.

signalled his unionist stance to Sudanese and international constituencies and how he asserted his political influence by both publicizing peace negotiations and issuing military threats.

I compensate for the shortcomings of the SWB and FBIS records through material from my wider research on Garang, including SPLM/A memoirs, primary documentary and audiovisual sources, and interviews with 135 participants, 30 of whom directly discussed radio.²⁸ Key interviews with Radio SPLA's director, Atem Yaak Atem, allowed me to recover a broad picture of Radio SPLA's programming and vision. Atem has lived outside of South Sudan for several years and does not hold a government position, which allows him space for an independent view. In his own writings, Atem has reflected critically on Radio SPLA and continued to do so during our interviews.²⁹ Wider interviews on Garang's life before forming the SPLM/A allow me to situate Garang's use of radio in relation to his longstanding interest in information management and his concern that southerners prove their capacity and professionalism. Following Mhoze Chikowero's call to focus on the agency of broadcasters rather than the specifics of radio as a technology, I emphasize how Garang, Atem, and others used radio to break the Sudanese government's discursive monopoly on the emerging war and to challenge government stereotypes that southerners were parochial and backward.³⁰

²⁸ The number of interviews with listeners was limited by Covid-19 travel restrictions and the difficulty of conducting remote research in South Sudan. Interviewees were offered pseudonymity or anonymity.

²⁹ A. Y. Atem, *Jungle Chronicles and Other Writings: Recollections of a South Sudanese* (2017), 230.

³⁰ Chikowero, 'Broadcasting Chimurenga', 65.

The combination of oral history and foreign monitoring reports also offers insight into how Garang, his southern Sudanese opponents, and the Sudanese government monitored and responded to *each other's* broadcasts, referencing international broadcasters in the process. Monitoring and responding to rival stations were key strategies of clandestine broadcasters, including the SPLM/A and Sudanese government.³¹ Some of this back-and-forth is captured in SWB reports, as are moments when Radio SPLA criticized the BBC for spreading false information. These interwoven layers of broadcasting and monitoring show how Garang and his opponents navigated radio's international space to engage in personal politics. The next section offers an overview of Radio SPLA and the individual attitudes of Garang and Radio SPLA staff towards broadcasting and monitoring. I then discuss listener reactions to Garang; the rise of Sudanese government counter-broadcasts; and, finally, how the convergence of SPLM/A, government, and foreign broadcasts shaped Garang's local and international profile.

Radio SPLA

Broadcasting on shortwave from Ethiopia, Radio SPLA was on air from October 1984 until the overthrow of Ethiopian President Mengistu Haile Mariam and the SPLM/A's concomitant loss of its Ethiopian bases in May 1991.³² Between October 1991 and February 1993, Radio SPLA

³¹ E.g. *ibid.*, 79–80.

³² SWB ME/7782/A/1, 'Clandestine radio broadcasting to Sudan: Radio SPLA', editorial report, 24 Oct. 1984.

broadcast sporadically from various locations, but never on the pre-1991 scale.³³ From the start, Radio SPLA director Atem Yaak Atem, who finished an M.Ed. at the University of Wales on radio broadcasting in Sudan immediately before joining the SPLM, intended for the station to act as a counterpart to the government's highly partisan Radio Omdurman.³⁴ He wanted Radio SPLA 'to be credible'; they would not broadcast the type of 'complete lies' typical of Radio Omdurman.³⁵ Both Atem and former presenter Rebecca Joshua Okwaci explained that Radio SPLA's objectives were education and 'awareness raising'. To this end, Radio SPLA explained the SPLM/A's *Manifesto* which framed Sudan's conflict in terms of a 'marginalizing' political system, rather than a north-south divide. Atem remembered,

Now the message as far as Radio SPLA was concerned was to make sure that we identified the enemy. Who was the enemy? The oppressor. Not necessarily an Arab, not necessarily a Muslim, but somebody using Islam and Arabism to exclude others.³⁶

For Okwaci, the importance of clarifying the identity of the enemy was mirrored by efforts to frame the struggle as being for the people:

³³ SWB ME/1748 E1, 'Clandestine, unofficial and satellite broadcasts', special supplement, 23 Jul. 1993.

³⁴ A. Y. Atem, 'The role and problems of broadcasting by radio with special reference to the Sudan' (unpublished M.Ed. thesis, University of Wales, 1984).

³⁵ Interview with Atem Yaak Atem, 7 Jun. 2021.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

You don't want the public to say, 'oh some people are making noise, some people are fighting for no reason.' It was on their [the public's] behalf ... And therefore education, orientation, sensitization, *informing* the people that the revolution is yours and therefore we are just doing it on your behalf, these are issues at stake.³⁷

As Okwaci went on to explain, this required targeted programming for different audiences, from soldiers to youth to women, and in different languages.

Language policy was an important part of Radio SPLA's self-positioning as a representative broadcaster. News was broadcast daily in English and Khartoum Arabic. Juba Arabic was used for some programs, including *Al Qaid ma' al Thuwaar*, discussed below.³⁸ In addition, Radio SPLA broadcast in a number of what they called 'national' languages: Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk, Latuka, Bari, Heiban, and Zande. The small number of Latuka and Bari programs monitored by SWB commented on the war and encouraged listeners to join the SPLM/A. Atem explained that the national language broadcasts drew on the same source material as the English and Arabic programs, but also included unique commentaries (sometimes by a senior SPLM/A figure who spoke the language) and poetry.³⁹ Atem recalls that Radio Omdurman used 'to

³⁷ Interview with Rebecca Joshua Okwaci, Juba, 15 Aug. 2019.

³⁸ Khartoum and Juba Arabic are distinct. See C. Leonardi, 'South Sudanese Arabic and the negotiation of the local state, c. 1840-2011', *The Journal of African History*, 54:3 (2013), 10.1017/S0021853713000741.

³⁹ E.g. SWB ME/8497/A/1, 'SPLA warns of attack on Juba', *Radio SPLA (Bari)*, 17 Feb. 1987.

disparage anything southern’ and to refer to their languages in derogatory terms as *rutana* or *lahaja*, meaning ‘dialects’.⁴⁰ Beyond simply offering a way to reach a wider audience, the use of local languages was therefore an explicit policy of reclaiming a media space from which many had long been marginalized, a point highlighted in Radio SPLA’s national language broadcasts.⁴¹

For his part, Garang had recognized the importance of radio as a tool of publicity and diplomacy as early as 1972, if not before. As a student at Grinnell College in Iowa, US in the late 1960s, Garang purchased a shortwave radio set to listen to Voice of America (VOA) and the BBC to stay abreast of events on the African continent, given the dearth of global coverage in Iowan media.⁴² Subsequently, in an open letter addressed in January 1972 to Joseph Lagu, leader of the rebel movement which fought the government in Sudan’s first civil war, Garang highlighted the importance of radio broadcasting in what many have since seen as a prophetic rejection of the peace negotiations then taking place in Addis Ababa:

We are poor people engaged in a just war against petty oppression that has made us and left us so poor: ‘underdeveloped’ is the jargon. We cannot afford radio broadcasting and press facilities, indeed potent weapons available to the Khartoum administrators of oppression. The negotiations (in the event of their inevitable collapse and failure) would provide us with the necessary

⁴⁰ Interview with Atem Yaak Atem, 7 Jun. 2021.

