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Rainmaking and climate change: global discourse and local perspectives over regicide in South Sudan

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This article analyses how agro-pastoral communities perceive, adapt to, and address the effects of variable weather through a case study of regicides occurring during drought in South Sudan. Recently, South Sudan has been regarded as one of the African countries most severely affected by climate change. This global climate-change discourse has shaped narratives among policymakers and the media. Over the past decade, several communities in the 'hills and mountains agro-ecological zones' have experienced incidents in which villagers expelled or killed rain chiefs accused of deliberately stopping the rain. While the South Sudanese government and media attribute the droughts leading to these events to climate change, this view contrasts sharply with local perspectives. This article investigates two recent cases of rain chief killings among the Lopit, focusing on locally constructed beliefs about the relationship between nature and humans, as well as internal social conflicts. For the Lopit, rain is the central symbol connecting local religion and politics. Rain chiefs, believed to control weather within and during their reign, are responsible for ensuring rainfall according to their agricultural calendar, which is essential for community wellbeing and livestock health. They also serve as intermediaries between humans and the divine, helping people maintain and restore relationships with the divine. However, in this region of variable weather, rain represents both authority and risk. Drought not only causes conflict between communities and rain chiefs but also exposes underlying social tensions. This article contends that the straightforward link between drought and climate change requires reconsideration and highlights the importance of examining the morality of regicides.

KEYWORDS
climate change, rain chief, rainmaking, regicide, South Sudan

Introduction

Using examples of recent cases of allegations of misusing supernatural powers during droughts in South Sudan, this article examines the narratives and practices of South Sudanese regarding climate change, and how they perceive natural disasters, adapt to climate change, and mitigate its impact. This study addresses the following research questions: How have local people in South Sudan perceived, narrated, and coped with natural disasters? What kind of ontology lies in their understanding of the relationship between nature and humans? How do people accept or reject dominant global discourse of climate change? If local people have concerns regarding community responses to recent droughts, what are they?

Climate-change discourse refers to the complex social process through which understandings of climate change are constructed, contested, and communicated. Such discourse encompasses scientific, political, economic, and cultural elements that shape public perceptions and debates about the causes, impacts, and solutions associated with climate change. The global rise in temperature, a primary driver of climate change, is caused by greenhouse gas emissions. While developed nations are the primary sources of such emissions, developing societies and impoverished communities are the most vulnerable to their impacts (Chakrabarty, 2012: 9). Africa, in particular, is widely considered one of the regions most severely affected by climate change, including extreme weather events such as droughts, floods, and sea-level rise.

According to a World Bank report (Borgomeo et al., 2023), South Sudan is among the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world. The climate-change discourse centres on the country's high vulnerability to extreme weather, which exacerbates ongoing conflict and displacement by threatening livelihoods and intensifying competition for dwindling resources. Climate-related extreme events such as droughts and floods are allegedly reported to lead to exacerbating local conflict dynamics, displacing communities, eroding livelihoods, and intensifying competition over limited resources (UNIMISS, DPO and OCHA, 2025). In particular, climate-change discourse is more dominant in humanitarian aid and development after 2018 when the civil war officially ended. Since 2019, when a historic flood hit South Sudan following the sudden rise in water levels of Lake Victoria, which is located in the upper reaches of the Nile River, flooding has occurred almost every year in the wetlands along the Nile River basin referred to as the Sudd. In 2024, catastrophic flooding affected almost half of the country's counties, subsequently impacting 735,000 and displacing 65,000 people (UNOCHA, 2024). In addition, rising temperatures and changing precipitation patterns have led to drought in some parts of the country. Rainfall in South Sudan has declined by 10–20 per cent since the mid-1970s (USGS, 2011). Observed warming of more than 1 ˚C is equivalent to another 10 to 20 per cent reduction in rainfall for crops. Consequently, patterns in which floods and droughts occur in the same season have become widespread, with the latter happening earlier in the season, and the former occurring later (Serefino, 2024).

