Reading Emmanuel Jal's *War Child* as spiritual autobiography

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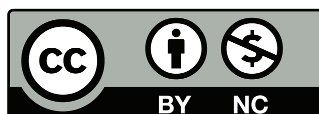
ABSTRACT

Emmanuel Jal's *War Child: A Boy Soldier's Story* picks up on the tail end of the politicisation of Sudan's North/South ideological divisions. Its historical setting is the Second Sudanese Civil War, during which the southern part of Sudan fights to secede from the Khartoum-led government. In this paper, I focus my reading not on the reasons for the outbreak of the war, but on the ways in which Jal's narrative is retrospectively predicated on the *conversio* narrative trope. I anchor my argument on what I term the text's imagination of the transformation of all Sudanese people from a faulty 'before' self to an enlightened 'after' self, following Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. I am particularly interested in how Jal inflects religion and spirituality in the text and how his own self-identity lends itself to what I term the text's conversion narrative leitmotif. I also aim to show the sense in which Jal uses his change from the indoctrinated 'bad' child to someone who turns to God and uses religious hip hop music as a mode of preaching the message of love, peace and unity to his compatriots.

Keywords: Emmanuel Jal, *War Child*, Second Sudanese Civil War, *conversio* narrative trope religious indoctrination, spirituality



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BIODATA

Nick Mdika Tembo is a Senior Lecturer in and Deputy Chair of the English Department at the University of Malawi. He holds a PhD in English Studies from Stellenbosch University, South Africa. He also held a postdoctoral position in the Department of Literary Studies in English at Rhodes University, South Africa. His research and teaching interests include African life writing, trauma and cultural studies, traumics, African popular culture and literatures, African genocides and conflicts, African migration literatures, Malawian literature, Eastern African diasporic fiction, South African auto/biographies, and the interface between literature and history, psychology, the environment, and the medical humanities. He has variously published journal articles and book chapters in these areas. He is currently working on a book project on traumics in selected Malawian, Zimbabwean, Kenyan and South African cartoon strips. Outside of his academic life, Tembo consults on human rights for women, children and on girls' education.

Introduction

War Child recounts Jal Jok's experiences of the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005) between the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) and their Christian and animist followers on the one hand and the Arabs[1] on the other, in which Jal took part as a child soldier. In the autobiography, Jal is sent away to Pinyudu refugee camp in Ethiopia, at age seven, as part of the rebel SPLA's well-coordinated operation called "warehousing" children for war.[2] It is here that Jal gets indoctrinated about the might of the SPLA whose command base is only a few miles away from the refugee camp. Jal and the other child soldiers spend their time between hustling for food and attending occasional SPLA organized meetings and military trainings in nearby Bonga where he is further taught to believe that the Arabs are bad people. Jal recounts that each time he attended these meetings, he felt anger and hatred rising in his chest (*WC*, p. 69), and that he began looking forward to a day of reckoning when he was going to pay back the African Arabs (*WC*, p. 89) for what they had done to his people (by which he means those from the southern part of Sudan). At the end of the narrative, after he is 'rescued' from the war and gets resettled in Kenya by Emma McCune, Jal undergoes a radical self-evaluation and transformation in that he learns to forgive himself, to regain his humanity and, finally, embrace religion and hip hop music as tools for healing his soul and uniting his war-ravaged homeland.

In this paper, I focus my reading not on the reasons behind the outbreak of Sudan's interstate conflict, but on the ways in which *War Child* is retrospectively predicated on the *conversio* narrative trope. As a concept, *conversio* comes from Latin and it means "a reversal, a turning back, a change of direction" (Warzecha 2015: 104). It stems from two Greek words, each of which has a different meaning: *epistrophê*, which means taking a new direction (or returning to the origin) and *metanoia*, which means "a change in spirit or mind, and is often translated into English as 'repentance' or 'penitence'" (Murray 2009: 7). In short, *epistrophê* implies a new lifestyle whereas *metanoia* implies a new mindset. Associated with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century religious practices, *conversio* had as its basis converts giving testimonies about their spiritual rebirth or intensification of religious experiences. According to autobiography theorists Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "the conversion narrative develops through a linear pattern—descent into darkness, struggle, moment of crisis, conversion to new beliefs and worldview, and consolidation of a new communal identity" (2001: 70). Conversion as understood here does not entail change from one religion to another. Rather I use it loosely in the context of what Kathleen Lynch calls

[1] In *From Bush to Bush: Journey to Liberty in South Sudan*, Steven Wöndu clarifies that in Sudan the term Arabs "has nothing to do with the real Arabs of the Middle East." Instead, it stands for "the people of Northern Sudan" who speak Arabic as their first language. Wöndu further explains that only "a few of [these people] are genealogical Arabs but the majority are African Muslims who prefer to consider themselves Arabs." In South Sudan these "Arabs" are also referred to "as *Jalaba* [also spelt as *Jallaba*] or *Mundukuru*" (Wöndu 2011: xii). Likewise, the term Africans or Blacks is often used to indicate people from sedentary, mainly agricultural groups, such as the Fur, the Masalit and to some extent the Zaghawa. The distinction between Arabs and Africans is not always clear cut in Sudan.

[2] In *Children at War* Peter Singer alleges that the SPLA had begun a practice of 'warehousing' young recruits in the mid-1980s. It used to encourage and organise young boys to flee to refugee camps located beside its bases on the Ethiopian border. At the boys-only camps, those past the age of 12 would be given full-time military courses, while those younger were trained during school breaks. These boys became the basis of what was known as the Red Army, and were even subcontracted out to the Ethiopian army while it was still allied with the SPLA. Many of these boys later became the core of the famous Lost Boys of Sudan (Singer 2001: 24-25).

"a reformist agenda" or "spiritually motivated acts of self-examination and representation" (2012: 15), at the end of which one progresses toward new ways "of life, systems of belief, and modes of relating to a deity or the nature of reality" (Rambo 1993: 3).

