

The ethnographic archive and the poetics of history: revisiting Godfrey Lienhardt's archive.

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Abstract

This article develops an approach for working with vernacular texts in ethnographic archives. It examines Dinka song texts collected in (South) Sudan by the anthropologist Godfrey Lienhardt (between 1947 and 1951), now archived at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. Songs were central to developing Lienhardt's ethnographic analysis; they are also an exciting and unique record of popular and artistic expression at the time of his research. The songs he transcribed offer perspectives on life under colonial rule that are often occluded in the documentary and ethnographic record (including Lienhardt's own writing). In this article, I examine a selection of songs, showing that to be understood today they must be seen as both a product of Lienhardt's data collecting practices and works of art in their own right. It is possible to usefully recontextualise these songs by triangulating between Lienhardt's published work, his unpublished field notes and other academic studies in South Sudanese history and anthropology. Importantly, these songs must be treated as verbal arts – and read with an appreciation of their aesthetic and stylistic qualities. Their meaning and significance is not always straightforward, in fact they are often deliberately opaque. Any interpretation must embrace these 'difficult' aspects.

Introduction

Among the most intriguing material in anthropologist Godfrey Lienhardt's archive is his collection of Dinka language song texts, assembled during ethnographic fieldwork in Southern Sudan between 1947 and 1951. These songs, along with other vernacular texts, were central to developing Lienhardt's ethnographic analysis. They are also a unique record of popular and artistic expression at the time of his research. This was a period of huge transformation: new institutions and social geographies were being created and consolidated, sometimes violently. Lienhardt's archive can be used to explore how the social changes brought by the colonial administration were impacting on Dinka society and how these changes were being creatively mediated in verbal arts. The songs he transcribed show how the oppression of the colonial state resulted in far reaching social anxieties about generational relationships, gender and reproduction. They offer perspectives on life under colonial rule that are often occluded in the documentary and ethnographic record. These songs are valuable historical evidence, but they

are challenging ‘artefacts’ to interpret. As well as issues around the anthropologist’s and archival mediation, Dinka songs also ‘speak’ in a particular way that needs to be taken seriously. They are not simple narratives or descriptions, they are an art form with their own aesthetics and modes of interpretation.

This article develops an approach for interpreting Dinka poetic arts in the ethnographic archive. It draws from my doctoral research (2010-2014), during which I worked on Lienhardt’s archive and conducted eighteen months’ research in Warrap and Lakes State in South Sudan (regions where Lienhardt himself worked and collected many songs, sixty years previously). My own research involved recording songs and my thesis explored how they were used in the period immediately after South Sudan’s independence to narrate and interpret the past. (Cormack 2014) This research led me to reconsider the song texts contained in Lienhardt’s notebooks. How can they now be read? How do they enrich or complicate the version of Dinka society presented in Lienhardt’s ethnography? What do they tell us about the history of creative expression in rural South Sudan? In what follows, I explain how these texts must, on one hand, be seen in the context of an anthropologist’s archive - a product of Lienhardt’s own research and data collecting practices. While, on the other, they are also creative works in their own right and unique commentaries on life under colonial rule. Even where Lienhardt was silent on their significance, they can be contextualised by triangulating between Lienhardt’s published work, his unpublished field notes and other academic studies in South Sudanese history and anthropology. Importantly, I argue they must be read with an appreciation of the qualities of Dinka verbal arts. Dinka songs draw heavily on metaphor, visual imagery, autobiography and local history. Their meaning and significance is not always straightforward, in fact they are often deliberately opaque. Any interpretation must embrace these ‘difficult’ qualities.

Godfrey Lienhardt (1921-1993) carried out his research during the last decade of Anglo-Egyptian colonial rule in Sudan. He worked mainly in the region of Gogrial (now a part of Warrap State), but he travelled across other Dinka speaking areas, including Aweil, Tonj, Rumbek and Bor. His doctorate was supervised by the anthropologist Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard and it was funded by the Government of Sudan. The resulting thesis was submitted in 1952 and reworked into the influential monograph, *'Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka'* (1961), a book which is now regarded as a classic of the anthropology of religion. His archive at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford is a valuable source for studying the history of South Sudan. It consists of fourteen boxes, five of which contain material produced during his Dinka and Anuak fieldwork in southern Sudan. They include field-notebooks and diaries, books of transcribed Dinka songs and texts, copies of documents from colonial government records and Dinka language learning materials. The additional boxes contain lecture notes and teaching material, Lienhardt's publications translated into different languages, some miscellaneous letters and materials related to politics of Sudan, and over five hundred photographs.¹ A collection of his letters written during fieldwork are not yet accessioned, but have been partially published. (Al-Shahi 2010)

Songs as sources are valuable because, in a variety of ways, they go beyond the anthropologist's own written impressions. They are an indigenous mode of self-representation and they convey the auditory and poetic elements of ethnographic fieldwork and past lives. Yet they also come down to us hugely mediated by the process of documentation. A song text is a performance rendered as an artefact within the archive. These texts have been through several stages of transcription, translation and interpretation. As a result, they both reveal and conceal. Chris Morton has drawn a useful comparison between vernacular texts and photographs, as forms of evidence with similar properties. He concludes that we cannot simply take such texts

as ‘snap-shots’ of local experience. But, if we interrogate and contextualise their content and production, vernacular texts can, like photographs, ‘lead beyond to local understandings’. (Morton 2016, 140)

This article discusses the songs in first their archival and then historical context. Their place within Lienhardt’s archive is important for several reasons. Lienhardt was a collector and interpreter of Dinka songs. The texts are products of his research and the relationships that he formed during fieldwork. Songs were important to his ethnography and he used them to convey his ethnographic insights. His approach was influenced by his academic background in English literature and consolidated during his anthropological training under Evans-Pritchard. His interests are essential to understanding why this collection exists. It was also this interest that led him to commission (as one of the general editors of the Oxford Library of African Literature) Francis Deng’s study of Dinka songs (the only book length academic study on this topic). Turning to the songs themselves, I describe the aesthetics, process of interpretation and social context of Dinka songs. Understanding these distinctive features of Dinka song-craft are essential for approaching the Lienhardt collection. I then look at examples of songs that speak to contemporary concerns about the state, authority and the reproduction of social relationships under colonialism. As has been more widely observed, gender relationships are particularly susceptible to historical changes. (Riesman 1986, 98) Lienhardt’s collection of songs provides ample evidence for this in southern Sudan.