Key aspects of the dominant climate-change discourse in South Sudan include the linkage between climate change and food insecurity, between resource competition and local conflicts, and efforts by national and international organisations to integrate climate resilience into peacebuilding and development strategies. While such discourse relies on experts' opinions on the basis of meteorological data, research into how local people and communities perceive these impacts and discourses, what they think causes extreme weather, and how they deal with drought and floods remains insufficient. In other words, the climate-change discourse has been shaped by the perspectives of the officials and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) who observe climate crisis through the lens of climate change from outside the affected communities and seek to intervene, thereby overlooking the narratives of the people actually living with these impacts.

However, some NGO reports mention local residents' perceptions and practices regarding climate disasters, although they do not draw as much attention as the mainstream narratives. For example, local NGO staff have expressed alarm over accusations of misusing supernatural powers and youth violence against accused individuals and their families as well as their displacement (Gworo, 2023). To properly understand such cases of allegations during droughts, this study examines the knowledge systems constructed within each local community and their relationships with human as well as non-human actors. In many rural communities in South Sudan, natural phenomena like rainfall, thunder, and drought have been understood from a religious perspective.

Drought, especially, has not merely been viewed as a natural disaster, but rather interpreted as a social event caused by social and moral problems such as the violation of taboos and misconducts by specific individuals. In the specific community adopted as a case in this study, a sacred chief possesses the mythical, life-sustaining power by controlling rainfall, and such power underpins their political authority. However, if they are perceived as failing to fulfil their responsibility over rain, they may become subject to accusation and sanctions among the community.

This article discusses how the conception held by the communities that consider climate to be mutually influential with human behaviours differs from meteorological knowledge, which takes the dichotomy between human and nature as a given. It is now widely recognised that the rapid increase in greenhouse gases resulting from the mass consumption of fossil fuels, alongside human activities driven by capitalism—such as power generation, transport, and industry—are the primary causes of climate change. On the other hand, local people facing changing climate patterns understand the weather in relation to their own actions, the behaviour of specific individuals, or the political and moral issues of their community. It could be said that both global climate change and local weather variability, albeit on difference in scale, are perceived as political and moral issues. Using the case study of the recent violent incidents over rain-control issues among agro-pastoral communities in South Sudan, this article seeks to rethink human and non-human relations, with serious consideration of local ontology.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. Section *Materials and methods* describes the geographical setting of the research area as well as research methods. Section *Results* addresses the relationship between nature and humans/climate and society, with a particular focus on the relationship between divinities, rain chiefs, and people in natural disasters within the cosmological order of local communities. Based on local cosmology, the causes and processes of recent cases of killing of rain chiefs is examined in detail. Lastly, in Section *Discussion*, the conclusion considers the politics of rain in an era of climate change.

Materials and methods

Geographical setting

This section briefly describes the geographical environment of the south-eastern parts of South Sudan, the setting for the case study, and specifically the Lopit people (see also Section *Results*).

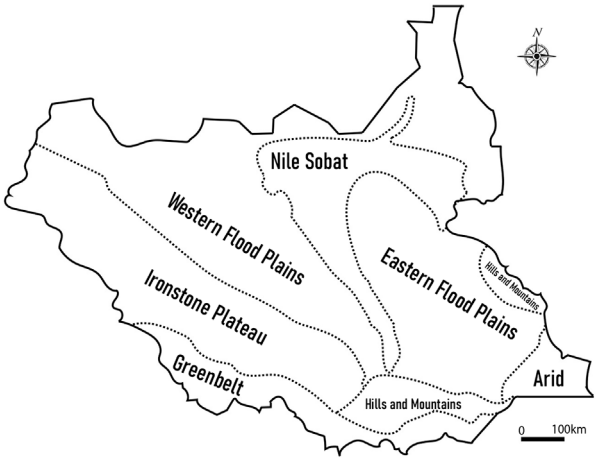

FIGURE 1
Agro-ecological zone in South Sudan. Source: Created by author from MAF (2007).