More recent scholarship has built on this understanding of *conversio* to explore the spiritual and ideological reversal of the principal narrator's former convictions, often revealed through their ability to lead a changed life. For example, John Freccero explains the formal uses of the conversion trope in works of fiction, noting that it is tautological, with its "central syntactic moment" ensuring the evolving identity not only of the narrator and protagonist but of form and content as well. In his view,

> Conversion is both the subject matter of [the] work and the precondition for its existence. Form and content are therefore in some sense analogous, inasmuch as conversion not only is a traditional religious experience, but also has its counterpart in language, where it may be defined as that central syntactic moment in which the ending marks the beginning and the circular identity of the author coincides with the linear evolution of his persona. (1982: 64)

Jal's text displays similarities with both this "traditional religious experience" that Freccero talks about here and the form and structural aspects of what is known as a spiritual autobiography. I illustrate this point in detail below. My point for now is to show that on the level of form, Jal portrays himself as evolving from the indoctrinated, 'bad' child who used to participate in the killings, looting and napalm during the Civil War to a young man who turns to God and hip hop religious music in the final chapters of his autobiography.

Several ideas discussed in this paper can be traced to the works of spiritual autobiographers. John-Raphael Staude provides a good history of the modern form of a spiritual autobiography, writing that although its foundations were established by Saint Paul in the New Testament, undoubtedly the most significant figure in the evolution of spiritual autobiography was Saint Augustine, whose *Confessions* has influenced most writers of spiritual autobiographies today. (2005: 257). In *Confessions*, Augustine traces his "mental pilgrimage from sin through conversion and repentance to beatitude" (Staude 2005: 257). He then asserts that a writer will be said to have created a spiritual autobiography "when the lifelong search for an ultimate reality that gives meaning to one's life in the face of evil, suffering, and death becomes the theme of [his/her] book" (2009: xi). True to this definition, Jal questions the inexplicable nature of God and his (compatriots') experience of unmerited suffering at the hands of the African Arabs. He later frames himself as a transformed person listening to the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr, Mahātmā Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela and the religious teachings of his Mrs Mumo in the text's last four chapters, the Epilogue and the Afterword. By drawing attention to these spiritual practices in the text, I thus show that Jal is specifically working within the medium of the conversion narrative genre through which we see him turning to God and music[3] to preach about love, peace and unity as the only modes that could unite his divided homeland.

By specifically focusing on the religious paradigm in the text, I do not at all mean to blur issues of racism and/or ethnicity that equally colour the discourse of nationalism in Sudan. I am also not blind to Jal's own retrospective assertions that the war in Sudan is not purely tribal or religious; or that what is at the heart of the civil war in Sudan is "money—in par-

[3] Jal is a full-time musician. One of the songs that catapulted Jal to fame is "Gua", which means 'peace' in Nuer, his native language. It was released in 2005

ticular the oil that lay hidden beneath the lands of the south and from which the northern government wanted to profit" (*WC*, p. 6). However, I do wish to signal that Jal uses religion as a narrative trope to show how it fans the flames of the extant racial/ethnic hatred. I am interested in how key protagonists in Sudan's conflicts use religion as a key component of national identification. I am also interested in Jal's journey from a religious childhood to his fall from spiritual grace and then back to his regeneration.

The central question I aim to address in this paper then, is: What place do contours of the conversion narrative have in the discourse of religion's various roles in the conflicts in Sudan? Although I focus heavily on Jal's inner reflections in relation to God, I ask the same question of Sudan's use of religious aspects in the project of nation building: What does religion do to ordinary Sudanese people in its legitimation of hatred and violence? What connections can we draw between Jal's confessions and his double take on his compatriots' abuse of religion to push through their personal predilections in Sudan? Most importantly, how does he appropriate the same aspects of religion to preach the message of love, peace and unity to his compatriots? In pursuing some of these questions, this paper attempts to provide a new perspective on the place of what I term spiritually inflected child soldier autobiographies in resolving civil conflicts.

Critics have written about children participating in war, longing for and seeking forgiveness from God and society at large (see Boyden 2003: 356; Goins 2008: 297-298). Some have alluded to the presence of the divine in child soldier narratives, without clearly indicating that the texts are spiritually inflected. For the purposes of this paper, I use *spiritually inflected child soldier autobiography* as a provisional term to refer to texts whose child soldier focalizer seeks peace with God in the midst of civil strife, and whose central concern is to exhort others to recognize God's power and beneficence. The notion of spiritually inflected child soldier autobiography is congruent with that of conversion explicated above, in that both employ one's turning of the soul from a faulty *before* self to an enlightened *after* self.

Two more terms need explication before I give a discussion on the religious and ethnic dynamics that suffuse the narrative texture of *War Child*. They are *religion* and *spirituality*. Religion is generally thought of as the expression of man's belief in and deification of a superhuman power recognized as the creator and governor of the universe. William James defined religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (2002: 29-30). The operative words in this construction of religion are *deification*—which is synonymous with worship or transcendence—and *creator* or *divine*—which is synonymous with God. Usually, religion is part of an established culture or institution that informs one's perceptions of the sacred. Spirituality, on the other hand, involves a behaviour that is aimed at connecting with a higher being or power. According to David Rosmarin, this behaviour "is subjective and is based on unique personal experiences" (2018: 12). What this means is that spirituality is not just limited to concepts of God, but also "to diverse aspects of life that are perceived to be mystical" (Rosmarin 2018: 12). In the context of this paper, I use religion in the literal sense to refer to the people of Sudan whose behaviour conform to socially bound ways of relating to either Christianity or Islam. I use spirituality to refer to Jal's personal search for meaning, belonging and a sense of connectedness with something sacred, which nudges him to use gospel hip hop music to heal himself and unite his fractured community. In the

next section, I briefly explore what I term the burden of nationhood in Sudan in order to illustrate how ethnicity and religious ideologies are conflated with the nationalist discourse to further fan the flames of civil strife in Sudan.