The ethnographic archive

The archives of ethnographic research are assembled by anthropologists primarily during periods of fieldwork and nurtured with related documentation and personal papers. In a sense, as George Marcus has written, all anthropologists are archivists, curating their own collections throughout their professional lives. (Marcus 1998, 53) Some of these personal archives later enter public collections and become archives in the formal sense of the term. Despite the unique nature of the ethnographic archive, there has not been much scholarly attention to this phenomenon.

If all ethnographies are to some extent historical documents, capturing a detailed picture of a society or phenomenon at one ‘ethnographic present’; then this material documentation must also represent a unique form of historical knowledge. Just as the Comaroffs urged historical anthropologists to begin by constructing their own archives, (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, 34–35) anthropologists and historians can also find rich material in the ethnographic archives already assembled. Ethnographic archives, with their attention to documenting local experience, contain insights that more narrowly official records often do not.

Recent work in both history and anthropology has shifted the archive from being the means to becoming the subject of enquiry. Scholars have been asking new questions about the form of the archive. Questions of governance and control have been central to these recent analyses, which have generally looked at the archives of state. (e.g. Stoller 2008; Weld 2014; Hull 2012) While the ethnographic archive is not neutral (it orders knowledge and imposes its own categories), it doesn’t carry out an administrative function. The methodological issues in understanding ethnographic archives are therefore somewhat different. They must involve critically integrating the positionality of the anthropologist into an interpretation of their collected materials.

The relationship between ethnographic archives and colonialism is complicated. Much of this can be traced to the ambivalent relationship between anthropologists and colonial state. As Wendy James has described, their work was dependent on the colonial system, but some anthropologists were producing work about the rationality and complexity of non-western cultures that challenged the principle of European supremacy upon which colonialism was founded. They were both part of and critics of the colonial system. (James 1973, 42) Parts of Lienhardt's archive embody this ambivalence. He got to know colonial administrators and used local district files in his research. Yet he was also pursuing question about the nature of Dinka religion and belief, which went far beyond administrative concerns.²

There is value in approaching the ethnographic archive as a historical source, with the consideration of Lienhardt's position taken into account. Lienhardt's archive demonstrates the significance of this. The area where he worked, southern Sudan, suffered extensive post-colonial conflict and many records have been lost or destroyed. There are transcripts of records in colonial district archives made by Lienhardt in the field which have since been destroyed. It is possible to recover pertinent historical documents through his archive – some examples of which I will discuss in this article. Mass death and displacement wrought by prolonged conflicts has affected (although by no means entirely) the transmission of local oral histories. Lienhardt himself thought about his research in relation to the historians of the future. He writes in *Divinity and Experience* that the accounts of myths and oral histories he had collected may one day be useful for Dinka people in understanding their history. (Lienhardt 1961, 175) Longer versions of these historical accounts cited in his published work can be found in his archive.³ The songs in Lienhardt's archive can also help to historicise Dinka verbal arts. In many cases, Dinka songs die with their singer, but Lienhardt's archive gives us the chance to

know songs that were sung at the end of the 1940s. His archive also offers an opportunity to historicize Dinka verbal arts. Combined with the collections of other scholars like Francis Mading Deng, Mark Nikkel (author of *Dinka Christianity*, 2001) and from the *Metre and Melody in Dinka Song* project at SOAS and the University of Edinburgh, these archive texts uniquely document Dinka verbal arts from the late 1940s to early 2000s.⁴

A literary anthropologist

Godfrey Lienhardt is a fascinating person to think through the poetic content of the ethnographic archive. His extensive use of literature (both Dinka and English) in research, publications and teaching has resulted in a rich body of evidence to piece together insights on Dinka verbal arts and how they have been used by anthropologists. Anyone who has read *Divinity and Experience* will agree that it is a very literary ethnography. Lienhardt weaves songs, hymns and oral history into the analysis. Dinka texts are brought in both as evidence for anthropological assertions, but they also shape the narrative and analysis.

Lienhardt came to anthropology through literature. In 1939, he won a scholarship to Downing College, Cambridge where he studied under the literary critic F. R. Leavis. (Al-Shahi 1997)⁵ Lienhardt excelled in literary criticism. He published reviews in the literary journal *Scrutiny* edited by Leavis. Despite being an active member of the literary scene at Cambridge, after his studies were interrupted by a period of service in WW2 in East Africa, Lienhardt switched to archaeology and anthropology. He was then taught by Evans-Pritchard, who came from Oxford to Cambridge to teach. The two soon became close and Lienhardt moved to Oxford and began

a doctorate in 1947. He took up a faculty position in the Anthropology department in 1949. (Al-Shahi 1997, 9)

Lienhardt's early training in English literature had a profound impact on his research and scholarship. He was thinking through literature when he embarked on his doctoral fieldwork - the first page of his first field diary is inscribed with an extract from G.K. Chesterton's 'All is Grist', beginning with the line: 'travellers' tales and supposed to be tall, but I have always found they fall short'. (Chesterton 1931)