Ecologically, South Sudan is divided into six agro-ecological zones (MAF, 2007): the Greenbelt, Ironstone Plateau, Hills and Mountains, Flood Plains (Eastern and Western), the Nile/Sobat Rivers, and the Arid and Pastoral zone (Figure 1). The rainfall pattern varies according to agro-ecological zones. The south-eastern parts of South Sudan, which corresponds with hills and mountains zone has an annual rainfall of 600–1,000 mm. This zone is suitable for cultivation of grains like sorghum, millets, and maize, as well as simsim and peanuts. Dozens of agrarian and agro-pastoral peoples like the Lotuho-speaking groups including the Lotuho, Lopit, Lokoya, and Horiok as well as their neighbouring groups like the Pari, Lulubo, and Acholi have dwelt in this area for centuries.

The Lopit are classified as part of the Eastern Nilotic languages, within the Nilo-Saharan language group (Moodie and Billington, 2020). According to their oral traditions, their ancestors migrated from the border area between South Sudan, Uganda, and Kenya and built several settlements on the slopes and foothills of the Lopit Mountains, which is a low-lying range on the plains of the state of Eastern Equatoria in South Sudan. The Lopit are mountain-dwellers who have lived in well-fortified villages with populations of between 1,000–2500 inhabitants, and often say 'mountains can protect us'.

Although reliable population data is limited due to prolonged regional unrest and a considerable number of displaced people, population estimates suggest that the total population of the 55–60 Lopit villages is between 70,000 and 100,000 (UNOCHA, 2022). The dispersed Lopit community away from their homeland includes the refugees who grew up and were educated in towns or refugee camps in Kenya and Uganda. Some of the refugees have resettled in western countries like Australia, Canada, and USA. In addition, an increasing number of young Lopit tend to move from the villages and live in the capital Juba or regional towns in South Sudan, seeking education or employment opportunities.

Research methods

This study is based on literature reviews of previous ethnographies and news articles on rain disputes as well as primary materials collected through interviews with the Lopit and Lotuho people. Remote fieldwork was employed to collect primary materials. Remote fieldwork refers to conduct research without being there on the field site in real time in situations where field research is difficult to conduct for the reasons of armed conflicts, natural disasters, or the COVID-19 pandemic (Briggs 2023; Postill, 2017). This was due to the following situation that arose during the research.

In the mid-2013, the author began to conduct the fieldwork among the Lopit in South Sudan. However, since the outbreak of civil war at the end of 2013, the author has not been permitted to enter the country and conducting fieldwork in their villages has been substantially impossible. Between 2023 and 2025, interviews were conducted with Lopit refugees in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya. The remote fieldwork in refugee camps was adopted as an alternative method to gather primary and secondary materials through as rich a variety of sources as possible regarding the Lopit.

Face-to-face interviews in the refugee camp followed an open-ended format, with questions intended to elicit detailed responses. Dialogues between researchers and interlocutors were conducted mainly in English, although interviewees occasionally spoke Lopit among themselves. In such instances, other participants were asked to translate the conversation into English. All nine interviewees were male, they included chairpersons, three schoolteachers, and NGO workers, all of whom had lived in the camp for more than 20 years. These individuals were selected because, except for the chairperson, they hailed from the villages where the two regicide cases discussed in this article occurred.

The Lopit may not know their exact age, but they often know which age group they belong to. Two interviewees, whose ages were between the late twenties and early thirties, belonged to the ruling-age set known as the *monyomiji*, while the rest, in their late thirties and over forty, belonged to the retired generation.[1] They remembered not only the Lopit calendar, which was not used in the camp, but also farming work and rituals in their home villages. Among the interlocutors, the author's primary informant, a man aged forty-four in August 2025, belongs to the royal clan (the clan producing rain chief) of Lohobohobo village, as discussed in Section *Case 5: burial alive of Oture*. He possesses extensive knowledge of rainmaking rituals and rainstones and serves as the elder of a Protestant church established by South Sudanese refugees in the camp. Like many Lopit refugees, he combines Christian concepts with local knowledge in a hybrid manner. The case in Section *Case 5: burial alive of Oture* is based on his telephone confirmation with his father, who lives in Lohobohobo village, to ensure the accuracy of the information. As Briggs (2023) points out, Mobile Phone Methods extend the ways in which ethnographic research is conducted and are particularly useful when more traditional, face-to-face ethnography is not open to the researcher.