Historicizing the Burden of Sudan's Nationhood

In *The Sudan: Ethnicity and National Cohesion*, Mohamed Omer Beshir explains that in pre-independence Sudan, ethnicity and national cohesion in the country's previous civil boundaries as well as its political, religious and ethnic divisions were highly centralized. He notes that a precursor to the current civil conflicts in Sudan lies in the 1820s during the first Turko/Egyptian colonial regime (1821-1885) when a militarized system of governance was instituted. The second colonial administration by the Anglo-Egyptian condominium (1899-1956) reinforced the previous colonial structure from Khartoum, from where the General Government of Sudan (GGOS) was based. In *A History of Modern Sudan*, Robert Collins provides a similar explication, adding that the first steps towards the politicization of Sudan's North/South[4] ideological divisions occurred when the colonial regime administered the North and the South as separate entities. The North was regarded as the mainstay of Islam while Christianity was encouraged in the South. This strategy was partly employed because the colonial regime perceived the South to be similar to the Eastern African colonies in many aspects, whilst the North was similar to the Middle East. It was also employed to counter the spread of Islam with the aim of avoiding the return of Mahdi.[5]

Following on from this, the integration of North and South as a single administrative region was not going to be simple. When Britain finally granted Sudan independence in 1956, for example, the North was allowed exclusive governmental control whilst the South was granted semi-autonomous rule. A temporary constitution was put in place, because the two Sudans could not agree on whether Sudan should be a federal or unitary state, or whether it should have a secular or an Islamic constitution. While Southern politicians favored federalism as a way of protecting the southern provinces from being completely subordinated to the Northern-dominated central government, most northerners rejected the idea of federalism, seeing it as a first step towards separation between the North and the South. These disagreements solidified into a clear demarcation of regional and racial-cum-ethnic differences and they led to the First Sudanese Civil War (1955-1972). Three years into the civil conflict, in 1958, southern politicians left parliament in protest over the decision by their northern counterparts to adopt a national constitution which would define Sudan as exclusively Arab and Islamic in character. Here, we notice a disinclination by the southern politicians to pander to the notion of religious nationalism, which, according to Peter van der Veer, "equates the religious community with the nation and thus builds on a previously constructed religious identity" (1994: 80).

These historical events ushered in anarchy, political disorder and fundamentalism, which were then used by both sides of the warring factions to claim legitimacy over the state of Sudan, and which, in turn, have led to more

[4] My understanding and use of the terms "North/erners" and "Khartoum-led government" in this paper is with reference to Sudan (also known as North Sudan or the Republic of Sudan). The terms "South" or "Southern/ers" is in reference to South Sudan, which claimed independence from greater Sudan in 2011.

[5] Muhammad Ahmed al-Mahdi was a Sufi sheikh of the Samaniyya order in Sudan who proclaimed himself as the messianic redeemer of the Islamic faith on 29 June 1881. He led an independence movement to free Sudan from the Turko/Egyptian rule, and later became a national hero to the Muslim Arabs in the North (Blake 1993: 207).

than two million deaths and over four million people being displaced over the years. Robert Collins provides a useful summary of the reasons behind these intra-state conflicts. In his view, they hinge on the (racial/ethnic) politics of national inclusion and exclusion. In the history of Sudan, the term 'Sudani' had a pejorative connotation in that it carries "a label of national identity defined as Arab and Islamic that made it narrow and exclusive and holding little or no appeal to […] non-Muslim, non-Arab Africans" (Collins 2008: 9). I find these observations very persuasive, as they confirm the slave-master dichotomy that still exists in Sudan's oral discourse today.

A significant feature in *War Child* is that it mimics these religious and racial/ethnic tensions in its complicated treatment of the vicious transference of blame and resentment, which seems to be a continuation of the historical feuds that have existed "between the north and the south since biblical times, when the territory was known as Cush" (Peterson 2001: 176-177). It is corrosive hatred arising from this troubled past that sustains the narrative texture of *War Child*, and which drives Jal and his fellow combatants to take their revenge on the Arabs. This attitude only changes later when he is able to see that the Civil War in Sudan is not entirely a battle of religions as he had been told to believe, at least not when he is able to tell that "where Muslim and Christian had once fought each other, the [Khartoum-led] government was now killing its own—black Muslims who'd fought and died for it in the war against the South" (*WC*, p. 242). Jal's new insight thus becomes the central idiom of a reformed character-cum-activist we see in the narrative's Afterword. This new character allows him to admit that he no longer hates Arabs because his understanding has broadened (*WC*, p. 266). Unlike in the beginning where he admits to participating in killings and napalm because he "was young and blinded by rage," he is now older and wise, and knows that "not every Muslim is bad, just as not every Christian is good, just as the colour of people's skins does not drive them to evil" (*WC* p. 266-67). He is also able to see the issue of an Arab Muslim north battling an African Christian south as anachronistic: the war in Sudan, he realises, is "fought largely over oil" (*WC*, p. 265) and not because of religious and ethnic differences as whipped up by the leadership on both sides of the warring parties. Such observations coming from Jal recast the North and South, Muslim against Christian, 'Arab' against 'African' debate.

Two clusters of ideas then, provide a means by which to understand *War Child*. These are hatred and religion, which seem to implicate each other in their collusion to divide a nation that is already polarized along ethnic/racial and geographical lines. Underpinning this ethnoreligious nationalism are individual and collective perceptions of nationhood and belonging: the African Arabs are antagonistic towards Christians and animists from the southern part of Sudan because they do not belong to Sudan. Likewise, Christian and animist communities hate their northern counterparts because, according to Jal's father, they want to change the people of Southern Sudan, their way of life, and make them like their northern counterparts (*WC*, p. 21). These notions, that Sudan is divided by God (as Scott Peterson would have us know), are deeply etched into *War Child*, and are inseparably intertwined with the competing and at times contradictory rhetoric of belonging either to the Christian/animist South or the predominantly Arab Muslim North.

In the narrative context of *War Child*, religion is the site of contestation in Sudan, where the Khartoum-led government appears to say that "the SPLA and their Christian followers" cannot equally benefit from the country's resources since, Jal relates, they are merely "slaves beneath [the Arabs] just as they are meant to be" (*WC*, p. 4), while the

SPLA insist on fighting back to reclaim their land from the "merciless Arabs," blamed in the text "for every drop of blood spilled, for every child left lying in the dust, for every boy stolen as a slave, for every girl taken" (*WC*, p. 75). As a rhetorical device for justifying violence, religion thus aids and abets racial/ethnic hatred in Sudan. These incidents appear incrementally in the text, such that Jal begins to think that the Arabs are his number one enemy and they should therefore pay the price for putting him and his people in a perpetual condition of slavery and servitude. I thus argue, qua Scott Peterson, that what is being staged in *War Child* is "a modern extension of the Crusades [where] religious aspects have turned into red lines, even a *casus belli*" (2001: 174). Indeed, Jal's text overstates religion as a basis for waging war to what may be considered unprecedented extents, resulting in thematic and tropic saturation that makes it read at times like a historical account of the age-old "religious battlefield [that] mirrored the victories and defeats of Christianity and Islam in Europe and the Middle East" (Peterson 2001: 177).