⁴¹ SWB ME/8597/A/1, ‘Sudanese rebel radio explains policy of broadcasting in local languages’, *Radio SPLA (Bari)*, 16 Jun. 1987

⁴² Interview with Muzong Kodi, phone, 11 Jun. 2021.

broadcasting and press facilities to monitor our struggle to our people and to all peoples of the world.⁴³

With Sudan's return to war in 1983, Garang was intent on utilizing these 'potent weapons' to maximum advantage and did so via an Ethiopian transmitter, thanks to strong Ethiopian support for Garang personally and the SPLM/A as a whole.⁴⁴ Garang's vision for Radio SPLA was such that he delayed the graduation of the *Jarad* (Locust) battalion because he wanted the launch of Radio SPLA to 'coincide with their operations, so that their victories ... should be announced over the radios'.⁴⁵ Like anticolonial broadcasters, Garang sought 'to project an image of an unstoppable liberation force'.⁴⁶ Moreover, simply having the radio station — and broadcasting languages other than Khartoum Arabic and English — signalled SPLM/A capacity, diversity, and professionalism, which Garang had tried to cultivate among his southern colleagues in the 1970s by encouraging them to go to university.⁴⁷

⁴³ 'Captain John Garang's 1972 letter to General Joseph Lagu of Anyanya One', 24 Jan. 1972, in P. Wël, *The Genius of Dr. John Garang: Letters and Radio Messages of the Late SPLM/A's Leader, Dr. John Garang de Mabior, Volume II* (Kongor, South Sudan, 2012).

⁴⁴ Interview with Atem Yaak Atem, 7 Jun. 2021; Bayissa, 'Derg-SPLM/A', 27.

⁴⁵ Interview with Atem Yaak Atem, 7 Jun. 2021; see also Atem, *Jungle*, 265–6.

⁴⁶ D. Moyo and C. Chinaka, 'Spirit mediums and guerrilla radio in the Zimbabwe war of liberation', in Lekgoathi, Moloi, and Saïde (eds.), *Guerrilla Radios*, 97.

⁴⁷ Interview with Lual Deng, video call, 19 May 2021.

In production and content, Garang was omnipresent on Radio SPLA. Most obviously, Radio SPLA aired speeches given by Garang in English and Arabic. Speeches in English were generally scripted, sometimes with assistance from Atem or others, and marked important occasions like regime changes (of which there were several during Radio SPLA's years on air), anniversaries, or holidays.⁴⁸ These speeches targeted educated Sudanese in both Khartoum and the south, as well as an international audience.⁴⁹ The Arabic speeches, by contrast, were recordings of more spontaneous occasions of Garang speaking to recruits, officers, or in newly 'liberated' areas.⁵⁰

In the speeches captured by SWB and FBIS, Garang offered a national frame for the Sudanese conflict — articulated from March 1985 as the 'New Sudan' — and rejected the idea of a 'southern problem'.⁵¹ Given the anti-secessionist stance of the OAU and Ethiopia's own war against secessionist movements, Garang's unionist stance made diplomatic sense. However, the fact that Garang advocated strongly for unity in an Arabic speech to 'a youth gathering' (likely *Jarad* [Locust] battalion recruits in western Ethiopia) replayed over Radio SPLA in February 1985

⁴⁸ Atem, *Jungle*, 247–51; Akol, *SPLM/SPLA: Inside*, 87–9.

⁴⁹ Interview with Atem Yaak Atem, 15 Jun. 2021.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ SWB ME/7909/A/1, 'SPLA leader's "address to the Sudanese people', *Radio SPLA*, 22 Mar. 1985; SWB ME/8203/A/1, 'SPLA's Garang says Lakes Province a "liberated area"', *Radio SPLA*, 7 Mar. 1986; SWB ME/0536/A/1, 'Sudan SPLA leader on coup d'état and new regime's attitude to peace process', *Radio SPLA*, 14 Aug. 1989.

shows that Garang's belief in the New Sudan was more than geopolitical opportunism.⁵² In his political writing and speeches beyond radio, Garang narrated a unifying history for the SPLM/A, focusing on Sudanese diversity dating back to ancient history.⁵³ His speeches on Radio SPLA continued this but focused more on recent events, establishing a usable past in real time. Rather than dwelling on southern grievances towards a generalized 'Arab' enemy, Garang expanded on the SPLM/A *Manifesto* to delineate the failures and abuses of successive 'Khartoum clique regimes'.⁵⁴ Garang also emphasized Sudan's economic problems, 'compounded and exacerbated by the war which the regime is determined to escalate'.⁵⁵ He presented the SPLM/A as the solution to Sudan's underdevelopment and in-built discrimination, the 'vanguard' or 'catalyst' of a wider, historically rooted 'mass' revolution.⁵⁶

⁵² FBIS-MEA-85-029, 'SPLA-SPLM leader addresses youth meeting on goals', *Radio SPLA (Arabic)*, 8 Feb. 1985.

⁵³ See 'Don't get derailed from your own history, Dr. John Garang speaking on the history of the Sudan, 1988', in P. Wël, *The Genius of Dr. John Garang: The Essential Writings and Speeches of the Late SPLM/A's Leader, Dr. John Garang de Mabioor, Volume I* (Kongor, South Sudan, 2012); South Sudan Music Videos, 'Dr John Garang's speech', YouTube, uploaded 8 Nov. 2018, <https://youtu.be/ebLLRx8UgUY> [27 May 2021].

⁵⁴ SWB ME/7800/A/1, 'Sudanese rebel leader's appeal to the people', *Radio SPLA*, 10 Nov. 1984; SWB ME/7962/A/1, 'Garang address to Sudanese people: views on new Khartoum regime unchanged', *Radio SPLA*, 26 May 1985.

⁵⁵ SWB ME/0204/A/1, 'Sudan Garang says SPLA is "stronger than ever before"', *Radio SPLA*, 12 Jul. 1988.

⁵⁶ SWB ME/7922/A/1, 'Sudanese rebel leader's threat to continue struggle', *Radio SPLA*, 9 Apr. 1985; SWB ME/0537/A/1, 'SPLA's four-point peace plan', *Radio SPLA*, 15 Aug. 1989.

