

ARTICLE

Nationhood in South Sudan Cinema: The Iconicity of Motherhood in Akuol de Mabior's *No Simple Way Home* (2023)

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Abstract

Post-cessation nationhood in South Sudan presented a paradoxical situation: a country united during struggle is fragmented after independence. Among the triggers for this scenario was the death of Dr John Garang de Mabior—the country's founding father. This article is a multidisciplinary semiotic critique of Akuol de Mabior's film, *No Simple Way Home* (2023), against the history of South Sudanese nationhood. Without claiming a political scientific analysis, the author proposes that South Sudan's crisis of nationhood is symptomatic of a quest for a unifying icon. He theorizes the protagonist's quintessence of motherhood as a semiotic gesture of her de jure iconicity of unified nationhood.

Résumé

Après la cessation des hostilités concernant l'identité nationale, le Soudan du Sud a connu une situation paradoxale : un pays uni dans la lutte se fragmente après l'indépendance. La mort du Dr John Garang de Mabior—le père fondateur du pays— a été l'un des éléments déclencheurs de ce scénario. Cette étude s'agit d'une critique sémiotique pluridisciplinaire du film d'Akuol de Mabior, *No Simple Way Home* (2023), face à cette histoire. Sans prétendre à une analyse politique ou scientifique, l'auteur propose que la crise de la nation au Soudan du Sud soit symptomatique d'une quête d'une icône unificatrice. Il théorise la quintessence de la maternité de la protagoniste comme un geste sémiotique de son iconicité de jure d'une nation unifiée.

Resumo

No Sudão do Sul, a identidade nacional pós-cessação gerou uma situação paradoxal: o país, outrora unido durante a guerra, relevou-se fragmentado depois da independência. Entre

os fatores que deram origem a este cenário conta-se a morte do Dr. John Garang de Mabior — o pai-fundador do país. Este artigo apresenta uma crítica semiótica multidisciplinar do filme *No Simple Way Home* (2023), da realizadora Akuol de Mabior, contra esta história. Sem pretensões a fazer uma análise política científica, o autor sugere que a crise de identidade nacional do Sudão do Sul é sintomática da procura por um ícone unificador. Além disso, teoriza acerca da maternidade quinta-essencial da protagonista enquanto gesto semiótico do seu papel como símbolo icônico *de jure* de uma identidade nacional unificada.

Keywords: South Sudan; South Sudan cinema; *No Simple Way Home*; John Garang de Mabior; Rebecca Nyandeng de Mabior; Akuol de Mabior; nationhood; motherhood; iconicity; South Sudan crisis

Introduction

The opening shot of Akuol de Mabior's documentary, *No Simple Way Home* (2023),¹ is a digitalized family portrait (Figure 1), cutting to a close-up photo of her father, then her mother holding the young Akuol, a collage of three family photos, a brief video of the director inside her house (in the present), further portraits of John Garang de Mabior (hereafter Dr Garang)—in military uniform—and Rebecca Nyandeng de Mabior (hereafter Rebecca), then Dr Garang with soldiers



Figure 1. The opening portrait of the director's family, in Akuol de Mabior's *No Simple Way Home* (2023). Source: Screen Freeze Frame.

in the field—a moment during one of the armed struggles. This sequence, blending the past and the present, is overlaid with the director’s first-person voice-over narration:

My family’s story is inseparable from the story of my country even though I have never really lived there. We moved around a lot, and I grew up in exile because of the war. My father founded the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) in 1983, with my mother by his side. He led an armed struggle against a fundamentalist Islamic government based in the north of the country for the self-determination of the people in the south and the democratic transformation of the whole country.²

This conjunction of Akuol’s family story with that of the nation positions the protagonist, Rebecca, at the center of the Republic of South Sudan’s (hereafter South Sudan) national history of armed liberation struggle. The phrases “family story” and “story of my country” which the narrator uses, conjecture the country’s pre-independence matrix where the protagonist is allied with the early pursuit of nationhood. This is further alluded to through the film’s visual posturing of the protagonist’s subjective experiences as a frame for South Sudan’s nationhood. Incidentally, such a narrative strategy indexing Dr Garang’s role as the father of his family as coeval with his figurative role as the Father of the Nation both places his family as *a worthwhile* starting point for probing South Sudan’s post-independence national culture and highlights Rebecca’s connection with the country’s history and her significance in the present time.

Since the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005), much of southern Sudan’s global image was borne by the persona of Dr Garang. He led the mainstream groups in the liberation struggle—the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) and its political wing, the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM). From early 2000, he led the south’s negotiations with Khartoum. By 2000, Dr Garang had rebranded from a rebel leader to a statesman in readiness for the scheduled referendum on the formation of South Sudan. Becoming a vice president was an important first step in this rebranding. John Young (2005, 535) writes:

Garang had been the leader of the SPLM/A since its founding in 1983 and for many in Sudan and abroad he virtually personified the struggle of the south. Garang was also the unchallenged focal point during the various peace processes, in particular during the final phase of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) negotiations which were largely reduced to then First Vice President Ali Osman Taha and himself. And more than anyone else on either side of the table, Garang was the biggest beneficiary of the peace process which granted him a virtual hegemonic position in the south and the holding of a strong vice presidency nationally.

Throughout the liberation struggle, Dr Garang’s brand was evolving from a long-serving revolution fighter to a founding Father of the Nation. He was a symbol of unified southern Sudan which moderated ethnic and religious allegiances, onboarding the diverse citizens into a singular ideal of nationalism:

independence as a practical route to escape from the Southern Problem. The ideal derives from the revolution period when “Southerners began to organise professional unions, formal committees and political parties, like the Southern Sudan Welfare Committee, which became the Liberal Party” (Tuttle and Duot 2023, 388). Christopher Tounsel (2021, 52) notes:

A group of educated southerners formed the Southern Party ... changed its name to the Liberal Party to avoid northern suspicion that the word Southern implied separation. The party aimed to secure self-government for the South and fought for equal pay for equally qualified people from the North and South in similar positions. At its 1954 meeting, its delegates condemned the uneven results of Sudanization and called for national federation.

These uneven results comprise the Southern Problem, a flexible phrase for the priority issues affecting the peoples of southern Sudan, specifically regarding underdevelopment, slavery, culture, religion, and identity among others (Allen 1989). It is a “political discourse” that starts from “the colonial era and continues into the post-independence period when it had seismic implications for Sudan’s political cohesion” (Manoeli 2019, 17). Despite being a unifying priority for the political class and the citizenry of southern Sudan during the struggle, Southern Problem also designated the historically unpredictable tribal alliances which clamoured for a frontline role in the struggle with the north. In this role as *the* symbol of the struggle and its political aspirations of cessation, Dr Garang led the July 20, 2002, Machakos Protocol headed by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) where Khartoum signed for a future referendum over South Sudan’s determination for cessation while SPLM/A reneged on its constitutional demands. His passing on July 30, 2005 (after only three weeks in office) bereft the southerners of their unifying political and military figure and a much-needed iconicity of their anticipated nationhood. It also laid bare the complexity of external and internal aspects of the crisis of nationalism which he had survived.