Lienhardt believed in a common project between anthropology and literature in seeking to understand and convey human experience in the world. In 1951, after returning from his research in southern Sudan, he gave a lecture called 'Anthropology and Contemporary Literature' at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London. In this lecture, he developed an argument about the close relationship between the concerns of anthropology and literature. (Lienhardt 1973) Later in his career, he asserted again in the book *Social Anthropology* (published two decades before 'Writing Culture') that there are parallels in the concerns and practices of anthropology and literary studies. (Lienhardt 1966, 119) Lienhardt reportedly used to set the exam question: 'Read ethnographies for information; read novels for insight. Discuss.' (Baumann 1997, 100) This background explains partly why he collected and kept these songs. Lienhardt later acknowledged his intellectual debt to the Leavises, dedicating his textbook *Social Anthropology* to them. Some of these connection are explored by Schmidt (2017). At times *Divinity and Experience* becomes a close reading of Dinka oral tradition (which we could easily speculate was inspired by his apprenticeship under Leavis). This existing interest in literature and texts would have been further encouraged by his doctoral

supervisor, Evans-Pritchard, who himself made extensive use of vernacular texts in his studies of Zande history and ethnography. (Evans-Pritchard 1967; 1971; 1974)

Songs and their interpretation in Dinka Society

Lienhardt did not arrive at his interest in Dinka songs simply because of his background in English literature. Dinka verbal arts have been widely praised for their richness and creativity. On arrival in Gogrial, Lienhardt was immediately immersed in a sophisticated and ubiquitous singing culture: ‘any person may sing any song almost anytime and anywhere’, writes Deng. (Deng 1973, 78) Almost everyone, at least at the time of Lienhardt’s research, would have acquired a repertoire of personal songs throughout their lives. Lienhardt’s field diary is full of notes about of hearing songs. Two days after arriving at his first field site – the village of Pan Acier – he records that ‘yesterday evening I saw young men leading their bulls in circles...singing them bull songs’.⁶

Francis Deng wrote in his classic study, *The Dinka and their Songs*, that Dinka songs are ‘a mirror of Dinka social structure [and] its dynamics.’(Deng 1973, 88) Lienhardt was instrumental in encouraging Deng to write this book, they were originally going to co-author it, drawing on Lienhardt’s own collection of songs as well as recordings Deng had made. It was commissioned and published as part of a series co-edited by Lienhardt. (Deng 1997, 116) Lienhardt himself reflected that ‘texts, mostly songs, hymns and prayers, it was possible to see some of their world as the Dinka saw it, without [...] distortion.’(Lienhardt 1952, 3) To both scholars, Dinka songs offered a glimpse of Dinka society and they were essential to conveying

it to a wider audience. As one musician said to the ethnomusicologist Angela Impey, ‘If you know our Dinka songs, you will know our Dinka people.’ (Impey 2012)

This sentiment is why scholars have been interested in oral literature to understand other societies. But *how* exactly they tell us what they do is more complicated and neither Deng or Lienhardt develop this question explicitly. There is a danger in simply treating texts as a ‘mirror’ of wider social truths. While they do reflect events and concerns, they also interpret and shape those concerns. Dinka songs describe ‘social facts’ but they are also commentaries upon those facts. (Barber 2009, 5) It is for this reason that Elizabeth Tonkin warned scholars against erecting an artificial boundary between the study of oral literature (with a focus on form) and oral history (with a focus on content). (Tonkin 1995, 15–17) As Barber, drawing on Johannes Fabian, puts it ‘textual traditions can be seen as a community’s ethnography of itself.’ (Barber 2009, 4) This is why Somali songs and poems, for example, can be used to explore popular and artistic mediations of the violence which followed state collapse in Somalia in 1991. Not because they provide a run-down of events, but because they offer an interpretation: a way of looking at the past, a form of historicity. (Kapteijns 2014)

The artistic principles of Dinka songs are most clearly rendered in the genre of ‘ox songs’ that are sung by young men in celebration of their personal bull. These are quintessential examples of the poetic construction of personhood and renowned for being an celebration of the ‘oneness’ of man and animal in a pastoralist society. (Finnegan 2012, 245; Barber 2009, 113–18) Sometimes glossed as ‘praise songs’ to cattle, these songs comment elaborately on the aesthetic appreciation of cattle and the landscape. (Coote 1994) They describe the social, historical and environmental connections conveyed in the human-cattle relationship. An ox-song could be thought of as a pathway through a landscape that is at once temporal, physical,

social and genealogical. Thus, reflecting on ox-songs, Alfred Gell observed that ‘Dinka aesthetics is a poetic discourse which evokes cattle, humans, their environments, interactions and histories, in their fullness and confusion.’ (Gell 1995, 27)

Well-crafted songs invoke family histories and local historical knowledge, and draw on a range of visual metaphors that require complex knowledge of local landscapes and poetic tradition to interpret. Translating an ox-song in Gogrial for my PhD in 2012 took over a week. It involved long (and often conflicting) conversations about interpretation with family members of the singer and several follow-up interviews before I could get a handle on what the song was about. Their complexity and referential nature means that to an uninitiated reader/listener the text of a Dinka song may appear, in Lienhardt’s words, ‘disconnected’. (Lienhardt 1961, 18) Take this song extract, which is itself about composing a song. It was used by Lienhardt to show the intimate connection between the lives of people and cattle. It also shows the need to read the meaning of the song beyond the literal words on the page.