In remote fieldwork, local research assistant often plays a pivotal role in collecting materials. As mobile phones have become an essential means of communication not only in the refugee camps but also in the villages of Lopit, thereby communication between the refugee camps and the villages using online communication tools as

1 The handover period of *monyomiji* varies by village among the Lopit, therefore individuals of the same age may belong to different age sets.

SNS and online conference systems has become an integral part of their everyday life. Communication via social media to local research assistance from Japan, where the author live, has also become much easier.

For Section *Case 1: burial alive of Hobon*, the reliability of the case studies was verified through interviews conducted by contacting villagers in South Sudan via telephone and social media in February 2026. This verification was possible because one of the research assistants interviewed in the refugee camp returned to Mura-Lopit village (Mura) in 2025. Fifty villagers living in Mura participated in verifying the narratives described in Section *Case 1: burial alive of Hobon*. The participants included thirty-one men and nineteen women. Forty-four interlocutors were retired *monyomiji* or elders, while six belonged to the *monyomiji*, including individuals who had witnessed the burial of the rain chief. According to the research assistant, these interlocutors gathered with him to discuss the narratives presented from interviews conducted in Kakuma Refugee Camp. They identified inaccuracies and provided additional information during the discussion. Subsequently, the informant compiled these inaccuracies and provided additional information and sent them to the author via telephone and social media. This research method enabled the collection of detailed and reliable information for each case.

Potstill notes that there may be two related anxieties in the long-distance fieldwork; these include: (a) the ethnographic fear of missing out, and (b) anthropological aversion to thin descriptions (Postill, 2017: 66). To address this concern, he states from his own experience that the researcher can attend the event telemetrically via social media or know the field by revisiting the archived tweets and video footage, even if he or she is not present on the site. Furthermore, he adds that there is no substantial difference between the remote and on-site sections of the chapter in terms of their descriptive thickness (Postill, 2017: 67).

However, in this study, remote fieldwork was not a perfect substitute for on-site fieldwork. In terms of the diversity of interviewees, the fact that all participants in the group discussions held in the camps were male, and that it was not possible to conduct direct interviews with the incumbent rain chiefs in either the refugee camps or the villages, has limited the scope of the primary materials. Furthermore, as the interviews conducted in the refugee camps constitute primary sources, it cannot be ruled out that narratives of the participants have been influenced by the dire life conditions of the refugee camps, even after undergoing a verification process. Given that data verification carried out via telephone and remote communication was conducted with the support of a research assistant, there were limitations in terms of the depth of responses and the accuracy of the verification.

Finally, the names of interviewees in both Kakuma and South Sudan were anonymised to protect their identities.

Results

Relationships among rain, divinities/kings, and people

For people who rely on subsistence economies in Africa, both agrarians and pastoralists, rain is significant and is believed to bring wellbeing and peace to the whole of community. This is especially true in South Sudan, where over 80 per cent of rural households still rely on rain-fed agriculture and animal husbandry. Rainfall patterns in South Sudan are highly variable both spatially and temporally. In the Lopit Mountains, rain may fall in one village but not in another. Furthermore, even if rain is expected in 1 year, little rain may fall, or a dry spell can turn into days of continuous rain in another year. Consequently, the climate has been unpredictable for local people since long before climate change became a major topic in discussion.

Considering the ecological power of rain which sustains all forms of life—including humans, animals, and plants—as well as the variability and unpredictability of rainfall, the fact that rain and divine power are intrinsically connected in many parts of Africa is not surprising (Krige and Krige, 1943; Kurimoto, 1986; Sanders, 2008; Simonse, 2017; Van Beek, 2025).