Externally, Sudan has historically been fiercely opposed to the idea of an independent south. Christopher Tounsel (2021, 52) notes: “the almost complete exclusion of southerners during Sudanization in the 1950s fueled a growing sense of southern grievances and political identity,” adding that the 1954 “creation of the first all-Sudanese cabinet under al-Azhari’s pro-Egyptian National Union Party (NUP) accelerated southern political thinking toward self-determination and federalism.” This reiterates Douglas Johnson’s (2016a, 124) assertion: “The legislative assembly banned the use of the ‘noun South’ in official documents, replacing it with ‘southern provinces,’ and in Sudan’s first parliament the NUP leader of the House of Representatives criticized southern representatives for using the words ‘South’ and ‘Southerners.’” This pre-cessation antagonism is both mutual and broad-based—the southerners’ detest of Sudan’s nationalism persists, shaped by unease with the Khartoum government and other geopolitical interests. International Crisis Group (ICG) (2002, 8) reports that “Britain developed a ‘Southern Policy,’ the primary aim of which was to prevent economic

integration of the two regions in order to curtail the north's Arabic and Islamic influence." This would seem to pre-select cessation as the most likely outcome. Francis Mading Deng (1995, 101) also notes: "For the South, however, independence was to prove merely a change of outside masters, with the northerners taking over from the British and defining the nation in accordance with the symbols of their Arab-Islamic identity. In the minds of southerners, this logically necessitated the continuation of the liberation struggle after independence." During this period, citizens were unified by the process of armed struggle against a common enemy (Frahm 2012, 21). In the lull enabled by the Machakos Protocol and the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), the priority of an independent South Sudan meant southerners' faint commitment to Sudan nationhood, while lacking their own. Post-cessation, the North has been severally accused of procuring political and tribal divisions within the Government of South Sudan, with 2013 being exemplary (Deng 2015, 113).

Internally, post-cessation political and cultural fragmentation of the southerners was exacerbated by, firstly, postwar territorial demarcations that used ethnic maps to create administrative territories. Per Christopher Zambakari (2015, 75), South Sudan comprises "societies of individual nations. It has yet to develop a state that brings together diverse nationalities into the framework of a unified nation." Such maps refreshed the region's age-old problem of loosely bounded ethnic groups and their loose political commitments. Tim Allen (1989, 43) notes: "Throughout the 1960s the southern leaders made it clear that, as far as politics went, all they had in common was opposition to the north." Sporadic conflicts post-2005³ aptly correlate Dr Garang's absence with the difficulty of galvanizing the southerners into a coherent national group post-2002. Thirdly, there was the new problem of inter-ethnic hegemonies. Alan Boswell (2021, 1) describes the post-2018 Equatoria problem as unmotivated by "a power struggle for the centre" but by a need for autonomy from "Dinka hegemony" and pursuit of "sovereignty among South Sudan's constituencies and regions, beyond power sharing among elites." Labelled "a revolt against a common political centre," it prefigured the varieties of internal tensions over how to galvanize the country into coherent nationhood. All these disorientations comprise the contingencies of state-building (Badiey 2014, 3), what is termed here as a crisis of nationhood. The crisis of nationhood is a political process that starts long before Rebecca enters politics. Thus, while the film story is told from her perspective of South Sudan's contemporary politics, she is not clamouring for iconicity but highlights her personal experiences as a specific South Sudanese—Dr Garang's widow. She does not emphasize a return to the symbolism of Dr Garang, but uses her persona of motherhood to tease the possibility of better directions in the project of nationhood than are currently being taken. What informs my discussions is the film's keen emphasis on Dr Garang's family and its rootedness to the South Sudanese nationhood process, rather than an outright effort to claim and reappropriate his iconicity for, after all, the protagonist is a vice president in the period featured in the story. The crisis of nationhood is not the crisis of Rebecca's political aspirations or her character in the film. Rather, I consider her symbolic character as mother, which is juxtaposed with the political role of her husband as Father of the Nation, as open to semiotic criticism, using nationhood as a context.

Without claiming a political scientific analysis of post-independent South Sudan, this article reflects on Akuol's *No Simple Way Home* as a resource to theorize the non-material anchors of nationhood in South Sudan. Broadly, it is a multidisciplinary discussion of the filmic representation of motherhood and nationhood in the context of women, peacebuilding, and nationhood interventions in Africa (Affi, Tønnessen, and Tripp 2021). Here, it does not offer a political or personal intervention but an abstract conception of South Sudan's post-2005 unsettled nationhood in cinema alongside a critique of historical literature. Specifically, it focuses on Rebecca's protagonist-persona of motherhood as a semiotic sign that gestures towards new prospects of nationhood beyond the debates about "what went wrong." It proffers the visual and aural representations of her experiences as "framing practices" (Goffman 1974, 444) that underscore the difficulties of nationhood. Thus, her proclamation, "If things are really not going the way we were waging our struggle, I will not keep quiet," becomes material to the semiotic reorientation of post-cessation efforts towards ethnic-blind nationhood erstwhile embodied by Dr Garang's leadership of the struggle. The key argument is that such filmic representations denote a quest for a sharable icon of nationhood; and that the privileged figure of the protagonist-mother in national narration is instrumental politically and materially in the discussions of unified nationhood.

No Simple Way Home and South Sudanese Cinema

Much of South Sudan cinema dwells on the motif of contiguous conflict and its aftermath. David Aronowitsch and Hanna Heilborn's *Slaves: An Animated Documentary* (2008) tells the story of children abducted by fighters and forced into violent lives; Viktor Pesenti's *The World's Youngest Nation: South Sudan* (2012) explores the early moments of the new nation after decades of war; and Frédérique Cifuentes and Sidi Moctar Khaba's *Our Bright Stars* (2012) highlights everyday life in Juba. Joice John Thomas' *Angelo* (2013) tells the story of humanitarian efforts in Juba; Ochan Hannington's *Wani and His Vision* (2013) documents the everyday life of a motorcycle taxi (Boda-Boda) rider's ambitions; and Mary Kadi Manoah's *Clash of Cultures* (2013) explores the conflicting behaviours of South Sudanese returnees with different exilic experiences and customs. A 2014 flurry of films seems motivated by the civil war that erupted after the political split of President Salva Kiir Mayardit and Riek Machar Teny Dhurgon (then a vice president). Tim Freccia's *Saving South Sudan* (2014) examines a former child soldier on the frontline of the 2013–2020 conflict; Florian Schewe and Katharina von Schroeder's *We Were Rebels* (2014) follows a returnee former child soldier who lays down arms and joins in nation-building; Hubert Sauper's *We Come as Friends* (2014) documents the cessation of South Sudan from the Republic of Sudan; and Sam Benstead's *Coach Zoran and His African Tigers* (2014) chronicles the difficulties of a South Sudanese football coach assembling a team in the newly independent state. Other films include David Kinsella's *The Temptress* (2019) and Malek Domkőc's *Road Dogs* (2020). While most of these films are made by foreigners, *No Simple Way Home* is exceptional because its director is a native.