One way in which Garang broke from an older discourse which pitted the ‘Arab North’ against the ‘African South’ while maintaining a historically recognizable enemy was by emphasizing continuities of policy and personalities among Khartoum’s ruling elite. Despite the alleged revolutions signalled by the overthrow of President Jaafar Nimeiri in 1985, the partial elections of 1986, the civilian coalitions of the late 1980s, and finally Omar al-Bashir’s military coup of 1989, Garang drew explicit links across the politics of successive regimes, referring to each with derogatory nicknames. From the start of the war, he criticized Nimeiri’s ‘one-man no-system dictatorship’.⁵⁷ When Nimeiri was overthrown, Garang referred to the generals of the Transitional Military Council (TMC) as either ‘the gang of four’ or ‘May II’, highlighting their involvement as generals in Nimeiri’s recently overthrown ‘May regime’.⁵⁸ When Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi allied with Hassan al-Turabi and Ahmad Ali al-Mirghani in 1988 to form a Government of National Unity, Garang called them ‘the government of national disunity’ or ‘the unholy trinity’, accusing them of rejecting the SPLM/A’s peace initiatives and viewing ‘death and human suffering’ as ‘mere statistics’.⁵⁹ Finally, when Sadiq was overthrown in a military coup led by Omar al-Bashir, Garang referred to Bashir’s government as simply ‘the junta’, emphasizing Sudan’s history of military coups and asking who would guarantee that a peace agreement between

⁵⁷ SWB ME/7909/A/1, ‘SPLA leader’s “address to Sudanese people”’, *Radio SPLA*, 22 Mar. 1985.

⁵⁸ SWB ME/7922/A/1, ‘Sudanese rebel leader’s threat to continue struggle’, *Radio SPLA*, 9 Apr. 1985.

⁵⁹ SWB ME/0204/A/1, ‘Sudan Garang says SPLA is “stronger than ever before”’, *Radio SPLA*, 12 Jul. 1988.

the SPLM/A and Bashir ‘will not be cancelled by some Umar two who may take over tomorrow?’⁶⁰

Beyond simply demonizing the government, these nicknames underwrote a usable history of minority rule and oppression, defined not by southerners’ abuse by ‘the Arabs’ but by successive governments’ ‘sectarianism’, ‘warmongering’, and dictatorship.

In addition to speeches, Radio SPLA played interviews with Garang conducted by other news sources and, even when not sharing his direct words or voice, announcers referred to Garang constantly. According to Atem, this focus on Garang was not an explicit production policy but resulted from wider structural and political constraints within the movement. Atem explained that he tried to avoid a ‘personality cult’ or ‘hero-worship culture’ but ‘was unable to prevent it happening’.⁶¹ In Atem’s opinion, one of the programs to blame was *Al Qaid ma’ al Thuwaar*, or ‘The Leader with the Revolutionaries,’ intended by Atem as a way ‘to make sure that the leadership should be introduced to the public ... so that they could also talk, as individuals, as members of the leadership’.⁶² At the time, the SPLM/A’s Political Military High Command (PMHC) consisted of five members, including Garang. However, the presenter assigned to the program used it as an opportunity to ‘endear himself with Garang’, ignoring the other leaders; this resulted in disagreements between the presenter and Atem, and an overemphasis on Garang.

⁶⁰ SWB ME/0536/A/1, ‘Sudan SPLA leader on coup d’etat and new regime’s attitude to peace process’, *Radio SPLA*, 14 Aug. 1989.

⁶¹ Atem, *Jungle*, 349.

⁶² Interview with Atem Yaak Atem, 7 Jun. 2021; see also Atem, *Jungle*, 349.

Moreover, Radio SPLA existed alongside — and in interaction with — the movement's internal radio communication. Despite the SPLM/A's initial lack of trained personnel, the movement developed an effective communication and signaling apparatus.⁶³ For most of the war, long-range radio was the main means of communication, particularly given the size of the territory in which the war was waged and the difficulty of overland travel. Between 1986 and 1991, Garang did not convene any formal meetings of the PMHC.⁶⁴ As the war progressed, Garang made several major changes to military structures and tactics, which he announced by internal radio. These feature prominently in the writings of Lam Akol, an alternate member of the PMHC and co-leader of Garang's attempted overthrow in 1991, as evidence of what Akol paints as Garang's authoritarian and arbitrary leadership.⁶⁵ The 1991 split is analyzed in more detail below, but here it is worth making some more general points about the importance of internal radio communication in making Garang known to his commanders and troops.

The most obvious role of long-range radio was the exercise of military authority and, in general, communication from the field back to Garang's office was tightly controlled. On at least one occasion, Garang chided Akol for copying a radio message about the need for a PMHC meeting to all members: 'Whereas I agree with the recommendation, message is unprocedural. The

⁶³ M. D'Agoût, 'Reappraising the effectiveness of intelligence methods of a violent non-state sovereignty: a case-study of the SPLA insurgency in the Sudan (1983 – 2005)', *Intelligence and National Security*, 36:3 (2021), 398.

⁶⁴ Johnson, *Root Causes*, 91; Ø. H. Rolandsen, *Guerrilla Government: Political Changes in the Southern Sudan during the 1990s* (Uppsala, 2005), 29.

⁶⁵ Akol, *SPLM/SPLA: Inside*; L. Akol, *SPLM/SPLA: The Nasir Declaration* (Lincoln, NE, 2003).

repeated to all High Command members is at best unnecessary'.⁶⁶ In addition to fostering resentment among Akol and others, this military hierarchy directly shaped the content of Radio SPLA, which received its news from commanders in the field radioing to Garang's office in Addis Ababa.⁶⁷ Garang then passed the news to Atem and his team, after edits to remove undesirable information like the number of SPLA casualties; indeed, although Radio SPLA often referred to an SPLM 'spokesman', this was in fact simply material prepared by Garang himself.⁶⁸ Unlike more participatory practices of radio production which can foster 'strong relationships between radio hosts and their audience', Garang's close control over Radio SPLA exacerbated tensions within the PMHC.⁶⁹

Garang also used long-range radio to make announcements 'to all units', through which, as one interviewee put it, he 'became famous'.⁷⁰ These messages were read out by political commissars in the training camps, as part of recruits' 'general political education'.⁷¹ In addition to offering military updates, messages played a role in what members of the SPLM/A refer to more

⁶⁶ Sudan Archive, Durham, UK (SAD) 985/4/29, Radio message, John Garang de Mabior to Lam Akol Ajawin, info: William Nyuon Bany and Salva Kiir Mayardit (7 Jul. 1990). Also reproduced in Akol, *SPLM/SPLA: Inside*, 385.

⁶⁷ Interview with Atem Yaak Atem, 7 Jun. 2021

⁶⁸ Interview with Atem Yaak Atem, 26 Sept. 2021.

⁶⁹ A. Mbodj-Pouye, 'Radio and the road: infrastructure, mobility, and political change in the beginnings of Radio Rurale de Kayes (1980-early 2000s)', *The Journal of African History*, 62:1 (2021), 144.

⁷⁰ Interview with Anyanya veteran, Juba, 27 Jul. 2021.