As Simonse (2006) highlighted, communities where power over nature is attributed to divinities and those where the climate is managed by sacred authorities exist in South Sudan. The former is the pastoral communities dwelling in the flood plains of the Nile River basin like the Dinka or the Nuer, while the latter, the kingship communities are the agrarian and agro-pastoral peoples in the hills and mountains agro-ecological zones.

Within their cosmology, natural phenomenon and social events—which to scientists, occur in separate domains or are subject to different modes of explanations—are seen as one text to be deciphered. From the perspectives of morality, disasters are particularly viewed as the wrath of divinities against human moral defects. These divinities demand constant attention from people. Neglecting these divinities can cause serious harm to the community. To avoid provoking divine wrath, people must offer sacrifices and offerings to the divinities in the hope of divine blessings like rain and protection from other dangers like diseases.

This study examines the relationship between nature, sacred authorities, and people among the kingship communities in the hills and mountains ago-ecological zone, taking the Lopit as an example. Among the Lopit, natural and social events are conceived as part of a single system ruled by the same principles. Consequently, both natural disasters and social calamities—such as cattle raiding by hostile neighbouring tribes—are understood as threats originating outside the community. The person entrusted with the role of addressing these threats is responsible for dealing with them. The Lopit also believe that the power in nature, known as *jiok*, controls the natural environment including rainfall, not humans. The word *jiok* carries various connotations and cannot be translated into a single word. The most common meaning is ‘god’, but can also refer to power or a force that brings disaster. The term *jiok* is interchangeable and translates to the Christian God for some Lopit people.

Among the kingship communities in the hills and mountains agro-ecological zone, masters have the ability to control divine power of *jiok* and bear responsibility for ensuring wellbeing and security of the community. The powers attributed to the different masters correspond to the most common hazards people face like droughts, winds, crop-eating insects or birds, and so on. In each community, these masters are given titles according to the risks they are responsible for managing, such as the Master of Rain, Master of the Land, Master of Locust, Master of Birds, and so on (Kurimoto, 1986; Simonse, 2017: 281–3). The primary task of these masters is to

keep natural and human risks away from the community and to maintain normalcy and peace within it. Among the various responsibilities, rain is viewed as the most crucial, given the significance of its impact on the community. Accordingly, drought is the most serious threat to the community and is also considered to be linked to the issue of morality. When drought occurs, the Lopit investigate the causes of failed rains. Frequently, the cause is a breach of the social rules: an act of violence, transgression of taboos, failure to perform a proper ritual, and so on. The king's anger towards his people for their disrespect is also a primary cause. In such cases, they appease the rain chief's (i.e., the king's) anger with tributes, ultimately hoping to be pardoned and for abundant rain.

Among the Lopit, a master or chief is called *habu* (Moodie and Billington, 2020). This term may also be used to refer to the government chiefs, not only the customary authorities. In all Lopit villages, two important customary chiefs; *habu lahai,* which literally means a 'King of the Rain', and *habu lafof,* which means a "King of the Soil/Land".[2] A rain chief has power over rain, and takes responsibility for pests and diseases for crops. Meanwhile, a chief of land takes charge of the safety of the community. He should defend the community against enemies, as well as lead wars with other communities. He should also ward off wild animals and reptiles, such as leopards and snakes, from the community with his powers.

A rain chief, whose position is inherited through hereditary succession, rules specific territorial areas composed of several villages. The Lopit were divided into seven territorial areas controlled by a particular rain chief, which are known as "rain-areas" (Huntingford, 2017: 85). In each rain-area, the rain chief can designate which son is to succeed him; normally both the father and mother of a man must "have rain".[3] A woman, the rain chief's wife in most cases, may be a rain chief as a "queen". A rain chief must bestow annual rain upon the people under their control, and the people must fulfil their duties: tilling their fields, building a house, brewing beer, and so on. The relationship between rain chiefs and people is structured as one of reciprocity (Simonse, 2006: 45). This reciprocity is positive when rain, which is the natural blessing of rain-chiefs, generates gifts from the community, or when gifts of the community are used to motivate the effectiveness of the rain chief. However, as described later, this reciprocity can turn negative when the rain chief is seen as ineffective or unwilling to provide for the people.