Read against the earlier mentioned tensions between the North and the South, fundamentalism provides a useful metaphor for conceptualizing the religious and ideological differences between the two Sudans. Thus, when Jal finally decides to let go of his anger and turns to music as a mode for uniting the country, he challenges his compatriots to reconcile their loyalties for the goodness of the greater Sudan. In the next section, I explore how the conversion narrative trope is further inflected in *War Child*.

Exploring the Conversion Narrative Trope in *War Child*

I locate my discussion in the framework of religion; in particular, I draw on ideas from R. Scott Appleby and Martin Marty, which deal with fundamentalism, ethnoreligious nationalism, and the use of religion to either build or destroy groups. Religion, Appleby posits, is often regarded as a double-edged sword, "having so often inspired, legitimated and exacerbated deadly conflicts" on the one hand while acting as a key player in peacebuilding on the other (2000: 7). On his part, Marty suggests that religion consoles, heals and integrates people into systems of meaning and belonging (1997: 2). Yet, "the same elements that made religion a consoler and healer could be turned into weaponry of disruption and killing" with ease (Marty 1997: 3). I am interested in how the SPLA poisons the protagonist-narrator's mind against the Arabs in *War Child*, to the extent that he, too, begins to (wrongly) see Islam as a religion that promotes violence against his people. Nonetheless, I also argue that Jal is not content with his own religious teachings either; he questions the presence of the divine when the Christian and animist communities of southern Sudan suffer at the hands of the African Arabs. What we have in the end is a person who fails to identify with either religion. This is what leads him to temporarily harden his heart toward matters of faith.

Before discussing how conversion works as a narrative technique in Jal's text, it will be useful to summarize how Jok acquired Emmanuel as his *nom de plume*. According to Jal-the-narrator, the new name was amongst the three that were given to him while at Pinyudu refugee camp, the other two being John and Michael (*WC* p. 67). Jok preferred the name 'Emmanuel' to the other two "because someone had told [him] it meant 'God is with us,' and also because [his savior from the war front] was Emma [McCune]" (*WC* p. 184). This explanation for his final choice of name forebodes the resilient and longsuffering personality we encounter in the closing sections of *War Child*; someone who puts every bad experience and act behind him to praise God

through song and music because, true to his name, God had not forsaken him.

In his article titled "Autobiography as Spiritual Practice," Staude explains the phenomenon of a spiritual autobiography as "a self-narrative considered as personal history in relation to its spiritual foundations" (2005: 256). This "self-narrative" follows a particular plot structure which, according to Staude, has four parts: "a description of the individual's life before spiritual awakening; an account of the events leading up to the individual's encounter with God; a description of the actual encounter with God and the impact of this event on the narrator; and a celebration of the new life following this event" (2005: 258). Jal's work displays some curious resonances with Augustine's conception, though it also deviates from Augustine's treatise in certain respects in that *War Child* does not necessarily involve dying to life so that one may live in God, to borrow Robert Bell's expression (1977: 108). Nonetheless, it is fitting to explain the essential spiritual/religious templates in Jal's childhood and their influence on him later in life. Jal places his narrative in the context of a spiritual discipline he used to receive from his mother: "she was a Christian and taught me right from wrong from the moment I was old enough to understand," he recalls (*WC*, p. 7). Angelina, his mother, is portrayed as a devout Christian who mostly looked unhappy except on Sundays when "she was truly content […] because she went to church" (*WC*, p. 8). Here, religion is portrayed as having a calming effect on Angelina. As Jal also reminisces, it was on Sundays when Angelina's face would mostly brighten up as she sang hymns in the church choir: "Her face would light up as the music filled her, and I knew that for just a moment she had forgotten whatever made her sad" (*WC*, p. 8). Descriptions of his mother's religious convictions key into his earliest memories of his encounter with the Christian God, for he always accompanied her to church as a child: "Each week [Angelina] would wake early and make us [children] porridge […] before putting on our 'Sunday best.' Then we'd leave Baba sleeping and go to Mama's Protestant church," he says (*WC*, p. 8).

To understand the impact of this spiritual background, it is important to bear in mind that Jal begins to believe that what makes his mother happy also makes him happy. Thus, religion and music are the defining moments that shape his own spiritual life. Importantly too, what makes his mother sad also makes him sad. We learn that the source of his mother's sadness is the ongoing civil war and the ill-treatment Christians receive at the hands of "the Muslim government in Khartoum" (*WC*, p. 12) which, according to the narrator, does not like non-Muslims. When his mother's singing is later 'silenced' by the Arabs who only permit "the Muslim call to prayers" (*WC*, p. 9) as the only song to be sung, for example, Jal feels angry with them. Soon, this anger turns to hatred especially when the Arabs start beating up Christians. His own family's encounter with the Arabs only enrages him further and colours his perception of the African Arabs and their faith. He recalls:

> Looking back, I can see that the seed of hate was sown inside me that day [when the Arabs attacked my family]. Until then I hadn't understood what was happening around me – why the people called Arabs seemed to hate people like my family, why they were richer than us, why police beat men and women on the street, or why Mama was so silent and sad so much of the time. But the day an Arab raised his hand on my mother was the day that set me on a path to hatred. (*WC*, p. 6)