⁷¹ Manoeli, *Sudan's 'Southern Problem'*, 194.

generally as ‘boosting morale’. Few messages to all units survive from before 1991 but one from Garang to William Nyuon Bany and for the information of all units from September 1990 comments,

Singer Mohammed Wardi, a strong sympathizer of the Movement, arrived Ethiopia on 25/9/90 ...

He will sing in Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa in solidarity with the SPLM/A. He will donate half of the proceeds of his parties to SPLM/A’s wounded heroes ... Above is for your information and to underline the appeal and broad support the SPLM/A enjoys all over the Sudan as underlined by this famous Sudanese artist.⁷²

The lighter, more uplifting tone of this message reflects a different side of Garang’s leadership, as projected to general troops.

The founding of the SPLM/A had seen a bitter leadership contest between Garang and an older generation of politicians and former guerrillas who wanted to rekindle the fight for southern secession, as Garang himself described on several occasions.⁷³ That Garang was never the default leader of the nascent movement made his prominence on both internal and external radio, and the link between the two, all the more important. Garang’s emergence as the singular voice of the

⁷² Akol, *SPLM/SPLA: Inside*, 387.

⁷³ SWB ME/0537/A/1, ‘Sudan; SPLA leader on coup d’etat and new regime’s attitude to peace process’, *Radio SPLA*, 14 Aug. 1989; SPLM, *‘This Convention Is Sovereign’: Opening and Closing Speeches by Dr. John Garang de Mabior to the First SPLM/SPLA National Convention* (1994), 22.

SPLM/A marked a significant departure from the fractured leadership of the southern guerrilla movement of Sudan's first civil war. The following sections discuss how his broadcasts shaped popular opinions about him within Sudan and how they prompted government counter-broadcasts.

Garang's audience

A dominant nationalist narrative celebrates Radio SPLA's role in mobilizing support for the SPLM/A and countering government propaganda, but the reality of audience reactions to Garang's speeches was more complex. Moorman has highlighted that, during Angola's civil war, listeners of the anti-government Radio Vorgan 'were not just echo chambers; they recognized propaganda, "heard between lines"'.⁷⁴ Recognizing the varied and nuanced listening of radio audiences is particularly important in the Sudanese context, where Garang was simultaneously introducing new political theories and attempting to win over a diverse population, including victims of SPLM/A violence against civilians and northerners not traditionally aligned with the secessionist stance touted by southern rebels during Sudan's first civil war. In garrison towns like Juba, the experience of listening was not only intimate — in the sense of 'broadcasting into the private space of the home, into the ear and head of the listener' used by Moorman — but personal, determined by listeners' lived experiences.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Moorman, *Powerful Frequencies*, 149.

⁷⁵ Moorman, 'Guerrilla broadcasters', 260.

Radio SPLA was widely listened to in southern Sudan and Khartoum, as well as among the Sudanese diaspora in East Africa, though listenership in rural areas was less than in towns. Its broadcasting time, 3pm-4pm, features prominently in accounts of the war and interviewees describe how silence would fall as everyone tuned it, including northerners and, according to ‘a story going the rounds during those years’, President Bashir himself.⁷⁶ Individual and general accounts report the importance of Radio SPLA in encouraging youth to join the movement and combatting falsehoods propagated by the government.⁷⁷ However, experiences of listening and opinions of Garang varied widely, particularly in Juba which remained under government control throughout the war and suffered from intense security reprisals against suspected SPLM/A collaborators.

In SPLA camps, listening was often communal but, in Juba, people listened ‘discreetly’, alone or in small groups at home.⁷⁸ For SPLM/A sympathizers and those fed up with ‘mistreatment [in Juba] by the Arabs’, radio was an important link with the rebel movement.⁷⁹ The intimacy of radio listening under these circumstances is captured in Victor Lugala’s semi-fictional novel, *White House*, which tells the story of Riti, a young photojournalist for the *Juba Times* who listens to the rebels’ ‘daily broadcasts religiously but in hiding’ and lives in constant fear of security

⁷⁶ Interviews with Federico Vuni, UK, 20 Apr. 2019; Kosti Manibe, phone, 1 Jun. 2021.

⁷⁷ Interview with John Okech Okello, Juba, 7 Aug. 2019; Arop, *Sudan’s Painful Road*, 92.

⁷⁸ Interviews with Kosti Manibe; Otim David Okot, Juba, 2 Aug. 2019.

⁷⁹ Interview with Otim David Okot.

attention and his sister's and girlfriend's possible sexual relationships with security officers.⁸⁰ Throughout the story, sex, radio-listening, and security are closely intertwined, suggesting the penetration of security into the most personal parts of people's lives. Torn by paranoia, Riti throws his radio into a pit latrine in fear he will be discovered by security but is nevertheless apprehended and ferried to the infamous 'White House', where suspected collaborators were tortured and/or killed. Riti is eventually released, but the story's conclusion reveals he was arrested for possessing a photograph of Garang, found in his office desk. The final paragraphs describe Riti remembering 'what the rebel leader once said on the radio: "Anger is the best weapon for a freedom fighter"'.⁸¹

This depiction of Radio SPLA's importance and Garang's capacity to inspire is common, but is countered by accounts from listeners less sympathetic to Garang and the SPLM/A. One listener remembered,

Life was very difficult. In Torit, when the SPLA crossed to Lafon ... they crossed there and they did a lot of atrocities to the people there, raping and all this and that. People coming from there [to Juba] giving us horrible stories altogether. It scared people you know?... So when we were in Juba of course, they used to broadcast this and this and that. John Garang was also encouraging his people, 'Oh you see, you come join this – because tomorrow those who are holding these offices,

⁸⁰ V. Lugala, *White House* (Perth, 2017).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

you are the ones who are going to hold these offices. See this gun? The gun will give you food and anything.’ So this is what he was preaching when we was training the SPLA, you know?⁸²

Filtered through accounts of SPLA abuses against civilians, Garang’s messages were, for this listener, overly military and violent, encouraging harmful behavior.

Radio SPLA’s songs were another polarizing factor in listeners’ opinions of Radio SPLA and of Garang’s leadership. One SPLA soldier from a minority ethnic group remembered that, in training camps, SPLA recruits were encouraged to compose songs in their own languages to ‘boost morale’.⁸³ The songs were learned by fellow recruits from different ethnic backgrounds and, for this interviewee, contributed to inter-ethnic community in the camps.⁸⁴ However, when recorded and played over Radio SPLA, these songs shaped popular opinions of Garang in complicated ways. Particularly in the early years of the war, most songs not in Juba Arabic were in Dinka and Nuer, as these groups were then the majority in the SPLA.⁸⁵ In addition, many were composed in the Dinka tradition of *ket*, ‘meaning to compose a song against somebody’.⁸⁶ The targets of these insults were the government and ‘the South Sudanese political figures who were collaborating ...

⁸² Interview with ‘Michael’, phone, 17 May 2021.