I call to Deng ‘refuser of burnt grass’*
‘Has the composer come?’
And we go into the hut (to compose)
The hut of Adeng, daughter of Majok ‘growl of the leopard’*
I call to Kuot ‘pied-back’*
‘Has the composer come?’
Anguec, wife of my father, I have nothing more to say
The composer confuses people, the song twists,
But if the song starts by going crooked
One of the listeners will straighten it out.

The asterisked sections each refer to a bull name. ‘Refuser of burnt grass’ is the giraffe configuration, Malek, because giraffes eat only leaves. The ‘growl of the leopard’ is Makuac, the dappled/spotted configuration named after the leopard. ‘Pied-back’ refers to Majok, the pied black and white configuration. (Lienhardt 1961, 18)

While songs do offer a ‘way in’ to Dinka society, they are also a creative form which operate on their own aesthetic terms. They can’t simply be treated as sources of data to be mined for their archaic elements. (c.f. Vansina 1985) They are works of art with their own indigenous techniques of interpretation. (Barber 1997, 4,8) Scholars of oral literatures – from Slavic ballads to Yoruba Oriki – stress that their literary force and social significance emerges through, not in spite of, these unique forms. Lienhardt saw the opacity of Dinka songs, their slipperiness and their significance beyond literal meaning. Writing in his DPhil thesis about religious songs, he says

‘I do not think that it is possible to arrive at a single original meaning or intention in Dinka hymns. Those I give were explained to me in Dinka as best they could be, but it is clear to anyone who has collected Dinka hymns that the Dinka themselves do not know their literal meaning, and corruptions to the text easily occur.’ (Lienhardt 1952, fn.142)

Visual imagery and association are vital qualities of song and skilful use of metaphor is essential. Good songs are those that employ a creative range of poignant associations and images; songs that are too literal lack depth and are considered unsuccessful. (Deng 1973, 91) This is not a case of ‘the harder the better’, but the appreciation of a well-executed and inspired metaphor. For example, in the lines below the singer invokes the pleasingly unexpected comparison of pipe and tobacco to man and beast:

My Mijok is important to me
Like tobacco and the pipe;
When there is no tobacco
The pipe goes out
His pace and mine are the same. (Deng 1973, 80)

Many songs are a form of historiographical discourse; they interpret the past poetically for the audience. This includes both the grandiose past of Dinka cultural heroes, migration and wars; as well as the micro past of family and local history that bears on the lives of composers (many

songs will weave both together). Drawing on this, in my thesis I argued that a particular historicity is both conveyed and constructed through poetic interweaving of landscape, temporality and identity in song. (Cormack 2014) It is also through these characteristics that personal identity and relationships are crafted and reflected. Angela Impey's research on the transmission of Dinka songs in the diaspora shows this wonderfully, by demonstrating how songs can nurture feelings of 'belonging' following the displacement of civil war, by poetically drawing together time, place and cultural meaning. (Impey 2013) Many of these insights are true of research on oral cultures and archival materials. As Natalie Zemon Davis has shown of sixteenth century pardon tales, archival work is not necessarily about peeling away layers to reveal bare fact, it is about using texts to understand how meaning was crafted and conveyed. (Davies 1990, 8)

In addition to aesthetic qualities, another crucial point for their interpretation is that Dinka songs are part of a process of social action that extends beyond the text and the moment of performance. (Tonkin 1995, 97) This is particularly the case for the songs I will discuss in this article, which poetically engage struggles over authority and several of which were sung in protest. As Francis Deng explains, it is typically women and young people who compose and sing songs because in a society in which power is generally held by senior men, singing and dancing provide an artistic arena for the less powerful to make claims on the system and speak what is otherwise unspeakable. (Deng 1973, 81) We can glimpse examples of this use of songs throughout Lienhardt's fieldnotes. Just over a week into his research in Pan Acier (now Warrap State), Lienhardt noted in his diary that the participants at a woman's dance 'sang about people they didn't like.' They sung critically about a chief, and Lienhardt's research assistant speculated that they wouldn't have dared sing the words in front of him.⁷

When artfully deployed, poetic skill can have tangible outcomes. A young man who crafts a brilliant song about the injustice of his father denying him marriage can convince his older relatives to support his case. For this reason, many songs have a confessional element. Songs are often the continuation of, and agents in, everyday social drama. As Barber writes of Yoruba Oriki, ‘they are fully realised only in the moment of performance...there is a sense in which they are not simply accessible at all viewed as words on a page.’(Barber 1997, 7)

Given the important concerns about context and performance, oral literature is usually studied through ‘face-to-face’ ethnography. In the rest of the paper I want to apply these insights to understanding songs as texts within the ethnographic archive. Dinka songs have always responded to and reflected social change. (Deng 1973, 4) Because of this quality, that have great potential to reveal contemporary transformation and the concerns of the people who sung them.

Dinka texts in Godfrey Lienhardt’s archive

The Dinka texts in Lienhardt’s archive are comprised mainly of songs, invocations, prayers, and longer narratives – including snippets of local history and *anyikol* a Dinka word meaning story or folktale (often with a fantastic element). There are some miscellaneous texts, such as descriptions of local customs, short personal histories written by school children, and even the partial transcription of evidence given in a court case investigating the suspected burial alive of a *bany e bith* (spear master) in Gogrial in 1949 (a practice that had been outlawed by the colonial government).⁸

Lienhardt did not make any audio recordings, even though the technology existed at the time of his fieldwork and his supervisor, Evans-Pritchard, had made wax cylinder recordings of songs in his Zande research twenty years earlier. Approaching the songs in his archive we are dealing with textual artefacts that have been rendered from a performance. This is not necessarily a barrier to understanding; as people have been converting oral literature into texts for thousands of years. But we do inevitably lose something of their original delivery. These texts need to be read with an awareness of how they have been created. If transfer from an oral to written form is already one kind of translation, when we read a song in English it has been through several stages of mediation. (Finnegan 2012, 172)