In South Sudan, the cosmological order, including natural phenomena, has been regarded as related to and reflected by social events or human conduct. Therefore, disasters are often interpreted as manifestations of the wrath of divinities or sacred authority. Rainfall is left to the divine power defined by the rules of exchanges between the rain-chief and people in the kingship communities, including the Lopit.

Rainmaking and disputes

Accordingly, when and how is rainmaking performed? If it does not rain, what relationship will the rain chiefs have with the people, and what outcome will they face? This section details the rainmaking ritual, the rainstones that are indispensable for it, and the graded age-set system called *monyomiji*, which exercise authority over the decision-making of the community.

Rainstones are the most important objects used in rainmaking rituals. Only three individuals are allowed to touch and keep the rainstones: the rain chief, his wife, and his assistant.[4] A belief exists that if an ordinary person touches or keeps the rainstones, misfortune such as blindness or sterility would befall their entire family. In addition, rain chiefs do not openly perform rainmaking rituals in public; in most cases, several ritual procedures are conducted in secret. Therefore, the following account of the rainstones and rainmaking rituals compiled through the many conversations with the interlocutors in South Sudan and Kenya can be considered an explanation shared among the villages rather than based on direct observation.

In the Lopit language, rainstones are called *hai,* which literally means "rain". The number of rainstones varies by village. Some interlocutors claimed that there were four, while others asserted that there were more. The rainstones appear transparent or white and are probably quartz or crystals similar to those used by neighbouring ethnic groups.[5] An interlocutor emphasised their material peculiarity, stating that when the rainstones are placed on the ground, water seeps out around them.[6] The rain chiefs keep the rainstones within a shrine called a *hiduri*, which is built beside the rain chief's house. In *hiduri*, the rainstones are carefully stored within a rain-pot made of clay filled with water, as well as calabash, spears, grains of sorghum and millet, and tobacco, which are used in rituals alongside them. The rain-chief is supposed to perform a series of ritual acts at *hiduri*, such as sprinkling water at the door of the rain-chief's house. The water used for the ritual must be collected from a specific river in the mountain valley.

The rain chief can not only call rain but can also halt it using several methods. For example, rain chiefs sometimes combine the white smoke from their cigarettes with white ostrich feathers to stop the rain. Spears used in rainmaking rituals may also be employed. When the rain chief smears red soil on the spearhead, the clouds above the spear disperse. Around when the sorghum ripens and

2 This article uses the term "rain chief" to refer to *habu lahai*. While the term "rainmaker" appears in colonial-era documents and remains commonly used in South Sudanese media and among the people, the term "rain chief" is considered more appropriate given its original meaning in the Lopit language and the religious and political position associated with it. However, when the term "rainmaker" appears in media sources, it is retained. The term "a chief of land" is used to refer to *habu lafof*. While the term landlord is commonly used in South Sudan to refer to *habu lafof*, in English it usually denotes a property owner who rents property commercially to tenants.

3 In general, a male rain chief marries a woman from a rain chief's clan that is different from his own.

4 An assistant to a rain chief is called a 'Deputy'. The assistants were selected not only from among rain chief's clans, but often from those with extensive experience in rainmaking rituals.

5 According to Simonse (2017), most stones he has seen during his fieldwork among the Lulubo, Lokoya and Lotuho were three and 10 cm in diameter. Pieces of white quartz on which condensation forms when the humidity in the air rises are the most desirable kind (Simonse, 2017: 313).

6 An interview with a close relative of the rain chief in Kakuma Refugee Camp on 25 August 2025.

TABLE 1 Lopit calendar.