⁸³ Interview with Lemi Logwonda Lomuro, phone, 21 Sept. 2021.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Interview with Atem Yaak Atem, 15 Jun. 2021.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* See also discussion of *ket* in F. M. Deng, *The Dinka and Their Songs* (Oxford, 1973), 199–201.

or assumed to be collaborating with the government'.⁸⁷ These songs, which echoed Garang's wider rejection of the southern elite whom he claimed cared only about jobs and personal advancement, were, according to one interviewee, off-putting for many civilian listeners.⁸⁸

Interviewees also listened to foreign stations like the BBC, where Garang remained a strong presence. They mentioned specific reporters — most frequently Robin White — and emphasized Garang's skill in manipulating questions to offer entertaining and insightful interviews.⁸⁹ Like with Radio SPLA, however, some listeners resented the BBC's overemphasis on Garang. In 1986, the BBC conducted an audience survey in Sudan, at a time of expanding media freedom following Nimeiri's overthrow.⁹⁰ The survey was directed by Mohamed and Margaret Mohamed-Salih, anthropology professors at the University of Khartoum, whose final-year students were trained to independently question respondents in their home areas.⁹¹ The survey was limited to select urban areas and mostly educated male respondents but nevertheless offers insight into opinions about

⁸⁷ Interview with Atem Yaak Atem, 15 Jun. 2021.

⁸⁸ Interview with Jacob Akol, video call, 15 Jun. 2021. See also SPLM/A, *Manifesto* (1983), ch. 4.

⁸⁹ Interviews with Otim David Okot; Timothy Tot Chol, Juba, 10 Aug. 2019; Akol Miye Kuol, Nairobi, 7 Sept. 2019. On foreign journalists as 'public figures', see A. Fiedler and M. Frère, "'Radio France Internationale" and "Deutsche Welle" in Francophone Africa: international broadcasters in a time of change', *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 9 (2016), 78.

⁹⁰ Article 19, 'Sudan: Press freedom under siege' (London, 1991), 1.

⁹¹ BBC Written Archive Centre (WAC), Caversham, E3/1 416/1, International Broadcasting Audience Research, 'The BBC in Urban Sudan, Summer 1986', Jan. 1988, D4.

Garang.⁹² The only southern city included in the survey was government-held Juba but, in an attempt to ‘complement the [survey’s] quantitative information’, the BBC’s Francois Delauzun conducted qualitative interviews with 25 ‘opinion leaders’ and about 30 ‘ordinary people’ in Khartoum.⁹³ The opinion leaders included prominent professionals and politicians from the south and Nuba Mountains. The ‘ordinary people’ included ‘refugees’ settled ‘on the outskirts of Omdurman’. The report does not list the refugees’ place of origin, but they likely came from the south, Darfur, or Nuba Mountains: the ‘peripheries’ described by Garang. Based on these interviews, Delauzun reported,

Our coverage of the war in the South did not seem to satisfy most listeners. This is not because it was seen to be biased, but rather incomplete. Southerners particularly resented the concentration of the coverage on John Garang and the SPLA. Although they acknowledged that Garang had a very efficient propaganda machine, they felt that the BBC should not fall for it and ought to give a broader perspective of events in the South.⁹⁴

Though far from comprehensive, this report aligns with my interviewees’ comments on Garang’s wide-reaching radio presence and its ambiguous effect on listeners with reservations about the

⁹² *Ibid.* 3.

⁹³ *Ibid.* D1, D8-D9.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* D9.

SPLM/A. Listeners' attention to the BBC also shows that Radio SPLA did not exist in a vacuum, a fact of which Garang and Radio SPLA staff were well aware.

Garang's radio diplomacy and government counter-broadcasts

Throughout the war, Garang listened devotedly to Radio Omdurman and international broadcasters covering Sudan, in order to understand events in Khartoum.⁹⁵ He also used Radio SPLA to engage directly with the claims of the Sudanese government.⁹⁶ In the process of drawing parallels across historical cases of poor governance and oppression, Garang emphasized continuity in his own political program, referring frequently to past speeches as evidence of his consistency.⁹⁷ Central to this was his proclaimed commitment to 'dialogue', defined in the wake of President Nimeiri's overthrow in April 1985 as an inclusive process to be 'undertaken by all democratic and patriotic forces in the country so that a national democratic consensus is reached on the fundamental issues'.⁹⁸ To this end, radio served not only as a discursive platform but as a tool to make public a series of negotiations with various groups in Khartoum.

The culminating event of the one-year transitional period was a conference held in Koka Dam, western Ethiopia, between the SPLM/A and various Sudanese political groups in March

⁹⁵ Interview with Lemi Logwonda Lomuro.

⁹⁶ James, 'Multiple voices', 200.

⁹⁷ For example, SWB ME/0536/A/1, 'Sudan SPLA leader on coup d'état and new regime's attitude to peace process', *Radio SPLA*, 14 Aug. 1989 refers to speech given 27 May 1985.

⁹⁸ SWB ME/7963/A/1, 'Garang address to Sudanese people', *Radio SPLA*, 27 May 1985.

1986. Whereas peace negotiations in Sudan's first civil war had been conducted largely in secret, Radio SPLA broadcast a recording of Garang's opening address and a reading of the final declaration, which encompassed Garang's idea of a New Sudan and delineated a framework for a future national convention.⁹⁹ While the Koka Dam Declaration did little in the way of ending conflict on the ground, it was a public turning point in how the war and any prospective dialogue were framed, and a symbolic victory for Garang. Over the following months and years, Garang integrated the declaration seamlessly into the SPLM/A's usable past and his vision of a New Sudan, using it as a benchmark for specifically national dialogue.¹⁰⁰ When the April election established Sadiq as prime minister in a coalition government, Garang used the Koka Dam Declaration — to which Sadiq's Umma party was a signatory, but his two main coalition partners were not — as a central reference point in increasingly heated radio debates about possible dialogue.¹⁰¹

This was part of a wider set of strategies to establish the SPLM/A's international legitimacy, though the movement's success in doing so was mixed. In parallel to Garang's

⁹⁹ SWB ME/8215/A/1, 'Sudanese rebel leader addresses conference in Ethiopia', *Radio SPLA*, 21 Mar. 1986; ME/8220/A/1, 'Sudanese rebel leader addresses conference in Ethiopia', *Radio SPLA*, 25 Mar. 1986; ME/8221/A/1, 'Declaration of Sudanese groups' meeting in Addis Ababa', *Radio SPLA*, 28 Mar. 1986. See also J. Garang and M. Khālid, *The Call for Democracy in Sudan* (2nd edn, London, 1992), 118–44.

¹⁰⁰ SWB ME/8537/A/1, 'Sudanese rebel leader's statement on uprising anniversary', *Radio SPLA*, 6 Apr. 1987.