A paradigm on a state of mind being espoused here is one referred to as the psychology of hate. Hatred, psychologists argue, is an atti-

tude that is often grounded in some sense of perceived threat. It tends to overwhelm us and obscure everything else we might feel. What is more, it makes us want to take action, to hurt or destroy whatever inspires the hatred. This is consistent with research findings into the phenomenon of hate by scholars such as Frank Ninivaggi and Liu Xiaobo, among others. These thinkers recognize that hatred is an ego state that wishes to destroy the source of its unhappiness. Hatred is due to a deep-seated emotional dislike for someone or something and it is often associated with feelings of anger and a disposition to hostility (Ninivaggi 2010: 195). The point here is that hatred is synonymous with destruction of both the hater and the hated. Perhaps this is what leads Xiaobo to say that hatred is corrosive of a person's wisdom and conscience (2010: 4). Hatred destroys a human being and, if left unchecked, "the mentality of enmity can poison a nation's spirit, instigate brutal life and death struggles, destroy a society's tolerance and humanity, and block a nation's progress to real freedom and democracy" (Xiaobo 2010: 4-5). Of the various explanations concerning how hatred replays itself in human affairs, the ones that are pertinent to this paper are that it can lead to assigning of blame, harboring hostile feelings, disgust and revulsion, and a burning desire to destroy the other. Since hatred is a form of animosity, frustration and hostility, it gives rise to the psychological descent into violence. Hatred, understood thus, is traumatizing physically, emotionally and morally, and is an emotion that masks personal insecurities in human affairs. Jal's combination of religion and hatred as thematic strands for his narrative, at least in the first half of the autobiography, works to recreate the experience of a country divided by irredentism so that readers can better understand the damaging psychological and psychosocial effects this has on its people.

The question of hatred as haunting Jal and his compatriots remains unresolved in *War Child*. Indeed, if the fight between the North and the South is about ethnoreligious nationalism, how do we account for the in-fighting among the Christian and animists themselves within southern Sudan, who are largely non-Muslims? In the narrative context of the memoir, what else had set Jal "on a path to hatred" (*WC*, p. 6) besides witnessing his family being attacked by African Arabs? Why is he still consumed with hatred, which drives him to again and again clamor for revenge? What had he seen and what effect did it have on his soul? As a small boy, Jal had watched his aunt, Sarah, being raped by an Arab soldier. He had also seen his people and close family members being killed by the Arabs despite his mother telling him night after night that God was going to protect them. This is exemplified in the text where he tells of an incident in which the police had "opened fire and killed the bride and groom" (*WC*, p. 10) at a Christian church in northern Sudan. He further recounts how he and his fellow children had been forced to trek thousands of kilometers to the Ethiopian border, passing through the desert and surviving a drowning in the Nile River. In certain senses, these bad experiences frame the discussion taking shape in this paper, about the power of both Islam and Christianity in fanning the flames of hatred in the text and the ensuant conflict in Sudan.

In *Recovery from Trauma, Addiction, or Both*, Lisa Najavits observes that trauma "can evoke dark feelings such as rage, hatred, bitterness, desire for revenge, and sadism" (2017: 86). These feelings, according to Najavits, arise from "a dark physical place" that the victim may have suffered in the past (2017: 187). Jal's actions in the latter parts of his autobiography seem to fit into Najavits's schema, for he acknowledges to living with hatred for so long that it was part of him, bleached into his bones and scarred on to his heart (*WC*, p. 220). He also admits that, as child soldiers,

"the need for revenge had been seared on to [their] hearts as [they] watched [their] villages burn and then beaten and starved into [their] bones at Pinyudu and training camp" (*WC*, p. 131). In essence then, this paper explores the role of the religious actors in impressing upon Jal and his fellow child soldiers' feelings of rage, hatred, bitterness, desire for revenge and sadism; feelings that I see as simultaneously bumping Jal off his faith.

One important aspect in Jal's embodiment of feelings of rage, hatred, bitterness and desire for revenge is that he is socially and spiritually disconnected from the bonds of family, friendship, love and community because of the civil war. This is what Judith Herman also means in her pioneering work, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence*, where she observes that incidents such as civil strife "call into question basic human relationships" (1992: 51). Herman is of the view that

> Traumatic events […] breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. *They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis*. (1992: 51; my emphasis)

Suffice to say that Jal's active participation on the war front seems to complicate his faith and indeed casts him "into a state of existential crisis." He even admits to doubting the real presence of the divine, especially in times of adversity. Slowly, he begins to regard Christianity as the weaker of the two religions, asking if God cared so much, then why were my people being fed by *khawajas*?[6] Why were we refugees in a country where no one wanted us, forced out by a government that hated us? Why did the villagers in Luaal and Pinyudu beat drums for God on Christmas Day when He wasn't anywhere to be found? (*WC*, p. 90). True to Augustine's definition, Jal is here on a "search for an ultimate reality that gives meaning" to the so many unresolved issues he has with the Christian God. He wants to know why, if God really exists, He would allow one group of people to get unmerited suffering at the expense of another:

> if Mama's God were strong, he would have heard the prayers of the southern Sudanese, but instead Allah was allowing his people to oppress mine, to force us to be the slaves they believed we were destined to be. Why should I worship Mama's God with my heart when I went to church? I would never allow Him in my heart. (*WC*, p. 208)

It is hard to overemphasize the pervasive feelings Jal has towards religion. I would like to argue, however, that these feelings underline the difficulty of coming to terms with an experience we have decided to cut off from our lives, probably because it still reminds us of pain and loss. While the focus of this paper is on the range of religious discourses that have gained expression in shaping the relations between the two Sudans and within South Sudan itself, we cannot overlook the anger and hatred that haunts Jal and the way his mind vacillates between accepting God into his life and rejecting Him entirely. This stream of consciousness reflects his double bind, which leads him to remain ambivalent about the presence of the divine in his life.