Lienhardt explains in his PhD thesis that his efforts were aided by a school teacher called Akille Deng Aghou ‘who helped me to collect many texts, and attempted to explain them to me through the Dinka language in the course of many hours which must have been very laborious for him.’(Lienhardt 1952, 3) Lienhardt and Aghou worked without the aid of any recording device, making their achievements in transcribing even more impressive. It also strongly indicates the instrumental role of Deng Aghou as an interpreter, as it would have been impossible for Lienhardt to decipher the complex variations in pitch and tone in Dinka language at speed, at least in the early days of his research. Lienhardt did acquire great proficiency in Dinka language, but he struggled at the beginning. (Al-Shahi 2010, 199) No doubt the work of translating texts had a lot to do with his improvement.

Dinka is primarily an oral, rather than a written language. When Lienhardt was transcribing these songs, hardly anyone had ever attempted to write anything in Dinka. The first Dinka dictionary and grammar were produced during Lienhardt’s research at a Catholic Mission station in Kuajok by a Comboni Missionary called Father Nebel. (Nebel 1948; 1954).

Lienhardt stayed here for a period of his research in early 1948 and probably met Nebel. (Al-Shahi 2010, 193) Still, accurate ways of distinguishing between the different tones and sounds in the language were still being developed. As a result, some lines and texts in Lienhardt's collection – or at least their complexities – are indiscernible because of vague original transcriptions. Lienhardt's handwriting is also not for the faint hearted.

The range of songs in his collection are determined by his priorities and the relationships he developed in the field. All of songs in the Lienhardt collection (with possibly a few exceptions) are sung by young men. Meagan Vaughan has shown the possibility of using songs to recover women's perspectives from the past. (Vaughan 1987) This is not possible in the Lienhardt archive. Even though Dinka women do frequently compose and sing songs and we know Lienhardt heard women's songs, he hasn't left any transcripts. We must also work with the limitations of the information he recorded. We cannot now know why individual songs were transcribed or the exact circumstances of their dictation. Nor do we know which elements were suppressed, or which repetitions were left out. Some of the songs have information about their provenance, or about the background of the singer, but others do not.

Social reproduction, resistance and colonial violence: The Song of Gol Mayen

Now let us turn to the songs themselves. The first example I will discuss is not typical of the songs in Lienhardt's archive, but it is an exceptionally revealing archival document. It is a song composed on behalf of Gol Mayen (c.1870-1936), who was an important spiritual leader, *bany e bith*, among the Agaar Dinka.⁹ The song is about the injustice of taxation. It was sung in front of C. A. Willis, the Governor of Upper Nile Province, at Yirol town in 1929. (Willis 1995, 2)

Lienhardt did not record the text of this song himself, he obtained it at the local government files in Rumbek (where he collected a variety of documents).

The text of the song is prefaced with a note, which says

...in 1929 when Willis came to Yirol, Gol Mayen gave a cow, a calf and a bull to an Agar named Machwol to compose the following song. It was sung in Willis' presence and Hebbert claims that Gol threatened to paralyse anyone who explained the meaning to the government. Hebbert first heard the song in c. June 1930, but a Rumbek merchant, Ali, was named in the song instead of Hassan.

We don't know the exact circumstances in which this song came to be recorded in government files. G.K. Hebbert, who was District Commissioner of Yirol 1930-1932 seems to have authored the document and he appears to have understood some Dinka. (Willis 1995, 22) The song was not transcribed at the original performance, but from a version circulating some months later. Almost certainly someone defied Gol's threat to 'paralyse anyone who explained its meaning to the government' and helped with the translation and explanation.

The immediate context for this song was that since 1927, Gol Mayen had been openly agitating against the government's taxation policy. As the most influential spiritual leaders among the Agaar, Gol said that he would bring a plague of locusts unless the government stopped forcing people to pay taxes. This prophesy came true in 1930-1932 and a plague of locusts plunged the area into famine. (Mawut 1983, 38-39; Mawson 1989, 179-91)

Tax was a coercive practice. Matthew Benson has argued that taxes in colonial Sudan were less about revenue generation, and more a measure and means of social control. (Benson 2019) In 1938, Evans-Pritchard reminded British officials preparing to go to Sudan that 'Southern Sudan is ruled by force' and tax was not paid 'out of a sense of moral obligation, but because

[Southern Sudanese] are afraid of retaliation’. (cited in Johnson 2016) Colonial taxes were usually collected in cash, but people were often forced to sell crops or livestock to access cash. Or, if they failed to pay, their livestock could be confiscated in lieu of cash payment. As cattle were used in bridewealth exchanges they were central to social relationships for many societies in Southern Sudan, including the Agaar Dinka, this had potentially far reaching consequences. (Hutchinson 1992)

Turning to the song itself, each line is written in (very bad) Dinka, which is followed by an English translation and some brief explanation in brackets. I have transcribed this exactly as it is written in the archival file.

‘Pan e ma yeng nake anyar rial ke goi wot wa’
Oh my brothers why did you kill the white striped buffalo, that amazed our tribe?
(refers to tradition of ancestors who killed a miraculous buffalo that was destroying the tribe)

‘Ke ril achaa yok pan e nyang pan cheng a gulgul pan e liet chi bere weng ic’
I have struck a hard proposition, oh tribe of Nyang! Tribe that lives in a twisted way!
(Dinka name for govt. station is “pen” – “to prevent of prohibit”, twisted in opposition to the straight words and prohibitions of Govt, & that life has now been twisted by the govt. misruling cases) Tribe that lives in a sandy spot that must never be changed! (refers to frustrated desire to move Jur for better cultivation)

‘Ku nang a thiyeh aten akwe yete nin e pain a nyang a chok a rech’
If you ask Atanakwe (=Gol), who is the wall of the Nyang (Gol’s subtribe of Agar), shall we let our country be spoilt?