Set between 2005 and 2020, it tells the protagonist's family story. It features flashbacks of the 1983–2005 period and emphasizes the December 2013–July 2020⁴ phase. During the latter time, South Sudan was being critiqued for payroll peace, the ineffectuality of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), and the discordance between unification or integration of opposition forces (Craze 2019). The film briefly hints at pre-independence conflicts and the temporality of struggle—the time of Dr Garang's political leadership, elaborately dwelling on the post-2005 period when the protagonist became politically involved. Its story emphasizes the protagonist's political exertions from exile and back to South Sudan. Its title—*No Simple Way Home*—metonymically infers her itinerary around the world and back to her country, and her perception of the nation as a *kind* of home. Generally, then, the film addresses the incompleteness of “South Sudanicity” as a cultural and political project and the significance of shared trauma at a personal scale, least bred from civil wars and mostly occasioned by post-cessation eventualities. Its mood is nostalgic and sad, with celebratory interludes. Certainly, it is remarkable for several reasons.

1) It addresses nationhood in South Sudan cinema from an eccentric position that gyrates between the political forefront and the general public. Although it comes in the wake of other films that cover everyday life in postwar Juba, Akuol's story is told both from an insider's perspective and the political frontline. Her lifetime involvement in the process of struggle both before and after independence, and the privileged position erstwhile held by her father and now her mother grants her a unique perspective on nationhood. She also embodies the merger between local and diasporic conceptions of nationhood, having experienced both lives intermittently—with more experiences as the latter than the former. Yet she manages to mitigate these variances by fronting her family story through metaphors of everyday life. Her choice of family and streets as the main settings, and her film's themes of motherhood, humility, and empathy frees her family story from an elitist political reading, conferring it with ordinary speculation about nation-building in South Sudan.

2) The film improves the global profile of post-independence South Sudan cinema while keeping tabs on local anxieties. The history of cinema in South Sudan draws from the larger pre-independence era where the Khartoum government censored film content to “limit any films or scenes that were likely to prompt questions or doubts concerning the justice of the emerging post-colonial social order” (Tuttle and Duot 2023, 389). It is among the first films that privilege South Sudanese citizens' voices in telling their stories and histories on the global stage. In a post-independence South Sudan where individual experiences give agency to issues on global mobility, internal conflicts and displacements, and the aftermath of political outcomes in Africa,⁵ such stories of “home” offer a crucial aperture into South Sudan's contemporary reconstitution after its post-independence civil wars, while keeping its pre-war ideals in sight. This is what makes *No Simple Way Home* a befitting film in theorizing nationhood. It uses Dr Garang's national profile as the backdrop to the protagonist—the legatee of his ideals. The national figuration of the family story alongside the country's history, with civil wars and struggles melding with post-independence conflicts,

analogizes the nation at a microcosmic level. The film is mainly set in modern-day Juba, the capital city and executive headquarters of South Sudan. It also features scenes of the city's outskirts and rural South Sudan. This setting is remarkable for registering the idea of South Sudan through diverse urban and rural landscapes and cultures of everyday life; economic struggles in Juba, the flooding disasters and the displacements in the remote southern villages, memory of exility, political betrayals, ineffectuality of governance, everyday hustle in Juba and the countryside, political expediency, famine and disaster, struggle and underdevelopment, and contiguity of violence. Thematizing these experiences improves the erstwhile minimal global register of the country's cinema while publicizing an insider perspective on the pragmatic experiences of "South Sudanicity."

3) Repurposing history in service of the protagonist's post-cessation ambitions. Although the film is set in the present where Rebecca is already a vice president, its historical narrative highlighting Dr Garang's role in the SPLM/A leadership is a springboard for the family's profile into the country's contemporary political space to guarantee its political afterlife. Refreshing the posterity of Dr Garang's national iconicity is presented as a personal burden for Rebecca and a rationalization for her political participation. The mix of political, national, and private discourses—all curated into a nostalgic imagination of South Sudan through the private lens of Dr Garang's family prefigures Rebecca's role beyond the political. The use of actual footage of the past and present adds verisimilitude, "authenticating" the experiences of the founding first family⁶ as a template of nationhood. This figuratively confers upon the matriarch the mantle of the lost patriarch so that her desire for leadership is legitimized by her genealogical and revolutionary past. In this case, the primacy of Rebecca's political recompense, which occurs early in the film—through appointment by President Salva Kiir—adds to her public profile as a prominent citizen. One may argue that the film usurps self-authenticating narration using a memoir strategy to recognize and reclaim Dr Garang's political honour in South Sudan's national history in service of his family in post-independence times.

4) Publicizing the role of women in Africa's cinema and political discourse. The film's sampling of the protagonist's family life broadly gestures towards the difficulties of female figures in African cinema today and thus fits the context of similar efforts elsewhere in Africa which focus on women in national struggles. Akuol's film offers a bi-forked frame: the female director as part of women filmmakers in Africa; and the female protagonist's political profile dramatizing the representation of women in African cinema. In the former, the film offers a meaningful contribution to "women's cultural activism" (Ellerson 2018, 246). It attunes us to the frontline possibilities for curating alternative visions of cultural production and consumption, women and film critique (Ellerson 2012), and women filmmakers' contribution to history and political narratives (Ellerson 2016). Alongside other women filmmakers in Africa (Ellerson 2000), Akuol's film can be read beside Sarah Maldoror's *Sambizanga* (1972) focused on Angola; Flora Gomes's *Mortu Nega* (1988) set in Guinea Bissau, and more recently, Ousmane Sembène's *Faat Kiné* (2001) set in Senegal. The latter offers a baseline for how women negotiate exilic identity and their connections with their homeland

(Ellerson 2017), and aspires towards “thoroughgoing cinematic decolonization,” seeking to “redefine and reclaim black/African female subjectivity from a history of filmic (mis)representation” (Ukadike 1994, 103). One may also invoke Manthia Diawara’s (1992, 140) theme of “return to the sources” in the sense of integration into the political homeland, a key motif in the film.

These four aspects shape how we may read Akuol’s film narrative of “South Sudanicity” as a form of nationhood. Curiously, despite its global publicity through screenings and broadcasting, it is hardly studied, with Stuart Norval’s (2022) review of its intimate portraiture of the protagonist being a sole example. Going forward, an effort is made to intervene in this academic silence on the significance of the woman figure in South Sudan cinema. In this effort, the film is considered a resource for a multidisciplinary semiotic critique of how the characterization of the protagonist as a mother acquires iconicity of the country’s nationhood.