To be sure, such ambivalence is not new in literary evocations of the absence of the di-

[6] This is a local term for white people in Sudan. As used here, it refers to the western-founded organisations such as UNHCR, UNICEF, World Food Programme, Save the Children, Red Cross, and Médecins sans Frontières, which were involved in taking care of thousands of Sudanese refugees in the refugee camps in Ethiopia.

vine in times of adversity. Elie Wiesel's quintessential Holocaust semi-autobiographical novel, *Night*, stands out as a text that reveals the complex and contested nature of the presence of the divine when one fails to discover the exact reasons for their suffering. Told from the perspective of an adolescent, Wiesel shares his experiences of his suffering in four different concentration and extermination camps during Nazi rule. Wiesel confesses that his faith in God and humanity was severely tested as he struggled to survive constant hunger, despair and terror, such that he began to question God's role in the face of the reality of his suffering: "I was not denying His existence, but I doubted His absolute justice" (2006: 45). In his Foreword to the novel, François Mauriac equates Wiesel's musings about his relationship with God to "the death of God in the soul of a child who suddenly faces absolute evil" (qtd in Wiesel 2006: xix). Another study of note is Qiana Whitted's *'A God of Justice?': The Problem of Evil in Twentieth-Century Black Literature*, in which the author also wrestles with fictional representations of spiritual crisis in selected African-American fictional and autobiographical writings. Whitted considers the experience of bitterness at being forsaken by God, especially when one is made to ask: "how can an all-powerful, benevolent, and just God allow pain and undeserved suffering to occur?" (2009: 1) What Whitted's study and Wiesel's text have in common is that they engage the inexplicable nature of God and man's experience of unmerited natural and moral suffering. Although written in different times and contexts, the two texts present a form of unsureness that also seems to echo Jal's own experiences in *War Child*.

Be that as it may, Christians believe that adversity has a way of transforming even the most hardboiled person into a perfect weapon of God. For Jal, this transformation comes six years after he loses Emma McCune to a road accident in Kenya. He describes this period as painful, almost bringing him back to the life of brutality and killing he had left behind in Sudan. He portrays himself moving "from place to place in the years after Emma's death as [he fought] to survive" (*WC*, p. 206). He further admits that surviving on his own took all his energy. He spent his time "finding food to eat, a place to sleep, and breath to fill my body when despair filled me. I had ulcers in my stomach, backaches and sore eyes" (*WC*, p. 208). Such confessions could be read as the protagonist's breaking points, moments when he is disoriented and vulnerable once more and is able to sit back and take stock of his life. His admission that he "was tired of fighting, tired of living a life with no one to look after me, tired of being alone" (*WC*, p. 210) could be interpreted as his implicit acknowledgement that unless he embraced *metanoia*, things would not work for him. In Christian mythology, this form of change is called *a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins* (Mark 1: 4).

To trace the subsequent discourse of conversion and how it works in *War Child*, we need to look out for those incidents where Jal still clings to hope that God will see him through all his trials and temptations. Notwithstanding his earlier ambivalence for example, he still acknowledges that God had saved him from dying of starvation during his splinter faction's long trek to Waat to join Riek Machar's SPLA-Nasir. He also clings to his mother's strong conviction that God "will always look after those who believe" (*WC*, p. 175); a creed he claims had kept him going when, one by one, his friends died of starvation in the desert. His belief that God takes care of "those who believe" is a clear reference to 1 Timothy 4: 10, "For to this end, we both labor and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe" (New King James Version). Jal completely embraces this biblical message throughout his long trek to Waat, renewing his conviction that, like the Israelites of old, it is God who had "shown him

the way" by giving him a crow to feast on when he was about to eat the flesh of his dead friend (*WC*, p. 179). He also recognizes that it is God that "had delivered him from evil," avowing "soon He would save me again" (*WC*, p. 179). Through this undying devotion to the divine, Jal not only clings to God for survival but also rededicates his life to Him for penance, compassion and strength.

In *The Poetics of Conversion in Early Modern English Literature*, Molly Murray evokes William James's paradigms and paradoxes of Christian conversion with reference to the various ways through which human beings recommit themselves to God. Murray is of the view that conversion

> can be a deliberate, voluntary action, and the passive receipt of the grace of God. It can be incremental and painfully protracted, and it can be instantanteous (sic) and cataclysmic. It can be a matter of refusal and rejection, and a matter of intensifying commitments that already exist. It can bolster individual and communal identities, and it can destroy and refashion them. (2009: 7)

What is being evoked here is the essence of what Edwin Starbuck calls "motives and forces leading to conversion" (1990: 58). Many of these "motives and forces" can be found in Jal's dithering as he contemplates his *metanoia*. In many ways, Jal seems to be led by "the feeling of imperfection, incompleteness, undoneness, unworthiness" (Starbuck 1990: 58) which, in turn, creates "doubts and questionings, tendency to resist conviction; depression and sadness; restlessness, anxiety and uncertainty; helplessness and humility; earnestness and seriousness" in him (Starbuck 1990: 58). Needless to wonder, he depicts his *metanoia* as something he does "to repay the kindness" (*WC*, p. 218) of Mrs Mumo, the woman who took him in after the tragic death of Emma McCune. He introspects,

> To repay her kindness, I had started going to her church, the Kileleshwa Community Church, because I knew it would make her happy. *I could not let God into my heart*, but as I listened in church, *I thought of the desert and the way He had helped me*. In so many ways I wanted to believe in Him because the happiness on Mrs Mumo's face as she prayed reminded me of Mama's. Although my life had changed since the night I'd stared at the gun, *my anger had not disappeared*. I prayed with my head but not my heart, and Mrs Mumo's faith drove me on, not mine in God. *Buried deep inside me, the spear of hatred still burned*, and sometimes I thought it would burst out of me. (*WC*, p. 218; my emphases)

The ability to reflect on his *metanoia* and attribute it to the kindness and unwavering faith of his surrogate mother reveals a certain level of maturity in Jal who, being consumed by hatred, is able to see that one good gesture deserves another. In this case, Jal's change of heart seems to reflect Murray's explication of conversion as a painfully protracted process through which one has to battle with their soul about whether or not they should accept grace. Jal also raises a number of reasons for not letting God into his heart. Yet recalling both his mother's and Mrs Mumo's faiths, his pristine past is triggered, and he begins to expiate his mind of the anger and hatred he had allowed to gather inside him and colour his perception of the African Arabs, until he finally experiences intensification,[7] as I revisit shortly.

[7] Intensification is a type of (religious) conversion that, according to Lewis Rambo, involves "the revitalized commitment to a faith with which the convert has had previous affiliation, formal or informal" (1993: 13). I hold that Jal's submission to the religious teachings of Mrs Mumo and the speeches of Mahātmā Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr only follows on a strong spiritual path that Jal was already oriented to during childhood.