‘Nyang liet Akoon a Bwoi Machot achi o muk’
Oh people of Nyang of the sand of Akon Bwoi, Machot helped us
‘Thiechke wen e wad it Makwe Thong e bai run a muk adwel nhom’
Ask the son of my grandfather Makwe Tong e bai (Gol) the man who hold the house top (the man at the wheel)

‘Kida ache thook ring de maiwal wed a tap a pen jang nin’
It is not the spirit of Maiwal (spirit or devil in Rumbek district.) that finishes (destroys) our property. Taxation prevents the Dinka from sleeping

‘Malwal a aurpwo ring de Makutech ring e nhom riel achaa yok’
The red people, the companion of the mufatish are empty hearted (stingy). I have been found by the obstinate people

‘Kida ache dhweng ring de makitich mith Athan achan jai ya e’

This is no joke (play song) oh company of the mufatish! We have refused the sons of Hassan (Hassan el Rayeh, long established merchant in Yirol) Ya Ya

‘Malwal e rech e kong ache wet a tap a pen jang mith ‘bai kan’

Oh! Malwal e rech e kong (Rumbek devil spirit could also be a play on words: ‘Malwal e raic e kand achi pen jang’ would mean ‘the red people who spoilt everything and have prevented the Dinka from having children’) is it not taxation that prevents Dinka having children? Bring something (govt. always saying bring something).

This text epitomizes the power of song and performance as a form of social action. This song had an overt message of resistance to government taxation policies. It was part of a strategy to drum up popular defiance. There was an extraordinary performative aspect to how this poetic and political message was conveyed. It was to be sung in front of the Governor (Willis) in a language he could not understand. The spectacle could only have been intended for the consumption of the local Dinka speaking population. Composed and sung at the height of Gol’s anti-tax campaign, it would have been an extraordinary moment.

The song also gives rich insights into the way the state was evoked and the imagery that was employed. Taxation is said to stop people from having children. Cattle confiscated or sold to raise money for taxes could not be given in bridewealth, so they were indeed taken out of the circulation of livestock used for marriage and ultimately procreation. This is an image of the abuses of government as a disruption to the social fabric of Dinka life. As the anthropologist Jok Madut Jok notes, the song captures a spirit of resistance not just to taxation, but to colonial authority more widely, which derived its power from outside the Dinka community. (Jok Madut Jok, pers comm. 2020) The image of extortive foreigner powers, embodied in the merchant and the government, who always say ‘bring something’ (*bai ken*) resonates with what both scholars and southern politicians have subsequently argued about successive states in South Sudan – that this institution is characteristically violent and extractive. (Johnson 2011)

Gol's song also tells us much about the use of song by an influential local leader to spread a message and the repertoires for conveying dissent. We know from the note that the song was still being popularly sung at least six months after the original performance. It had been adapted to specific local circumstances – the name of the northern merchant was either 'Hassan' – a long established merchant in Yirol when sung in Yirol, or 'Ali' – a Rumbek merchant when sung in Rumbek.

Perhaps key to its success, the song 'works' as a piece of verbal art as well as a form of protest. It contains all the elements of a would could be considered a classically 'good' song. Imagery and metaphor play their role in making it a compelling and memorable piece. For example, Gol is not simply described as an important man, he is the man who 'holds [or cares for] the top of the house' (*muk adwel nhom*). The Agaar people are said to 'live in a twisted way' (*pan cheng a gulgul*) – a phrase that was interpreted at the time to both invoke the difference between Agaar society and the 'order' imposed by the colonial government and suggests that life has been 'twisted' by government rule. Many of the song's descriptions are rooted in the local landscape the sands (*liet*) of 'Akoon a Bwoi', a name which refers to Agaar Dinka arrival narratives to Rumbek: a girl called Akon Buoi was given to the non-Dinka inhabitants in exchange for the land. Contemporary audiences would have appreciated the poetic intricacy of these words, as well as their subversive message about taxation and colonization.¹⁰ It is testament to the power of the song that a version is still known in parts of South Sudan today. (Deng de Kuek, pers comm. 2020)

Spaces of contestation: Youth, marriage and authority

Gol Mayen's song was exceptional in its delivery, a more common arena for singing (especially for young people) was at dances. There are several songs in Lienhardt's collection marked specifically as being sung at dances and references to dances he attended are scattered throughout his field diaries. These songs were performed twenty years after Gol Mayen's, at a time when the colonial administration was more established.

Dances were places where young people came to have fun, to show off, to socialise and to start relationships that could lead to marriage. Dances were also a site of tension between the administration, chiefs and young people. The government had tried to regulate and ban night time 'dance gatherings' in Gogrial (and in other areas) because of concerns they were linked to insecurity in the districts – arguments did happen at dances and these sometimes led to violence. The government tried to enlist the help of chiefs to regulate dances – with limited success.¹¹

To understand why dances were contested in this period, they need to be linked to how the political and economic innovations of the colonial administration were altering the terms on which relationships between young and old played out. This was happening in ways that both challenged and built on existing ideas about age and power. (Waller 2006, 78) Older men and chiefs had recourse to new forms of authority and control (which rested in the hand of government officials and in towns) which young people did not. This resulted in social struggles that again coalesced on concerns about marriage. For example, young men complained to Lienhardt that the government had made it more difficult for them to marry, because the reach of chiefly (gerontocratic) authority had been extended. Previously, some young men in the village of Wan Alel near the town of Tonj complained, they could have run off with a girl, and maybe after some fighting, their families would have accepted the union.