Season	Local name for months	Approximate months
Hameiyu (Dry season)	*Loholong* = Sun	October
	Ifefyu = Cleaned up	November
	Isiaraimanyihifyong = Thirst (lit. Give your uncle water)	December
	Camidokh = Ophthalmia	January
	Hiromu = Let them dig	February
	Lohanyim = Simsim	March
Tahas (Rainy season)	*Lotahas* = Rainy season	April
	Lowas = Grain in ear (Planting of grains)	May
	Longorony = Dirty mouth	June
	Legis = The process of gathering crops	July
	Lomomo = Sausage tree	August
	Ifilhima = Sweet grain	September

Created by Author based on the collected data from multiple Lopit informants.

groundnuts dried, prolonged rainfall risks spoiling the crops. People ask the rain chiefs to halt the rain when too much falls during harvest season.

Disputes over rainfall are most likely to arise when dry spells persist during seasons in which rainfall is expected. The Lopit calendar, in which the lunar months are adjusted to fit the agricultural or solar year, shows how people recognise the ecological order corresponding to the rain pattern and crop cycle (Table 1). The Lopit refer to two seasons: the dry season (*hameiyu*) and rainy season (*tahas*). The cultivation period varies depending on the location of the field and type of crop. The Lopit have two main types of fields: the mountain fields called *nyarrat* and plain fields, *waha*.[7] People cultivate simsim, maize and early-maturing varieties of sorghum in the mountain fields, and long-maturing varieties of sorghum in the plain fields. The former are cooler and usually experience rainfall earlier than the latter. Peanuts and bulrush millets are mainly cultivated in the valley fields where sandy soil prevails.

In general, the dry season begins in October or November. When the dry season comes, sorghum, which is the staple food of the Lopit, can be harvested in the fields of the plains. The sorghum harvest continues until December. The dry season also marks the harvest period for peanuts and bulrush millets. After harvesting, the villages enter a period of festivities, which includes repairing drums, building houses, and clearing wood from their fields. In the dry season, two major festivals are held: harvesting and hunting festivals. In February, the people begin to dig the mountain fields. The local term for February, *Hiromu*, literally means "let them dig." The first planting season begins in February-March. Soon after the first rainfall in the mountain filed, the Lopit sow simsim, followed by sorghum and maize. The term for March, *Lohanyim,* which means the simsim, indicates the first crops are to be sown. In April, as rains begin to fall in the village and the plain fields, the villages enter the busy farming season. From April to May, people weed the mountain fields while sowing sorghum in the plain fields. During the same season, peanuts and bulrush millet are also sown in the valley fields. In the mountain fields, simsim ripen as early as June, with grains following shortly thereafter. A normal rainfall pattern for the agricultural calendar is abundant rainfall during May and July.

However, rainfall varies from year to year and place to place, and does not always occur according to the Lopit calendar. If crops fail due to lack of water, food shortage become severe around harvest time. In particular, tensions between the rain chiefs and people are likely to become high in June before the first harvest season.

Unexpected droughts have the most serious impact on people's livelihoods. Once dry weather persists, the rain chief is the first to bear the brunt of collective resentment. Often, the rain chief, who can control the rain, is suspected of having intentionally stopped the rain. In response to such suspicions, the rain chiefs would suggest other causes like misconduct of community members or insufficient contributions to rain chiefs, thus refuting their claims. The accusation and counter-arguments continue, sometimes leading to the killing of rain chiefs as the final solution chosen by the community (Kurimoto, 1986; Simonse, 2006; 2017).

The key political actors in these disputes over rain are the rain chiefs and the *monyomiji*. The latter can be described as the ruling age-generation and power is periodically transferred to the younger generation. Among the Lopit, each new generation of *monyomiji* takes power every 12 or 22 years.

Monyomiji is a political unit composed of male members of similar age, who promise to protect the community against all manner of threats. They have a practical legal, political, and military power over the entire village. If the village is attacked by neighbouring communities or ethnic groups, they must defend and decide whether to take revenge. If cattle are raided, *monyomiji*

7 *Nyarrat* refers to a flat plateau formed in a mountain valley, while *waha* refers to the bushy plains in front of the settlement. *Waha* is also used to denote the wilderness outside the village.