Overall, what the persona's vacillation points to is Lewis Rambo's impressive synthesis of the rumblings of a troubled soul when confronted with situations that demand tough choices. In *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Rambo argues that humans are fragile beings, often acting in "a vast panorama of conflicting, confluent and dialectical factors that both facilitate and repress the process of conversion" (1993: 20). This is expressed in terms of how we approach issues, of our streams of consciousness, and how we express our fears, hopes, doubts, and dreams. Jal operates in this frame of mind, expressing his fears and doubt about whether or not he should let God into his heart. Mrs Mumo seems to be aware of Jal's double bind, for she uses the speeches of Martin Luther King as one of her strategies in order to take a spiritually lackadaisical Jal "to a new level of intensive concern, commitment, and involvement" with God's power and beneficence (Rambo 1993: 3). She preaches,

> Martin Luther King will be remembered forever for his message, that peace, and not war, is the way to win battles […]. He knew he lived in a land where different tribes were unequal, but *he did not let bitterness poison his heart […]*.
>
> Martin Luther King chose the most powerful weapon in the world – love – to break the chains of hatred…. He knew bitterness for past sins would destroy him and his people from inside. (*WC*, p. 219; my emphasis)

Mrs Mumo is here performing a task that is akin to cleansing child soldiers from what Michael Wessells calls "the spiritual impurities acquired during the war" (2006: 194), in order to make them heal. In *War Child*, these "spiritual impurities" emanate from the fact that Jal had killed, looted and was indoctrinated into hating the African Arabs. Mrs Mumo is thus implicitly telling Jal to look for a spiritual solution for his problems; that, for example, he should look up to spiritual leaders such as Martin Luther King (and Mahātmā Gandhi) who preached in their time that love is the only weapon that can help break the chain of violence.

What quickens Jal's decision to realign his spiritual life is not only the fact that Mrs Mumo sermonizes to him to purge himself of the bitterness that had consumed him, but also his own awareness that he needs to do something to prevent the hope he once nurtured from completely dying within him. He declares:

> I had thought about forgiveness more and more since Mrs Mumo had started teaching me about great men such as Martin Luther King. I knew it wasn't a light that could be switched on in an instant – it grew day by day, week by week, month by month – but something was changing inside me now during the hours when I sat alone and tried to calm my feelings. A seed had been sown, and I sensed that, just as I'd once faced a choice about whether to use violence on the night when I stared at the gun, I now had another choice: to remain trapped in the bitterness of the past or to find peace in the present. (*WC*, p. 221)

In *The Poetics of Conversion*, Murray observes that *metanoia*, is not the end of the story. Specifically referring to the mystical conversion of the biblical Saul of Tarsus,[8] Murray

[8] In Christian mythology, Saul was a Pharisee who used to persecute Christians. He waged a holy war against the Christian Church, scattering those who believed the teachings of Jesus Christ and even putting some to death. At the height of his notoriety, Saul encountered the spirit of Jesus on his way to Damascus, which commanded him to stop what he was doing. It is believed that Saul obeyed, becoming one of the preachers of the Gospel. Saul not only tried "to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can

holds that "conversion is not just a matter of what Saul believes, but what he is to do: he must reject his old earthly communities and commitments in favor of his new ones, and dedicate his life to the project of evangelism" (2009: 8). It is possible to analyze Jal's own spiritual path in a similar way in terms of the demands Mrs Mumo appears to place on him, that he goes beyond penitence. She encourages him to write and perform religious songs which, I propose, is her way of telling him that it is time he used religious music to call on his compatriots to move away from sectarianism (and its attendant motivations) to thinking about themselves as people of one country. In this paper then, the framing of the protagonist's story by which the ending of the text suggests a complete turnaround in the author's behaviour and attitude, harks back to the conversion narrative genre. In the next section, I further explore how Jal uses music to preach the message of love, peace and unity to his compatriots.

Fighting Atrocity through Music

Jal's last four chapters and the Epilogue contain descriptions of how the author uses both gospel and secular music to express his new-found ideological convictions to his audience. He also uses music as the primary means through which he reaches out to his compatriots, entreating them to lay down the age-old ideological and religious differences and think of rebuilding Sudan. Perhaps this is reflective of the often mentioned point that songs and singing are soundtracks of our life, often assisting people "to reflect on their past, present or future, to make contact with unconscious thought processes, to confront difficulties within their intrapersonal experiences and their interpersonal relationships, and to project their feelings into music" (Wigram & Baker 2005: 11). In many situations, too, songs break social, ideological, cultural and racial barriers to unite people from all walks of life. Jal begins by acknowledging the effect music had on (the people around) him. He writes:

> Music was all around me in Kenya as people sang in church or at prayer meetings in Mrs Mumo's house. On the streets and in school I started hearing other songs that also spoke to me. The soft lilt of Bob Marley brought back memories of the commanders in Juba who'd listened to him; the heavy beats of Tupac and Ice Cube made my chest throb; the modern African rhythms of Kofi Olumide and Kanda Bongo Man reminded me of my childhood; and the R&B of artists such as Mary J. Blige, LL Cool J, and Chaka Khan made me want to dance. (*WC*, p. 220)

Jal builds on this knowledge of secular music circulating around him to start writing his own songs and performing them in schools, churches and entertainment centres around Nairobi, Kenya. These performances slowly begin to perform wonders on him. He confesses: "From the moment I started writing songs, the feeling I had was like nothing I'd ever had before […]. The busier I got, the calmer I felt—my nightly dreams diminished and the feelings of frustration inside me started to weaken" (*WC*, p. 223). In another passage, Jal admits to feeling peaceful after writing songs (*WC*, p. 236). What Jal articulates here is reminiscent of Sigmund Freud's notion of the *talking cure*. A related term, especially when applied in reference to writing as a form of catharsis, is "scriptotherapy." Stemming from the Latin roots *scriptum* (meaning "thing written") and *therapia* (meaning "to nurse or cure"), scriptotherapy denotes the act of writ-

to save some" (1 Cor. 9: 22); he also forsook his Jewish name of Saul and forever adopted the Greek name of Paul for which he is now remembered. Thus, Saul the persecutor became Paul the proselytiser.

ing in order to heal the traumatized soul; or, as Suzette Henke notes, it is "the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic re-enactment" (Henke 2000: xi). In both instances, Freud's notion (i.e. *talking cure*) and its extension (i.e. *scriptotherapy*) point to art or music as a healing mechanism, and as a mode that could help reconstruct the self after a traumatic process. In the light of this, Jal's new personality can be summarized as follows: religion and music work on his pent-up emotions until he feels more relaxed, and less agitated towards the people around him. His own conclusion is that music and God had saved him (*WC*, p. 237). He forcefully expresses his convictions through a song that he writes to give himself hope (*WC*, p. 236). He raps:

> When I am lonely
> I just have to praise the Lord
> When I am broke
> I just have to praise the Lord
> When no one loves me
> I just have to praise the Lord
> When things go bad
> I just have to praise the Lord
> As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death
> As things go bad I won't turn back
> Because I know Jesus Christ is there for me
> He died for me, he paid my price (*WC*, p. 236).