Now, this was not the case as the chiefs, backed by the forces of the government, would intervene.¹² At the same time, other of Lienhardt's informants in Gogrial town in 1950 felt that cases of elopement had increased (and 'proper' marriage was under threat) because elopement was now being punished with imprisonment – which was not sufficient disincentive.¹³ There were different ways of interpreting change – or at least, different ways of framing change to an anthropologist.

In this context, dances became one site of struggle, as government authorities tried to restrict young people – who in turn pushed back. At dances, in song and performance, young people found opportunities to reflect on their changing circumstances through song., Lienhardt's archive provides an exciting opportunity to 'hear' their concerns. Take a song that was sung at a dance in Malual Dinka country (Aweil) by a young man from Tuic Mayardit in 1949.¹⁴ Lienhardt prefaces it with the explanation that 'he is insulting a chief.' The words in parenthesis are Lienhardt's own explanations of the text.

Ding, son of Akol, food does you no food (you eat but don't get fat)
Pepper with salt of the English is not tasty
In the past, your mother wanted to marry men
Luol Dut made her pregnant,
and then Dau Jok made her pregnant
Mayom (the bull name of Ding) you own mother is a whore
Is a whore
I will blame you?
I will blame you?
I will blame you, you yourself?
Will I not blame the red sashes
The man who gave you the 'alama'
For you to talk
You stand up like Awein your mother (no respect) who wants many men, ten
Angeth (Awien's sister) hated this
Angeth (Awien's sister) hated this
And Lual Atak liked it
Your useless mother
When your mother died at Malek
And you didn't go
[writing illegible]
Awein ee Awein, you died badly (without any one to care for you)
And you Ding just went off to get beer somewhere.

Fat belly
When he had had enough beer, and his mother was [illegible] and he did not ask (whether his mother was dead or not)
Young servant, when people laugh at Ding
Young servant, when people laugh at Ding
He has stolen my cows with a rifle
And if it was the past, better that I had broken his spear at the neck

This is a very insulting song, it is derogatory towards Ding Akol's mother – accusing her of being a 'whore' and by association accusing Ding of having 'no respect'. Parts of the song alludes to how Ding Akol had been empowered (illegitimately) by the position of chieftainship and the power embodied in the gun. The 'red sash' or '*alama*' was the mark of government chiefship, as chiefs would be given this sash to wear. The implication here is that this man should not have been given this office and he only maintained through the external association of the government. The singer makes it clear that he attributes the real fault to 'the man who gave [Ding] the '*alama*' i.e. the government, who wrongly empowered Ding by making him a chief.

The last lines, 'He has stolen my cows with a rifle/And if it was the past, better that I had broken his spear at the neck' comment on the new (and indivisible) power of the government and the gun. We could read this last line as a comment that recourse to the moral order of the past was no longer possible. Lienhardt records several symbolic meanings attached to breaking a spear. An angry *bany e bith* might break the shaft of fish fishing spear in front of his people, to represent the destruction of the spiritual power that had sustained them. (Lienhardt 1961, 255) Also, in a peace making ceremony, breaking a spear could be a sign of the breaking of a feud and the ending of hostility. (Lienhardt 1961, 288) In both cases it implied a closure or a resolution that Ding is suggesting could not now take place.

The theme of chiefs, the government and the town is dealt with in other songs in Lienhardt's collection. This song was sung by a young man called Deng Ayou from the Aguok Dinka, likely to have been heard by Lienhardt in Gogrial town.¹⁵ Deng starts the song with a line about how he has hidden his bull so it cannot be taken by the government. Then, following an explicit account of a sexual encounter (not included in this extract), in which he is caught in a compromising position with a young woman by the side of the road, Deng sings that he fears being unfairly punished by a chief for his transgression. It is the chief who 'watches' and 'counts' him - suggestive of tax collection and administration.

A chief called Deng, he counts me, it is a chief called Deng who watches.
 Deng has shown me his eyes (said if) you run away there will be trouble
 Deng without buttocks, Deng looks at me
 He has eaten the flesh of goats and not got fat
 He has eaten sweet potatoes and is not fat
 (Deng's age mates) call out "this is witchcraft".

As much as the songs in Lienhardt's collection express the tensions of government, there are also references to its marvellous powers. Lienhardt writes in *Divinity and Experience* that he often heard people say 'the Government is Divinity' – not as a mark of affection, but in recognition that the government held power that they did not. (Lienhardt 1961, 157 fn) Although violent and external, this power was exciting and possibly valuable. As this song suggests, a man might want to marry (and align himself) with 'the daughter of the Governor' who travels in an aeroplane, rather than 'a girl of the boat'.

(Does) he want to marry a girl of the boat, of the daughter of the Governor?
 Or the daughter of the Governor General in Khartoum?
 In an aeroplane, the aeroplane which purrs, the aeroplane which purrs,
 Does he want to go to Khartoum in the aeroplane, the aeroplane which purrs?
 That the sun (covers his eyes),
 Cover the eyes, that the sun is near to the eyes: with its great flying wings.
 And the people of Meshra ran out and clap their hands (they are happy to see an aeroplane),
 And the people of Rumbek ran out and clap their hands.
 Thanks be to God who made the earth.