Iconicity of Motherhood

Originating from linguistics, iconicity is credited to, first, Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of “arbitrariness of the link between sound and meaning, or more precisely between signifier and signified within the linguistic sign” (Joseph 2015, 85). He notes: “Certain forms might be related associatively/paradigmatically, not by virtue of any link in sound or meaning but simply on account of being isolated within the system” (92). Here, de Saussure’s “associative/paradigmatic” concept allows us to decode motherhood as an isolated figure within the context of a nation, that has specific connotations of the nation as a kind of “home.” In the context of Akuol’s film, motherhood confers upon the nation a framework of sharable ideals. Second, Charles Sanders Peirce designates three categories of iconicity: imaginal where “the sign evinces an immediately perceptible similarity with the object to which it refers,” diagrammatic where “the similarity between the sign and its object is only a structural or relational one,” and metaphorical where “the similarity is mediated by a third, the *tertium comparationis* between the tenor and vehicle of the metaphorical expression” (Nöth 1999, 613). Per Peirce’s metaphorical iconicity, if “*tertium comparationis*” is “what is shared between the objects of any comparison, for which ... [it] provides the necessary common ground” (Zhu 2017, 35), then motherhood can be said to offer a common ground for South Sudan from where we can compare its national iconicity and its nationhood beyond political wrangles. Third is Roland Barthes’s theory of the image as the “*limit* of meaning, it permits the consideration of a veritable ontology of the process of signification” (1977, 152). Barthes’s ontology of the meaning-making process guides us to consider motherhood as a semic text; that is, as embodying the meaning of South Sudan’s nationhood “organised in associative fields, in paradigmatic articulations, even perhaps in oppositions, according to certain defined paths or ... certain semic axes” (1977, 161).

These three perspectives help us grasp Rebecca’s figure of the Mother of the Nation as a semiotic sign imbued with the ontology of *South Sudanicity* derived from her husband’s iconicity of specific national aspirations. She strongly

possesses the essentialized qualities—the semes—of postwar South Sudan as a familial assemblage where ethnicities and alliances may be rendered invisible. The semiology of her motherhood usurps her political profile with a broad-based national symbolism of a shared birthplace, the source or the origin, and also, a place of necessary return. This branding makes her an appropriate register—an icon—through her equivocal embodiment of *home* and *nation*. It is curated along the history of pre-independence civil wars (where her husband led the struggle to defend the nation/home) and post-independence conflicts (where she pronounces the sharable right to return and belong). This is emphasized in the scenes of her first sequence in South Sudan; built around her family life, highlighting their everyday tasks at home and around the streets of Juba. There are shots highlighting her family history; with childhood photos of the director and siblings; teenage boys congregating on street corners, young women selling tea; community life, the protagonist in her traditional house, singing traditional songs while grinding flour on a stone—a traditional custom—preparing an evening meal. In a later scene when Rebecca's appointment is announced on national television, she is surrounded by her community.

Such montage positions the protagonist as a model image of the unrealized South Sudan: in touch with and respectful of her people's traditions, responsive and available, tender and caring. In her pronouncement, "I pray hard for my daughter to see, while I'm still alive, a prosperous nation. That is how I wanted to leave my children. I didn't want to leave them in a country where people are divided into pieces, even into their core," she is limiting the possible interpretation of the images it accompanies (Tomaselli and Shepperson 2000, 12). She provides context to the shots: that the protagonist is foremost a wife and a mother rather than a politician so that her aspirations for her country are rendered apolitical and culturally grounded. The subsequent scenes feature the community's ordinary habits: citizens playing cultural musical instruments under a tree shade on the river bank in Juba, pastoral culture, urban youths, public infrastructure, and a variety of South Sudanese musical and lyrical cultures and economic livelihoods (pastoral and micro-enterprises). Together with the narrator's voice, these shots indexically synchronize the figure of the mother with ordinary life so that we see her as affable and safe. In her self-insertion voice-over, the director states: "This is home, the land my father gave his life to. Land which I feel duty bound." The term home here occasions a moment where we can explore the *dialogic* rapport between nation and home (Ponzio 1990, 203) through the polysemic sign of motherhood—a placeholder for Dr Garang's fatherhood.

If, as Tomaselli and Shepperson (2000, 12) say, the "basic property of iconicity is continuity of some quality of both the sign (the image) and its object (the person or place or event fixed in the image)," then this sequence of Rebecca's family life after returning to Juba, and the shot of the statue juxtaposed in it, links the symbol of the nation to that of motherhood. There is indexical continuity between the statue's historical quality and its symbolic reassignment to the protagonist. Through this continuity, the home's symbolism changes from "a place of origin and return" to "a space of political continuity." It is where the protagonist's dual struggles—1) to access South Sudan as a political home

replete with accoutrements of freedom and prosperity, and 2) to mobilize her label of mother qua politician to materialize the country as a *home*—converge. The former emerges through the protagonist’s persona of a political leader who highlights national flaws to locate her role in mitigating them. The latter informs her character morphing the old, tentative South Sudan of civil wars with the new version of political goodwill. In this delicate balance, the asymmetric and irreflexive nature of the sign of the mother (Sonesson 2016, 17) and the film’s indeterminate aesthetic—neither fully historical nor autobiographical—indexically illustrate the narrative dilemma: how motherhood and nationhood may share iconicity.

The answer is perhaps Augusto Ponzio’s (1990, v) “memorative function,” by which the iconicity of the mother curates the mental *image* of home as the place which cogenerates a future symbol of South Sudan. It is a memorial space of the political which preserves the country’s traditions, experiences, and norms. Motherhood as an *imaginal object* evinces “immediately perceptible similarity with the object to which it refers” (Nöth 1999, 613)—the qualities of the nation as a safe place. Karen Waltorp (2017, 103) applies the imaginal realm to her anthropological investigation of “what lies beyond and between the intelligible and sensible/corporeal realm.” Phantasmagorias of objects, she argues, may indexically link with the objects they infer and enable a future-looking theory. This future dimension benefits the critique of iconicity in South Sudan because, per the film narrative, the time of a unified nation is an imaginary not yet realized. Iain Edgar’s (2004, 85) visual research correlates the imaginal world with dreamwork and imagework: “an active process in which the person ‘actively imagining’ lets go of the mind’s normal train of thoughts and images and goes with a sequence of images that arises spontaneously from the unconscious.” Further, it comprises “autonomous forms and images ... discernible ... between that of sensibility and intelligibility” (86). Ponzio’s memory as an archive, Nöth’s imaginal iconicity, and Edgar’s imagework straddle, on one hand, the world of intangible phenomena that comprise the film’s diegesis; and on the other, the interpretive world of the film viewer (or critic). They allow us to synthesize images in Akuol’s film as simultaneously her autonomous visualization of South Sudan; an effort to render this imagined world intelligible through the conventionality of the iconic image of the mother. This, certainly, causes unresolved tension between image and representation.