¹⁰¹ SWB ME/8263/A/1 'John Garang reaffirm's [*sic*] SPLM's willingness to meet new government', *Radio SPLA*, 17 Apr. 1986.

discursive posturing about dialogue, radio broadcasting played a direct role in ‘the shaping of warfare and its moral rhetoric’.¹⁰² Garang used radio to frame the military acts of the SPLA and establish it as a force which both the government and international actors would have to recognize. Garang was never shy about using military force to highlight his control of people and territory and, by extension, his claim to political legitimacy. Following Nimeiri’s overthrow, he announced to ‘the generals’ in Khartoum that without the SPLM/A’s support, ‘[t]he oil will not flow; water will not flow in the Jonglei canal; vehicles will not move in war zone one [southern Sudan]; the air will continue to be dangerous for air transport’.¹⁰³ In subsequent radio speeches between mid-1985 and mid-1986, Garang made intermittent threats about shooting down planes. When the SPLA captured Rumbek in March 1986, just two weeks before the scheduled Koka Dam conference, he announced,

Rumbek town is, of course, very heavily defended all around, with many anti-aircraft guns and launchers, both SPLA’s and those captured, and any relief flights into the town must first be cleared by SPLA general headquarters and then co-ordinated with the field commander ... Any other plane whether military or civilian will be shot down without prior warning.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² James, ‘Multiple voices’, 198.

¹⁰³ SWB ME/7922/A/1, ‘Sudanese rebel leader’s threat to continue struggle’, *Radio SPLA*, 9 Apr. 1985.

¹⁰⁴ SWB ME/8203/A/1, ‘SPLA’s Garang says Lakes province a “liberated area”’, *Radio SPLA*, 7 Mar. 1986.

Beyond a vindictive threat of violence, this statement asserted that the SPLM/A must be treated as a legitimate diplomatic actor with pseudo-sovereign territorial control. Garang's message was clear: to reach the south, you must go through the SPLM/A and its increasingly important humanitarian wing.

Later that year, the SPLM/A followed through on its threat. On 15 August 1986, the SPLM/A announced a flight ban via Radio SPLA and international press release, claiming Sadiq 'planned ... to launch a major offensive against SPLA forces' and to 'use the food of the International Food Relief to support his offensive'.¹⁰⁵ The following day, the SPLM/A shot down a civilian Sudan Airways flight taking off from Malakal, killing all on board. On 18 August, the SPLM/A proudly claimed responsibility for the attack. Although Garang himself did not speak, Radio SPLA relayed a 'warm message of congratulations' from PMHC member Arok Thon Arok to Garang on 'the shooting down of the enemy plane ... by the gallant SPLA forces of Fashoda Battalion'.¹⁰⁶ On 19 August, Radio SPLA broadcast a statement blaming Sadiq for the incident, saying he did not heed the SPLA's 'magnanimous advice'.¹⁰⁷

In response, Radio Omdurman broadcast a vitriolic statement by the minister of culture and information condemning 'Garang and his gang':

¹⁰⁵ Bodleian Library Special Collections (BLSC), Oxford UK, MS.Oxfam.PRG.3/3/1/36, SPLM/SPLA press release, 15 Aug. 1986.

¹⁰⁶ FBIS-MEA-86-160, 'SPLA Radio broadcasts congratulations', *Radio SPLA*, 18 Aug. 1986.

¹⁰⁷ SWB ME/8343/A/1, 'SPLA blame Mahdi for shooting down of plane: More planes will be attacked', *Radio SPLA*, 19 Aug. 1986.

To make John Garang understand that the road to peace cannot be founded on the heads of innocent women and children and the unarmed, this government cannot share a platform with pirates and highway robbers.¹⁰⁸

This marked the beginning of an era of more personalized radio attacks focused directly on Garang. Over the next week, government media described Garang as a ‘terrorist’, ‘criminal’, and ‘outlaw’, someone whose ‘immorality’ demanded that dialogue be stopped and that the SPLA ‘be dealt with in the language of war’.¹⁰⁹ On one hand, by shooting down a civilian plane and publicly claiming responsibility, Garang and the SPLM/A had given the government the discursive fodder it needed to drop the pretense of peace negotiations. On the other, Garang had linked radio discourse with action, reinforcing the power of his personal warnings and those of Radio SPLA more generally.

In a press conference about the Malakal incident, Sadiq denounced ‘John Garang’s radio’:

Mahdi described what is being broadcast by Garang’s radio station as ‘empty talk’ ... its objective is to launch a psychological war. Mahdi stressed that the security situation in southern Sudan’s four cities, which Garang threatened to shell, is calm.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ SWB ME/8343/A/1, ‘Sudanese minister on shooting down of plane: proof of Garang’s “criminal acts”’, *Radio Omdurman*, 19 Aug. 1986.

¹⁰⁹ SWB ME/8345/A/1, ‘Minister threatens guerilla warfare against Garang’, *SUNA*, 21 August 1986.

¹¹⁰ SWB ME/8345/A/1, ‘Sudan’s Mahdi says Garang uses terrorism’, *SUNA*, 21 Aug. 1986.

Ironically, Sadiq's attempt to publicly discredit Garang and Radio SPLA suggest that he perceived Garang's 'empty talk' as a real threat. Indeed, youth listening in Khartoum and Juba explained that the government's constant denigration of Garang made them more aware of his importance.¹¹¹

In late September, the government began broadcasting a program on the same frequency and at the same time as Radio SPLA. Tellingly, SWB and FBIS first described it as an 'anti-Garang broadcast', before labelling it the People's Armed Forces Program (PAFP) and renaming it National Unity Radio on 23 October 1987.¹¹² A monitor's summary on 29 September 1986 described that Radio SPLA had changed from its usual frequency of 9705 kHz to 9530 kHz, but that PAFP then began operating on 9530 kHz as well, 'causing mutual interference'.¹¹³ According to SWB comments upon first hearing PAFP, their broadcasts even began with the signature military jingle used by Radio SPLA.¹¹⁴ Within the SWB reports on PAFP's broadcasts, one program stands out: a commentary by members of the Anyanya-II, a group of southern secessionists who clashed with Garang's SPLM/A early in the war, though many later joined the SPLM/A. Titled 'the Voice of Peace, the Voice of Anyanya II', the program featured pro-

¹¹¹ Interview with Sunday Beiag, Nairobi, 6 Sept. 2019; focus group with Equatorian youth, Nairobi, 5 Sept. 2019.

¹¹² SWB ME/8375/I, 'Anti-Garang broadcast heard on former Sudanese rebel radio frequencies', 27 Sept. 1986; FOIA, cable from FBIS London to Rutlaab/FBIS Washington, 'FYI: Anti-Garang radio broadcasting on Radio SPLA frequency', 25 Sept. 1986.

¹¹³ SWB ME/8376/i, 'Pro and anti-SPLA radio continue broadcasting on same frequencies', 29 Sept. 1986.