The need "to praise the Lord" in the face of destitution, loss and want takes a decisive shape from this point onwards. Later, he starts composing secular songs that call for peace in Sudan: "For so long I'd only thought about writing songs about God, wanting to thank Him for His help and too afraid of the past to risk talking about it and making people pity me. But I'd thought again and again" (*WC*, p. 241) and felt more and more that the plight of the Sudanese people during the civil war "was something I wanted to write about" (*WC*, p. 242). Jal thus opines that such despair can only be defeated if he expands the reach of his music to include secular songs, especially those that call for peace and unity in Sudan: "We were all witnesses and, like so many children of Sudan, wanted our people to return to their lands, for the killing to end" (*WC*, p. 242). One such song is "Gua," which means power or peace. The song's lyrics, Jal reveals, "were a mixture of Arabic, Nuer, Dinka, and English" (*WC*, p. 241). In infusing the song with lyrics from a cross-section of Sudan's main languages and/or ethnic groups, Jal seems to suggest that his music is not only for his native Nuer ethnic group but for all the people of Sudan. It is as if he wants his compatriots to open their eyes to reality and embrace the message of peace preached in his song. Part of the reality he wants his compatriots to wake up to is his new understanding that "the war in Sudan wasn't simply about Islam against Christianity, one tribe against another" (*WC* p. 262) for, at one point in the history of the protracted internecine fighting in Sudan, "Muslims, angry at what Khartoum had done, had joined the [largely Christian and animist] SPLA" (*WC*, p. 242). Contrary to his doubts and fears that his fans would not listen to the song because he had departed from the religious theme, "Gua" becomes an instant hit and is liked by many because of the song's powerful message. He raps:

> Not one sister will be forced into marriage
> And not one cow will be taken by force
> And not one person will starve from hunger again
> I can't compare to anything
> The time when people will understand each other
> And there's peace in my homeland Sudan.

> […] We shall rebuild our land
> The whole world will respect us
> And we shall rebuild our land
> With one hand. One heart,
> With one blood, one body
> Because we are one. (*WC*, pp. 248-249)

One is thus persuaded to argue that music is a means of communication. It speaks to us in so many ways. There are indeed ways in which Jal's verse speaks to the audience that attends his performance of "Gua," for no sooner does he stop singing than he sees "people weeping and arms uplifted" because they "had listened and heard [and] understood what [he] was trying to say" (*WC*, p. 249). Jal admits to equally being washed through by the sound and energy of the song, until he, too, breaks down under its spell: "I reached up to wipe away the tears on my cheeks. They had been buried inside me for so long but would not be dammed up now" (*WC*, p. 249). The social and emotional sentiments being whipped up here are not entirely new. Within the field of music therapy, scholars have observed that songs and singing not only heal, but also play the social function of uniting groups and individuals from disparate backgrounds, besides being cathartic. Kenneth Bruscia notes for example, that

> Songs are ways that human beings explore emotions. They express who we are and how we feel, they bring us closer to others, they keep us company when we are alone. They articulate our beliefs and values. As the years pass, songs bear witness to our lives. They allow us to relive the past, examine the present, and to voice our dreams of the future. Songs weave tales of our joys and sorrows, they reveal our innermost secrets, and they express our hopes and disappointments, our fears and triumphs. They are our musical diaries, our life-stories. They are the sounds of our personal development. (1998: 9)

Bruscia's observations are linked to the ways in which Jal also uses music first to soothe his soul and purge it of the bad memories he has had about himself and the African Arabs and, later, uses the same songs to bring unity to a divided Sudan. Thus, Jal's journey into music as calling on his compatriots to lay down their weapons to embrace peace situates his narrative within the parameters of a text that inaugurates what María Pía Lara declares to be the illocutionary power of literature. In *Moral Textures*, Lara asserts that artistic works are "emancipatory narratives [that] create new forms of power [and] configure new ways to fight back against past and present injustices" (1998: 5). For her, literature and art are deliberate and purposeful performative acts of searching for a new beginning. Lara illustrates this by using the example of storytelling, noting that "storytelling becomes the articulate social weaving of memories, the recovery of the fragments of the past, the exercise of collective judgment, the duty to go against the grain and promote with this retelling, a performative frame for a 'new beginning'" (1998: 40). Writing and art are, therefore, seen as complex modes of communicating difference, alternative subjectivities and distinct identity re(constructions) in the creation of a new public.

Conclusion

In *War Child*, Jal reenacts the trauma of loss not simply to resymbolize and repeat it, but also explore how he seeks peace with God in the midst of filial strife while exhorting others to recognize God's power and beneficence. From his condition as a quintessential cosmopolitan, he reworks and negotiates different cultural, political and ideological templates with content and reference that give us a contemporary form of the spiritual autobiography. Though it has sometimes been suggested that constructing a spiritual autobiography is a tough choice, since it is difficult to "understand, predict, and control that which is generally invisible to the outsider, mysterious and sacred to the insider, and more often than not subject to debate" (Rambo 1993: 11), Jal's introspection allow us to see more clearly the complexities and ironies of religion in Sudan. *War Child* does not sermonize about the union, communion and communication with a higher power, but it does appeal to the social and ontological realm in its exhortation of the author's compatriots to lay down their age-old ideological and religious differences and think of rebuilding Sudan.

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