The concept of “logical *continuity* in which representation is presupposed by image” (Tomaselli and Shepperson 2000, 10) enables us to question the futurity of motherhood as an icon: how far in South Sudan’s future can this image shape the perception and interpretation of South Sudan? This question invokes the “relation of representation—that is, the iconic relation” (Pettrilli and Ponzio 2005, 217) so that motherhood in this film indexes the inertia of South Sudan’s revolutionary ideals. It is a compelling force to resist post-independence avarice and the new national arrangements which stray from the revolutionary cause. Motherhood as a flexible sign forecasts the country’s political workload as a continuous activity: independence was not only once, but continues to be a national concern in the present and future. It is its iconicity, the precondition for the cognitive processing of the protagonist as a useful interpretant of South

Sudan's procession through unresolved nationhood, that has the potential to resolve the tension between image and representation alluded to above.

Nationhood in South Sudan

Nationhood—a “project to make the political unit, the state (or polity) congruent with the cultural unit, the nation” (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008, 536)—is discursively theorized as multifaceted in the purview of politics and everyday life (Billig 1995; Canovan 1996; Hastings 1997; Miller 2009; Liebich 2023). Its everyday indicators have “specific historical and geo-cultural contexts and the broader development of an overall sense of nationhood and nationalism in history” (Smith 2008, 571). Edensor and Sumartojo (2018, 553) note: “quotidian surroundings continually reproduce the nation as we engage with them,” and nationhood “partly informs how we make sense of our daily experiences.” From these, nationhood infers the pragmatism of existing as a sovereign nation with unifying and pacifying symbols, and the everyday affordances which accrue from this scenario. For South Sudan, such affordances are historically paradoxical. Although the country's nationhood emerged through the route of an armed secessionist movement, the negotiations—led by the IGAD⁷—initially sought a peaceful settlement between the north and the south, with a weakened but friendly Khartoum (Rolandsen and Daly 2016, 134). It is thus tied to the politics and conflicts that ensued in the different phases of numerous armed conflicts and civil wars,⁸ and corresponding negotiations. The period 1991–2020 when the struggle for an independent South Sudan transitioned to a struggle for governance is most relevant to this article because it explicates 1) the pre-cessation imagination of the nation and Dr Garang's significance in sustaining a united front for this imagination; and 2) its initial post-independence difficulties when the significance of a sharable unifying icon is apparent.

i. Pre-Cessation Period

The 1991–2001 civil war featured two forms of conflict: 1) between the government forces from the north and the southern fighters; and 2) between different rebel factions in the south. While the former fits in the history of civil wars in the larger Sudan, the latter reifies the aftermath of political struggles that would later shape the internal factional politics erratically torn between ethnic unification and hostility. The 1991–2001 SPLM/A splits exemplify the latter scenario. On one hand, there was the “Nasir-faction” or SPLM/A Nasir splinter group led by Riek Machar, Lam Akol, and Gordon Kong. Their Nasir Declaration of August 28, 1991, demanded “leadership change ... [and] reform of the SPLM/A,” specifying the removal of Dr Garang, inclusion in the decision-making body—the Politico-Military High Command—and reorientation of the struggle towards “independent South Sudan rather than a reformed Sudan.” Their aim was “to take control of the entire Movement, not to set up a rival” (Rolandsen and Daly 2016, 120). On the other hand, there was Dr Garang's group—rebranded in 1994 as SPLM/A-Mainstream or SPLM/A Torit—pursuing an anti-secessionist goal.

This goal was criticised as “opportunistically driven by personal ambition” and its proponents as “stooges manipulated by crafty politicians in Khartoum to work against their own interests and those of their fellow Southerners” (121). Subsequent armed attacks in Leer and Ayod, and later the Kongor and Bor massacre, led by the White Army allied to Nasir-faction, were the physical symbols of the disintegration of southern Sudan. While these internal struggles eventually led to the disintegration of the Nasir faction, they motivated an increased rhetoric of self-determination in Dr Garang’s political plans, and the introduction of “a civilian government structure and ... democracy” (128). The movement’s 1994 national convention elected Dr Garang as Chairman of SPLM/A and Salva Kiir as the Deputy Chairman. The National Liberation Council (NLC) was set up as a supreme body (and later disbanded), and Nasir-faction disintegrated with Machar eventually returning to Dr Garang’s group. Numerous negotiations took place, some of the most notable being Nigeria’s Abuja 1 (May–June 1992), Abuja 2 (May 1993), the January 1994 Declaration of Principles which focused on cessation, and the July 1999 Egyptian-Libyan Initiative (ELI) for a unified Sudan (Rolandsen and Daly 2016, 131–32). Yet, even as options for a unified Sudan continued, SPLM presented changing ideals: “As a national organisation, it remained at heart a southern movement, and separatist sentiment remained strong, if latent, among southern Sudanese” (Johnson 2016b, xi). This scenario illustrates the tapestry of the pre-cessation national quandary which would find its way into post-independent South Sudan’s nationhood, the main focus of *No Simple Way Home*. The film’s flashback shots of Dr Garang’s days with fighters during the Sudan civil wars symbolically link his liberation effort within the SPLM/A group to the project of nationhood post-2005.

The 2002–2011 phase of the conflict focused on terms of cessation, rather than a truce and a unified Sudan. In the Machakos Protocol, Khartoum agreed to South Sudan’s cessation referendum while SPLM withdrew its demands for constitutional overhaul; and the signing of the CPA between the Khartoum government and the SPLM/A (United Nations Mission in Sudan 2005). After July 9, 2005, when Dr Garang was sworn in as the first vice president of the Republic of Sudan in a power-sharing agreement with President Omar al-Bashir, South Sudan appeared on course to become an independent nation. This also amplified the incompatible nationalisms between Sudan and southern Sudan. When in Akuol’s film, Dr Garang says, “We have been unable to forge a Sudan that belongs to all of us. People say Sudan is an Arab country, others say no it is not an Arab country it is an African country. Others say ... it is an Afro-Arab country ... others say it is an Arabo-African country,” he aptly expresses this early quandary of nationalism which informed the founding of South Sudan. Douglas Johnson (2016b, x) argues that “the provision for a self-determination referendum to be conducted in southern Sudan elevated southern Sudanese independence as an equal alternative to unity.” Accordingly, Dr Garang’s posturing reiterates this inclination towards an independent postwar South Sudan nation. His passing thus disturbed southern Sudan’s unified procession towards independence, giving way to political wrangles and internal conflicts as political elites sought to redefine nationalism to accommodate individualistic goals (Johnson 2016). The arguments ahead hypothesize such efforts as an attempt to participate in curating a

replacement for the kind of unified nationalism symbolized by Dr Garang. It pursues this quest for lost iconicity as a viable frame for theorizing South Sudan's post-cessation nationhood.