Conclusion

The songs under discussion are both verbal arts *and* part of the process through which Godfrey Lienhardt constructed anthropological knowledge about the Dinka. For this reason, they cannot be completely separated from their archival context. I have tried to re-examine them by triangulating between Godfrey Lienhardt's archive and the wider historical and ethnographic record. This shows that these songs both reflect and interpret contemporary concerns and ideas about personhood and subjectivity. This worked in different ways. Gol Mayen's song is an example of how a local art form could be effectively conscripted into a project of resistance towards state policies of taxation, while at the same time revealing anxieties over the threats colonial administration posed to social reproduction and marriage. Other songs show how young people were using verbal arts to criticise new forms of power and control during colonial rule. Their concerns focus on marriage and dynamic relationships between young and old precisely because these institutions were being strained by the colonial administration.

What is striking, for anyone who has read *Divinity and Experience*, is that these songs, which so deeply shaped Lienhardt's understanding of Dinka society are largely absent from his ethnographic analysis. There are several reasons for this. This silence reflects the theoretical concerns of anthropology at the time. It is also a product of his focus on religious experience and his apparent view that this was separate from the impacts of colonial administration in the lives of Dinka people (even though the footnotes of *Divinity and Experience* often hint at interconnections). In an article, published late in his life, about the impact of the government in southern Sudan, Lienhardt reflected on the absence of colonialism in his own analysis and other ethnography, noting: 'traditional forms of political control were so strong, just below the

surface, that social anthropologists have been able to write a great deal about these peoples without dwelling at length on their colonial rulers.’ (Lienhardt 1982, 34). Revisiting his archive is an opportunity to look again at the material that informed his work. Lienhardt’s song collection (and other later scholarship) would suggest that while ‘traditional forms of political control’ remained important, they were strained and transformed by the colonial state. (Leonardi 2013; Hutchinson 1996) His archive provides a rare chance to understand subtle, artistic responses to colonialism in rural southern Sudan. This is ultimately made possible by Lienhardt’s own appreciation of and sensitivity to literature and the arts.

A final reflection; the special features and form of Dinka songs are at once a great opportunity and great challenge for researchers. This is a verbal art form that is intentionally constructed to be elusive. Dinka songs are not unique in this regard, and there are comparisons to be drawn. Evans-Pritchard described a similar phenomenon in the Zande concept of *sanza*, in which meaning is both revealed and concealed through ‘double-speak’ and play with oblique and ambiguous words. (Evans-Pritchard 1956) Nuer people, who have a comparable song culture, may sometimes state that ‘singing is lying’. Songs can be equated with lies because people do not assess the truth value of songs in the same way as they do for ordinary speech. Songs work on a different, more flexible register. (Sharon Hutchinson, pers comm, 2016 and 2020). As this implies, we can gain insights from songs, but we don’t know if our insights are ‘correct’. There is a certain irony that in songs we get to ‘truth’ through ‘lies’.

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¹ For a full catalogue see <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/manuscripts/lienhardtpapers.html> The photographs are available online at <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/southernsudan/search/photographer/lienhardt/index.html>.

² After meeting Lienhardt, T. R. H. Owen, the Governor of Bahr-el-Ghazal, wrote that although he liked Lienhardt personally, he wasn't convinced of the 'practical use' of anthropology to the administration. Sudan Archive Durham (SAD) 647/1/1-2. Letters dated July 1948 - December 1949.

³ For example, a version of the story of Tuic migration told to Lienhardt by Benjamin Lang Juk (an important chief from Tuic in Warrap State) can be found in his archive. Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM) Godfrey Lienhardt Papers Box 4, file 1 'Notes in order 2'. It is discussed in *Divinity and Experience* at page 185.

⁴ Dinka Songs from South Sudan collection <http://sounds.bl.uk/World-and-traditional-music/Dinka-songs-from-South-Sudan> (last accessed 14/08/2020).

⁵ Peter and Godfrey Lienhardt, Paul Baxter and Malcome Ruel were all taught Leavis. Evans-Pritchard is reported to have said 'who is this man, Leavis? Who people seem to bounce like tennis balls against a wall into social anthropology?' (Interview of Malcome Ruel, Clare College Alumni, uploaded Wednesday, April 28, 2010 <https://vimeo.com/11291094>) (Last accessed 14/08/2020).

⁶ PRM Godfrey Lienhardt Papers, Box 2, file 1 'Fieldnotes and diary beginning 1947' entry on 8/9 December 1947'.

⁷ PRM Godfrey Lienhardt Papers, Box 2, file 1 'Fieldnotes and diary beginning 1947' entry on 16 December 1947'.

⁸ The children's texts are in PRM Godfrey Lienhardt Papers, Box 3 files 10 and 13. The court case is in PRM Godfrey Lienhardt Papers, Box 9, file 10.

⁹ PRM Godfrey Lienhardt Papers, Box 1, file 9.

¹⁰ In September 2020, I shared the text of this song with several Dinka speakers, who recognised the quality of the song and confirmed that even almost 100 years after its composition, the imagery, word plays and hidden messages are still recognisable and enjoyable. It still 'reads' as a very good and entertaining song. Personal communication with Mawan Muortat, Jok Madut Jok and Deng de Kuek (by electronic mail, 25-29 Sept 2020).

¹¹ In Jur River District (of which Gogrial was part) dances were discussed and spears banned at the Annual Chief meetings in 1944 and 1945. SAD 767/9/56-87.

¹² PRM Godfrey Lienhardt Papers, Box 3, file 14. Field diary entry on 13 July 1950.

¹³ PRM Godfrey Lienhardt Papers, Box 3, file 14. Field diary entry on 15 July 1950.

¹⁴ PRM Godfrey Lienhardt Papers, Box 4, file 8 'Dinka Songs'. Lienhardt does not date the song, but it is transcribed alongside another song dated 1949 and seems to be from the same field trip.

¹⁵ PRM Godfrey Lienhardt Papers, Box 4, file 8 'Dinka Songs'. Song numbered '13'.