¹¹⁴ SWB ME/8375/I, 'Anti-Garang broadcast heard on former Sudanese rebel radio frequencies', 27 Sept. 1986.

government Anyanya-II members who badmouthed Garang and his Ethiopian, Cuban, and (alleged) Soviet backers.¹¹⁵ While this was not the first time that the government used the Anyanya-II as the peaceful, accommodating antithesis of the SPLM, the Voice of Peace commentaries signal an overt strategy of discrediting Garang, mirroring the government's material tactics of arming southern militias against the SPLA.¹¹⁶

PAFP broadcast in Arabic, suggesting the government was targeting domestic listeners more than the international community. Voice of Peace broadcasts described desertions from 'Garang's camps', splits within his movement, and Radio SPLA's lack of credibility.¹¹⁷ By using Anyanya II commentators, these broadcasts challenged Garang's authority through fellow southerners. In later years, PAFP featured news of splits between Garang and senior SPLM/A leaders, including Kerubino Kuanyin Bol, Arok Thon Arok, and Joseph Oduho.¹¹⁸ Based on real divisions in the movement, these broadcasts had the potential to be much more damaging for Garang's reputation. It is hard to know how this government propaganda was interpreted by listeners; however, by tracing government attempts to discredit Garang, jam Radio SPLA

¹¹⁵ SWB ME/8420/A/1, 'Sudanese anti-SPLA radio broadcasts Voice of Anyanya II programme', editorial report, 19 Nov. 1986.

¹¹⁶ Johnson, *Root Causes*, 67–9.

¹¹⁷ SWB ME/8401/A/1, 'Anti-SPLA radio claims despondency among Garang's forces', *PAFP*, 25 Oct. 1986.

¹¹⁸ SWB ME/0058/A/1, 'Sudan anti-SPLM radio reports interview with defectors on "split" in movement', *National Unity Radio*, 23 Jan. 1988; SWB ME/0174/A/1, 'National Unity Radio calls on SPLA to reject Garang's leadership', *National Unity Radio*, 6 Jun. 1988.

broadcasts, and reveal rifts between Garang and his commanders, we see the government's increasing concern about the *idea* of Garang circulating within Sudan and beyond, and Garang's power to disrupt the status quo. Having long controlled Sudanese media, the government reacted to Radio SPLA by expanding its efforts to divide southern opinion and to silence or undermine Garang.

International radio and the SPLM/A split

In addition to the government's PAFP broadcasts, between October and early December 1986, Radio Omdurman was responsible for a series of rumors claiming that Garang had been killed. Notably, these broadcasts and Radio SPLA's reactions also implicated the BBC, first in spreading misinformation of Garang's demise and subsequently in helping prove that Garang was alive through an interview conducted by BBC correspondent Mike Wooldridge. The exchanges these rumors generated aptly demonstrate the ways in which Sudanese actors not only spoke *to* an international audience but drew foreign broadcasters into debates about truth-telling.¹¹⁹

Original BBC broadcasts from October 1986 are not available but, on 17 October, Radio SPLA accused both Radio Omdurman and the BBC of spreading misinformation about Garang's death:

¹¹⁹ Cf. Connelly, *Diplomatic Revolution*, 133–5.

The spokesman pointed out that rumours broadcast over Radio Omdurman and the BBC saying that Col Dr John Garang de Mabior had been killed in a fight with his deputy, Lt-Col Carabino [sic] Kuanyin Bol, who was claimed to have been subsequently killed himself, was [sic] completely fabricated. The spokesman said that the rumour is part of Khartoum's propaganda campaign aimed at misinforming and misleading the Sudanese public.¹²⁰

Two later broadcasts monitored by SWB provided more detail, claiming Garang had been killed in Jabal Boma in eastern Upper Nile. The first claimed as its source an eyewitness who had defected from the SPLM/A and the second internal SPLM/A radio communications intercepted by the Anyanya-II.¹²¹ According to a SUNA summary, Sadiq himself commented on Garang's alleged death, claiming he had heard different reports but that 'his absence is noticeable. His recordings that are broadcast are old'.¹²² Sadiq went on to highlight 'that what is certain is that there are differences within the Garang group', claiming these had to do with both tribe and ideology.¹²³

The international confusion caused by these conflicting reports is captured in the communications of Oxfam staff trying to operate in southern Sudan who, as late as 3 December, were unsure of whether Garang had been killed. Notably, it was an interview with BBC's Mike

¹²⁰ SWB ME/8394/A/1, 'Sudanese rebel radio denies reports of Garang's death, SPLM split', *Radio SPLA*, 17 Oct. 1986.

¹²¹ SWB ME/8422/A/1, 'Reported death of John Garang', *SUNA*, 19 Nov. 1986; SWB ME/8436/A/1, 'Sudan's Anyanya II rejects Islamic-Christian committee; Garang rumours', *SUNA*, 2 Dec. 1986.

¹²² SWB ME/8430/A/1, 'Sudanese prime minister comments on southern question, Ethiopia', *SUNA*, 28 Nov. 1986.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

Wooldridge which proved definitively that Garang was alive, followed by a wider press conference in Addis Ababa.¹²⁴ The SPLM/A capitalized on the occasion, making jokes about Garang's 'resurrection' and turning the confusion against the government. Replying to a reporter's question that maybe he had been wounded, Garang joked about 'disrob[ing]' and affirmed, 'No, I was not wounded in any way. As I said before, this was disinformation, distraction'.¹²⁵ He went on to decry Khartoum for spreading rumors, framing such behavior as a clear detriment to the peace process agreed to in Koka Dam.

On this occasion, Garang had the last word, speaking to a domestic and international audience about his commitment to truthfulness and dialogue. The incident reveals Garang's awareness of radio's international networks and his ability to manipulate these to reinforce his personal credibility and highlight the government's duplicity. However, the power of radio rumors — no matter how unfounded — also points to the complications of projecting leadership in the contested space of the ether. Garang did not have a monopoly on international broadcasters and, in 1991, the most significant internal threat to Garang's leadership was precipitated by the combination of an internal message to all SPLA units and a BBC interview with Garang's would-be usurpers: Riek Machar and Lam Akol.

¹²⁴ BLSC MS.Oxfam.PRG.5/3/1/10, Nick Winer to Tony Vaux, 'South Sudan', 3 Dec. 1986.

¹²⁵ SWB ME/8439/A/1 'John Garang's news conference in Addis Ababa', *Radio SPLA*, 8 Dec. 1986 and *SUNA in Arabic*, 9 Dec. 1986.