ii. Post-Cessation Period

On July 9, 2011, the Republic of South Sudan was declared. In July 2013, President Salva Kiir and Vice President Riek Machar fell out, the latter mobilizing the Sudan People Liberation Movement in Opposition (SPLM/A-IO) fighters against government forces. Numerous generals and fighter groups joined the resulting South Sudanese Civil War lasting between December 15, 2013 and February 22, 2020. The resulting political negotiations and settlements marked the *new* phase of the “Southern Problem”—what to do *with* the new nation. Johnson's (2016b, x) rhetorical question—“How, then, did a peace agreement designed to unify the country come to be the instrument by which it was finally divided?”—retrospectively queries this *new* Southern Problem—how to rationalize internal chaos outside the rhetoric of slavery and oppression used to justify the split from Khartoum. Such chaos defined the country's nationhood underway. Historically, South Sudan's diverse mix of ethnicities and cultures⁹ necessitated a broad-based approach to the orderly management of armed factions during the struggles. Rolandsen and Daly (2016, 124–25) note the role of ethnic alliances in the elusive configuration of SPLM/A as a national movement in the early 1990s, a view popularized by other scholars (Jok and Hutchinson 1999; Deng 2005; and Ben-trovato and Skårås 2023). These delicate ethnic bonds also informed postwar identities where, without a “clear-cut enemy, it is a major challenge for South Sudan to devise a common identity that unites the putative nation beyond competing loyalties to ethnicity, tribe and family” (Frahm 2012, 21). *No Simple Way Home* dramatizes the numerous post-cessation strategies countering this difficulty as a process of nationhood.

The first strategy, multiethnic political participation, is emphasized through Rebecca's return from exile. The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) signed in Addis Ababa on September 12, 2018 during the 33rd Extraordinary Summit of the IGAD, under the South Sudan post-cessation process, recognized multiethnic political participation. Rebecca's character arc in *No Simple Way Home* and her place in remediation can be understood in this framework of post-independence strategies to mitigate conflicts through the management of political and ethnic rivalry. The intervention it procures, her allegiance to traditional values of family as a befitting metaphor for the nation, reorients nationhood from adversarial politics to a common home. This symbolic intervention is made possible by proffering the image of the mother and circumventing allusions to multipolar political or ethnic alliances. Her character journey collocates the personal and political dimensions of her “homecoming.” The initial scene of this sequence, which occurs in 2019, shows Rebecca and her family—accompanied by other people—praying in her Nairobi exile home. We then see her aboard an airplane, flying to Juba. The narrator's voice proclaims: “After years in exile, we came home.”

This homecoming montage signals the February 22, 2020 formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (RTGoNU) which incepted, among others, Rebecca and Riek Machar into government. It positions her within the country's political elite, a move designed to procure unified nationhood and counter ethnicity "as a mobilizing tool" and a reason for South Sudan's failure "to formulate and institutionalise an effective national identity" (Zambakari 2015, 75). This dramatization of Rebecca's appointment into government as a highpoint of post-cessation impartiality simultaneously posits her (and other ethnic factions') return to South Sudan and inclusion in government as the first effort towards post-ethnic nationhood.

Secondly, collaboration with international experts to deliver a "peace dividend to the people of South Sudan" (Govt. Canada 2012), largely focused on effective democratic governance, territorial control, public service, security, and natural resources management as anchors for long-lasting peace. In Akuol's film, Rebecca's ideals of public service, publicized through the mobilization of documentation and relief efforts for flood disaster victims within the film expand the idea of restitution that she embodies beyond the political leaders. She emphasizes her indebtedness to the people of South Sudan, reiterating her grief over the lack of post-independence benefits for the citizens. This sense of indebtedness fits within the broad theoretical trajectories focused on rehabilitating political ideals that had been in operation throughout most of the country's civil wars, making them tenable in postwar political and cultural alignments. These maneuvers humanize the protagonist beyond her political obligations, amplifying the significance of her characterization as a mother.

Thirdly are ideological campaigns to shift the nation from negative motivations for collective action, as has been the case during the war and soon after. Frahm (2012, 33) suggests that South Sudanese need to "develop a positive association" and recommends "promoting the cultural heritage of all of South Sudan's ethnic groups equitably and on a national stage ... [to] enable each and everyone feel like a proud member of the South Sudanese." Bentrovato and Skårås (2023, 1046) discuss the government-led efforts to produce history textbooks teaching nationhood and offering "a unifying narrative of the historical victimisation of the South and its struggle against Sudan's central state, embodying a discourse of "unity in resistance" as a "usable past" that can mobilize shared nationhood. For Akuol, national unity is adduced through recognition and acceptance of existing symbols. The narrator/director's monologue, which accompanies the shots of the silhouette scene of the John Garang Statue in Juba, is a placeholder for the ambiguity and incompleteness of both nation-building and nationhood:

In South Sudan, my father's image surrounds us. We imagine and remember different versions of him, transforming him into the hero we can't be. The day he died is now Martyr's Day. He is our founding father, our departed father of the liberation struggle. What about our mother who is here?

The film's invocation of the above strategies highlights the need to go past post-independence theories that consider nationhood through the frames of politics

and nation-building (Pedersen and Bazilian 2014), dynamics of the guerrilla wars (Rolandsen 2005), legacies of the civil war (Natsios 2012), political transition (Arnold and LeRiche 2013), early days of independence (Kuyok 2015), lessons and challenges (Zambakari 2013) and (Belloni 2011), failures of governance (Rolandsen 2015), economy and peacebuilding (Rolandsen 2019), challenges of meeting social obligations (Kuol 2020), residual conflicts (Krause 2019), citizenship and democracy (Zambakari 2015), and even colonial legacies (Zambakari 2012). Whereas these discussions are helpful in socioeconomic and political nationhood, they imagine nationhood only in its material possibilities; as if it were solely a political process of state-building, rather than also a cultural one. The prominence of indirect metaphors of post-independence chaos, which do not amplify the aura of conflict but mobilize sentiments towards political reforms in Akuol's film, hints at a concern with these nonmaterial processes of nationhood beyond the pragmatic political inclusivity. The protagonist's detached review of political reward—which infers the material provisions of the RTGoNU agreement—and her inclination towards public service offer a new model for theorizing post-cessation unification. The remainder of this article reads the film's organizing idea: that the crisis of nationhood in South Sudan does not exclusively arise from ethnic diversity, the expiry of negative unifying forces, clamour for elite political spots, or territorial and ethnic fragmentation; 'it' is *deferred* contingent on the availability of a unifying identity. The ensuing subsection critiques post-cessation conflicts and the significance of motherhood's iconicity in theorizing nationhood in Akuol's film.

Nationhood in *No Simple Way Home*

No Simple Way Home portrays a kind of anti-climax in post-independence South Sudan, with a nostalgic aura for a *kind of* independence that never happened. It predicates nationhood as a sign (of sharable yet absent ideals), hence open to subjective interpretation. As a sign, nationhood is not inert; it is spontaneous and open-ended (Edgar 2004, 86). Its inertial iconicity is projected through the image of the Mother of the Nation. Nationhood is also spontaneous; it is driven by the protagonist's impulse to advocate for streamlined future-sensitive governance. This advocacy presumes the continuance of the nation's founding ideals as a process responsive to everyday eventualities. It is also open-ended because the *deferment* of such ideals of nationhood presumes an alternative *kind of* nationhood underway. The process of interpreting nationhood as a sign thus rationalizes this equivocal "*kind of* nationhood" as an attempt to intercept 1) the temporality of Dr Garang's iconicity within the realism of his absence; and 2) the exigencies of post-independence liberation beyond the clamour for frontline position in the national narrative.

i. Temporality of Iconicity

The mood of the sequence of Dr Garang's death—a critical narrative beat in Akuol's film—is sad, and the tone is retrospective. It starts with an aerial shot of

an indeterminate green landscape with different gradations of fog. The narrator's voice intones: "My father spent 21 years at war, and died after 21 days in office." This cuts to the shot of a still picture of a military convoy: armed soldiers ride atop open-carrier trucks, with the photo of Dr Garang affixed on top of the leading vehicle. The shot is composed in a perspective framing dominated by a straight road on which the convoy is riding, surrounded by vague bushland. More still images showing grieving South Sudanese citizens follow, culminating with a portrait of the protagonist's mourning family. They are seated on chairs in the foreground, surrounded by members of the clergy and other persons—perhaps friends.¹⁰ All these still portraits, colour-graded to grey, can be read as "part of the cultural knowledge that is inextricable from everyday practice and local ideologies" (Pink 2015, 55). They specify the cultural textuality of grief, specifically, its capacity as a symbolic interlocutor in the immediate need for an alternative register of Dr Garang's iconicity. The director-narrator continues: "My mother became a widow the year she turned fifty. I was sixteen. Through her grief, she not only had a family to hold together, but people began to call her Mother of the Nation." Superimposing this narration with the image of the protagonist's family achieves two semiotic purposes: 1) It insulates the family from the aura of grief, and gestures toward their importance in the national concern of the moment: the burden of the protagonist as the heir to her husband's iconicity. Accordingly, the audiovisual nexus semiotically signifies this *conferral* of her late husband's iconicity of nationhood. 2) It illustrates the importance of a unifying icon in the nation's shift from struggle to independence, visually denoted by the film's changing visual style from the extensive use of portraits of the past to video footage of the protagonist in post-2005 South Sudan. Rebecca's physical return to South Sudan is prioritized and completed in the first fifteen minutes of the film. The rest of the film is broadly about "finding her way around her country as a home." This stylistic choice is symbolic; it focuses the remainder of the film on the transferal and synchronization of national Fatherhood with the protagonist's persona of motherhood. At no time does the viewer notice South Sudan as devoid of its iconicity of nationhood.

If "the need to impart a message comes even before the message is created" (Semenenko 2012, 113), this montage—which appears before the film's narrative premise—indexes a *need* to communicate "something" about South Sudan. This "something" is deducible through the simultaneity of non-discrete and discrete narrative features in the film's textuality. The former occurs when the text is "perceived in its totality" and the latter when it is perceived as "composed of divisible elements, or shots" (31). The non-discrete textuality of South Sudan in the film emerging through the consonance of Dr Garang's grieving family—a portrait of the nation's history frozen in time—and audio commentary produces a harmonious semiotic totality of his timeless iconicity. The high visibility of the protagonist's public profile materializing from her communal efforts differentiates her political brand from the mainstream, often accused of self-interested indulgences at the public's expense (Deng 2015). The discrete approach allows us to analyze the figure of the Mother of the Nation as a separate feature within the total image of South Sudan.¹¹ She is a historical conduit of alternative imagination of South Sudanicity. Thus, when the narrator says, "We toured the country

as a family with my father's body. I will never forget the sound of despair that started from a distance and rumbled like it was coming from the earth," she is materializing the idiosyncratic textuality of this grief as a concurrently discrete aspect of Rebecca's national role. Rumbling is a metaphor for the irretrievable course of nature, denoting the incommunicable loss that Rebecca experienced as she accompanied her husband's body. The reference to earth denotes the retrievable aspect of nature—the nation, her commitment to which is the subject of Akuol's film. I term this textuality idiosyncratic because extending film language beyond cinematography into metaphors of nature enables a semiotic detour from the finality of death to that of motherhood and its promise of renewal. It figures the rebirth of South Sudan's nationalism from a mere multiethnic revolutionary group united by struggle to a *kind* of family grounded on the same earth. The question at hand, which has to do with the perpetuation of the "meaning" of Dr Garang's iconicity, is: Why is it important for his iconicity to continue, and how does this happen?

On "why," the question invokes the protagonist's figurative qualities of "language-object" and "the metalanguage" of South Sudan's nationhood (Kalinin 2022, 213). In language-object, the symbol is read through "everything that gravitates to meaning-creating mechanisms founded on the text's continuous nature" (Kalinin 2022, 213). The continuity, implied through the solitary moment of the grieving protagonist, helps to curate motherhood as the *new* semiotic model for South Sudan's nationhood. It is not merely a relational continuity—that the protagonist continues the embodiment of nationhood—but that the "model" of that nationhood is sustained in her characterization. Concerning "metalanguage," motherhood is rationalized as "a model of description for the very mechanisms of production and reproduction of culture, semiotisation of experience, signifying dynamics of the text" (Kalinin 2022, 213). Here, the iconicity of motherhood is philosophical; the mother is the new apparatus of national discourse. This is quintessential to theorizing that the country's nationhood did not certainly materialize on Independence Day nor did its iconicity vanish on the day of Dr Garang's death. Motherhood allows for seamless imagery of national cultures and the dynamic nature of nationhood.