In late May 1991, the SPLM/A lost their main training and refugee camps in western Ethiopia following the overthrow of President Mengistu. They also lost the Radio SPLA transmitter, a blow from which the broadcaster never meaningfully recovered. As hundreds of thousands of refugees returned in disarray to Sudan, Nasir near the Sudanese-Ethiopian border became a hub for international relief.¹²⁶ Both Machar and Akol were in Nasir by 8 June, where they planned their attempt to replace Garang.¹²⁷ Akol had previously represented the SPLM/A in Nairobi and was known within the BBC.¹²⁸ In late August, Akol sent a message directly to Colin Blane, BBC's East Africa correspondent. Blane remembers an anonymous messenger walking into his office in Nairobi to leave a message inviting him to Nasir 'where [he] might find something of interest'.¹²⁹ Blane discreetly checked around and, realizing no one else in the Nairobi press industry had received a similar invitation, decided the tip was worth pursuing for a potentially exclusive story. On 28 August, Blane took a humanitarian flight to the Sudanese-Kenyan border and proceeded to Nasir the following day. There, he met and interviewed Garang's would-be usurpers, focusing on Akol and Machar as more eloquent speakers than their co-conspirator Gordon Kong. He returned to Nairobi on 30 August where he broke the news in a short voice report, soon followed soon by a longer feature including the interviews with Akol and Machar.

¹²⁶ Sudan Open Archive (SOA), online, Mark Cutts (for SCF UK), 'The mass exodus of Sudanese refugees from camps in western Ethiopia and programmes for their rehabilitation in southern Sudan', July 1991, 14-15, 21.

¹²⁷ Akol, *SPLM/SPLA: Nasir*, 1-4.

¹²⁸ Interviews with Lucy Hannan, Nairobi, 19 Mar. 2018, and Colin Blane, phone, 26 Apr. 2018.

¹²⁹ Interview with Colin Blane.

Two days earlier, Akol and Machar had sent an internal message to all units announcing, ‘In order to save the movement from the imminent collapse [*sic*], it has been decided to relieve John Garang from the leadership of the SPLM/A’.¹³⁰ The BBC report relayed their message to a wider audience, including SPLA soldiers who had missed the initial dispatch. The internal message to all units — which borrowed from Garang’s own communication tactics — and Blane’s BBC broadcast combined to have significant impact. Although Garang was then in Torit, some 300 miles from Nasir, he reacted quickly to the report by contacting Blane directly. Blane recalled,

I wrote a voice report ... and that prompted a very very fast response from John Garang denouncing the report and denouncing me. But since the next thing I did was to broadcast chunks of the interviews, then Garang couldn’t carry on saying that I hadn’t spoken to Lam Akol or Riek, because he could hear them, they were out there. And the story was out there. And you know, that was how, from my point of view, how fast and strong the impact was. I mean, Garang responded and it was clear that the split was real.... And you couldn’t pretend otherwise because I had the leaders of the crew on tape.¹³¹

In Blane’s telling of events, Garang was immediately aware of the broadcast’s implications. Blane’s face-to-face interviews with Akol and Machar in Nasir — and the power of their voices

¹³⁰ Radio message, Riek Machar to SPLA high command and all units, 28 Aug. 1991. Reproduced in Akol, *SPLM/SPLA: Nasir*, 290–3.

¹³¹ Interview with Colin Blane.

on international radio — gave weight to Garang's alleged replacement. Unable to turn to the defunct Radio SPLA, Garang reacted to his attempted overthrow with an internal radio message to all units and a corresponding press release signed by nine of the ten members PMHC members who had not defected, with a note beside the tenth saying that he had given his support via radio because he could not be in Kapoeta in person.¹³²

Although there was no initial military component to Garang's so-called overthrow, the split rapidly solidified, precipitating a period of devastating inter-southern violence. If other factors were at play — Machar's close relationship with international humanitarians and the Nasir faction's backing from Khartoum — Akol's direct message to Blane and Garang's reaction to Blane's voice report reveal the important role of international broadcasters in the radio battles of the second civil war. In the search for political legitimacy, SPLM/A leaders interacted directly with individual correspondents like Wooldridge and Blane and cited their broadcasts to support their own agenda or denounce the BBC for its lack of objectivity. These radio battles had real effects, not only in giving Garang a voice to speak nationally and internationally, but in opening Garang to reports which blurred the line between local and global critique. Throughout the 1990s, the SPLM/A suffered further fragmentation, though Garang kept control of the 'SPLM/A-Mainstream'. Without its Ethiopian transmitter, Radio SPLA never recovered and propaganda battles during this period shifted from the airwaves to print media as the SPLM/A factions issued press releases denigrating their opponents and published more sophisticated newsletters from

¹³² Akol, *SPLM/SPLA: Nasir*, 14; SAD 985/3/7, Press statement by SPLM/SPLA, 31 Aug. 1991.

Nairobi and London.¹³³ They would, however, still cite internal radio messages in disputes about truth and authority and, as new peace processes and Operation Lifeline Sudan (a United Nations-coordinated relief intervention launched in 1989) legitimated the SPLM/A factions' presence in Kenya, Garang and other prominent SPLM/A figures engaged more directly and frequently with international media and foreign diplomats.

Conclusion

Radio broadcasting played an understudied role in the development of Garang's public profile and influence during Sudan's second civil war. Reading archives in combination with oral histories for the acts of interpretation through which various actors gave value to Garang's sonic presence offers a 'real-time' view of Garang's rise to local and international prominence. Radio allowed Garang to speak to a dispersed audience within and beyond Sudan, presenting an alternative history of the Sudanese state and publicizing his vision of a New Sudan. Through Radio SPLA's convergence with the SPLM/A's two-way radio communications, which further amplified Garang's voice and directly shaped the content of Radio SPLA, Garang quickly dominated the wartime soundscape. For many domestic listeners, Garang's presence on Radio SPLA stands out as an important source of inspiration during the war; however, experiences of listening were shaped by place and personal experiences, and songs and speeches which originated in SPLA training camps were often poorly

¹³³ From 1992, SPLM/A-Mainstream published the weekly *SPLM/SPLA Update* and SPLM/A-Nasir published the roughly bi-weekly *Southern Sudan Vision*.

received by civilian listeners. Nevertheless, Garang succeeded in shifting the dominant narrative of the war from southern secession to national reform. In addition, through a mixed strategy of dialogue and military action, he established himself as someone who had to be taken seriously. The intensification of government counter-broadcast strategies after the Malakal incident — with specific attempts to muzzle and discredit Garang's radio voice — betray the government's increasing fear about the power of Garang's broadcasts. By nature transnational and conversational, these radio battles did not confine themselves to dialogue between the SPLM/A and the Sudanese government, but implicated BBC broadcasting in wider disputes about truth-telling.

Debates over the airwaves also shaped the internal politics of the SPLM/A in significant ways. Garang's aural presence — on internal radio, in songs, and on Radio SPLA — was resented by the Nasir faction leaders and, in 1991, Colin Blane's BBC interviews with Akol and Machar played a role in precipitating the era's biggest internal threat to Garang's leadership of the SPLM/A. Radio thus powerfully mediated between personal, national, and international politics. Studying the war's sonic events in this way allows for an analysis of Garang's rise to power rooted not only in the concrete events of guerrilla warfare and diplomacy but in the actions and attitudes of individual actors who broadcast, listened, and monitored. This approach, focused on war's moral contests and claims to truth, offers a lens for understanding the centrality of personas in the SPLM/A's liberation war.

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