On "how," I borrow from Nikolay Poselyagin's (2022, 225) notions of phenomenology and narratology. As a phenomenon, nationhood's transmittable quality accrues from recurrently juxtaposing the images of the protagonist with a rhetoric of nationhood. This transmission is intelligible at both the semiotic and hermeneutic levels (Petrilli and Ponzio 2005, 36). In the former, the phenomenon of transmittable nationhood reads motherhood as a self-contained sign with the capacity to signify both the struggle and its aftermath. This level presupposes an "internal semiotic structure of the signifying process and considers signs in terms of their intrinsic signifying capacity." The internal semiotic structure here infers South Sudan's revolutionary agenda, the specific expectations which unified the fighters and the citizens they represented, and the capacity of the image of the mother to signify this agenda. In Akuol's film, phenomenology mediates between the protagonist's consciousness concerning her world, strictly produced through the national preconditions of struggle and, thereafter, the reality of ineffectuality imposed upon her (Poselyagin 2022, 225–

26). Here, she prompts a recognition of the country's iconicity and its capacity to exist in the absence of its bearer, the late Dr Garang. At a hermeneutic level, we consider "the interpretive response it elicits and in which it is generated" (Petrilli and Ponzio 2005, 36). *No Simple Way Home's* minimal coverage of the incumbent president, political excesses, or armed groups, restricted to only minimal complimentary appearances, has a semiotic value in posturing the protagonist's figurative carryover of Dr Garang's iconicity not as part of a collective political process, but as an overall ideal at whose helm is the protagonist. This ideal, inferred as a personal burden for the protagonist whose narrative goal is to embody her husband's iconicity of unified nationhood in contemporary times, reflects on an important issue: in the wake of Dr Garang's death, many South Sudanese citizens struggled to find a uniting force. The film thus provides a perspective of how Dr Garang's iconicity as the progenitor of South Sudan's nationhood may be retrieved in service of the nation in its present times. Such narratology can be theorized as "a heuristic tool, not an objective grid providing certainty" (Bal 2017, xi). Rebecca's motherhood speculates on the temporal conveyance of Dr Garang's figure of a devoted statesman by considering the protagonist as his "symmetrical counterpart" (Bal 2017, xii). It is her imaginal construal as the de facto addressee of her husband's iconicity to materialize his continuum rather than disruption, which is henceforth ratified through her frontline role.

ii. Frontline Involvement

For the viewer, the representation of Rebecca's persona as a mother materializes through her difficulties on the country's political frontline. In a poignant scene set on February 21, 2020, the day of her appointment as the first female president of South Sudan she tells the director: "I didn't know that I was going to be a politician because I didn't like it; because politicians seem to be like liars, and I don't like lying." She further adds: "My face in the government is not only my face but John Garang's. And I must be careful." This statement contextualizes her literal post-cessation stance towards the frontline political position, built on her political profile and active involvement in the processes of postwar nationhood since January 2005. She had served as a former second lady of Sudan, a former minister of roads and transport of Southern Sudan, and an advisor to the president of South Sudan. Her figurative role relies on her similarity to the idea of South Sudan, the object to which her motherhood refers (Nöth 1999, 613). Her frontline role acknowledges and reinforces her symbolism of de jure Mother of the Nation, as adduced in her media interview with Ahmed Maher (2021):

There were mixed feelings towards my appointment. The grassroots, the people who are down there, they are not looking at me as Madam Rebecca, but they are looking at me as the wife of John Garang. So, they are seeing John Garang in me ... maybe she will do a good thing because she was the wife of John Garang.¹²

This interview provides context for her frontline position as a space of struggle for intervention. She terms herself a “headache” to the government, highlighting the inertia towards the country’s ideal nationhood as a new struggle for nationhood. In a nation characterized by politics of fear (Thiong 2021), “headache” easily passes as a euphemism for Rebecca’s courage to lead from the front. Akuol’s film draws an analogy to this interview in a medium shot depicting post-independence conflict, where the protagonist addresses the media: “As a victim who has lost a beloved person, is this really what we fought for, what we are doing today? If things are really not going the way we were waging our struggle, I will not keep quiet.” This scene appears in a montage interjecting images of displaced citizens fleeing conflict with shots of armed fighters. She infers the country’s leadership about its incendiary post-independence stance where political wrangles overshadow public interests. Media reports attribute this to structures of governance and ethnic reconciliation (Hamilton 2014), and intensified ethnic aggressions and degeneration of nationhood (Daily Nation 2020). Other organizations describe the nation’s hurried independence as a process of “lofty expectations” (Taft 2014). By substituting the earlier portraits featuring her family (Figure 1), with her solitary figure as she articulates national issues, the film semiotically acknowledges the significance of her voice in the government acquiescing its hardliner political positions for a more accommodative stance. Per the narrator, the frontline role has a goal:¹³

After the swearing-in, new questions are taking over: what is the vision beyond the struggle? ... My mother stepping into the role that my father died in will not be history repeating itself. She is not going to be a martyr of the liberation struggle. She will more likely be remembered for what she does in this new position.

The phrase “what she does in this new position” asserts the protagonist’s preference for new directions in nationhood as a solitary goal. It appears to iterate her paradoxical political profile as an opposition leader in the government of the country her husband founded. Whether one reads the film as a family memoir or a national narrative, this frontline articulation of nationhood in South Sudan through the potentiality of the mother figure is noteworthy. It is hard to differentiate the personal and national discourses mediated through the protagonist’s life in *No Simple Way Home*. In a way, the film is a metaphor for both the detour of the director’s diasporic journey back to her homeland as well as the political burden borne by her mother, a conjunction between past and present, struggle and freedom, and tradition and modernity. It offers a worthy provocation on contemporary nationhood in South Sudan beyond the idealized templates of political deals. On this, the narrator’s final monologue is unequivocal:

It looks like there is no peace on the other end of freedom. And home is not a place of rest. I still don’t know what it means to be South Sudanese. I do know that the promise of liberation and independence is not the reality of liberation and independence.

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Notes

1. The film won the DOK Horizonte award in Munich (2022) and the Programs Choice award at the Encounters International Documentary Film Festival (2022).
2. All transcriptions in the article are by the author and derived from the film.
3. The most notable is the 2014–18 power struggles between President Salva Kiir Mayardit and his deputy Riek Machar, which was attributed to an attempted coup.
4. The latter is the period when Rebecca was appointed to the position of the fourth vice president of South Sudan alongside her opposition contemporary, Riek Machar, ending the post-cessation civil war.
5. See, for instance, the profusion of post-apartheid films in South Africa after 1990.
6. The phrase “founding first family” here is an aspirational term that indexes a future where Dr Garang’s family “assumes” an assured recognition as the key recipients of political power in the new nation.
7. IGAD was also the liaison body between the international community, the Khartoum government, and the SPLM/A.
8. The First Sudanese Civil War (also called Anyanya Rebellion or Anyanya I due to the dominance of Equatorians in the guerrilla outfit) lasted between 1955 and 1972 (for an extensive discussion of this war, please see Poggo (2009) and Johnson (2016a, 2016b)). The Second Sudanese Civil War lasted between 1983 and 2005 when Dr Garang was appointed vice president of Sudan.
9. Zambakari (2015: 71) reports ninety nationalities comprising roughly 8,260,490 citizens spread across 619,745 km² of territory.
10. This portrait is also repeated at the end of the scene after Rebecca is appointed vice president, perhaps as a semiotic signal of the end of her grief.
11. The image is subsequently zoomed in to emphasize the protagonist.
12. This is the author’s transcription from the media clip of the media interview.
13. Henceforth, the film transitions to scenes of the protagonist’s active political career.

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