TABLE 2 Rain disputes in Eastern Equatoria state between 2021 and 2024.

No.	Date	Place/Ethnic group	Overview
Case 1	July 2021	Lafon County/Lopit	After an investigation ordered by the monyomiji, a 43-year-old rainmaker was buried alive by the angry locals for not taking care of the rainstones properly (Radio Tamazuj, 2021).
Case 2	May 2022	Magwi County/Acholi	Two sons of a former rainmakers were accused regarding the prolonged drought in the area. They complained that they were left out of the beneficiaries when NGOs had distributed seeds to locals. The two men were accused of bringing suffering to the entire village by preventing rain. The angry locals issued an ultimatum of four days to ensure that it rains or further punishment would be exacted (The City Review, 2022).
Case 3	Sep. 2022	Ikwoto County/Lango	A rainmaker was lynched and beaten to the death by youths when he went to the funeral, and his body was burned to ashes (Radio Tamazuj, 2022; Jocob, 2022).
Case 4	Sep. 2023	Torit County/Otuho	Police investigating the death of a 70-year-old man suspected youths of killing the man who was suspected of bewitching the rain (Radio Tamazuj, 2023).
Case 5	Oct. 2024	Lafon County/Lopit	A rainmaker of Lohobohobo village was buried alive after being accused of causing a long dry spell (Radio Tamazuj, 2024; Patrick, 2024; Falzetta and Coleman, 2025).

attempt to track the culprits. They engage in communal labour in the fields to fight against hunger. When drought occurs, they investigate its causes and seek solutions. In rural areas of South Sudan like Lopit, where the national government barely controls the local security, the *monyomiji* effectively function as community police or councils. Oversight of rain chiefs is one of their duties. Normally, the *monyomiji* show respect to the rain chiefs and cooperate with them. However, once a drought hits, the *monyomiji* are tasked with watching and interrogating the rain chiefs, which leads to antagonism between them.

The political system of the kingships including the Lopit is characteristic of the dual system in the source of legitimate power: hereditary kings and ruling generation (Kurimoto and Simonse, 1988). A hereditary rain chief plays a central role in maintaining the cosmological order, while the ruling generations take responsibility for protecting the community with practical military and political power. Regicides, that is, killing of rain chiefs, are the final outcome when the tension between the two reaches its peak. The decision to execute the rain chiefs is reached by consensus among the *monyomiji*.

Regicide: media discourse and local perspectives

This section focuses on the recent cases of killings of rain chiefs among the Lopit. Specifically, how those interviewed interpreted the regicides is examined and compared with media discourse.

First, the fact that the regicide has been practiced as far back as the 19th century, when the Arabs and Europeans reached this region and began to record local customary habits, should be noted. According to the official documents and several ethnographies across, regicide during drought had been carried out in different communities of the states of Central and Eastern Equatoria (Kurimoto, 1986; Simonse, 2017). Simonse (2017) collected and reported 24 confirmed cases of accomplished, deliberate regicide between 1840 and 1986 based on public records. Based on primary data collected in multiple field sites including the Lopit villages, as well as Kenyan and Ugandan refugee camps, at least six cases of deliberate killings of kings or their assistants were recorded among the Lopit between 1950 and 2020.

As Table 2 shows, the cases of killing and expulsion of rainmakers were covered by the local media soon after they occurred. Between 2021 and 2024, five disputes over rain were reported by the local media. In four cases (Cases 1, 3, 4, 5), rainmakers or the person suspected of bewitching rainfall were killed, while a four-day ultimatum was issued to the rainmaker in Case 2. Al Jazeera reported on Case 5 in 2025, which highlights increasing international media interest in the regicides due to connections to climate change (Falzetta and Coleman, 2025). Local governments have also launched investigations in an attempt to find the perpetrators who committed the murder. However, no one has ever been arrested for any of these crimes.

Such media coverage and response have two characteristics. One is the view that specific individuals cannot control rain with magic. For example, an interview conducted by a local radio station with a meteorologist (Daniel, 2023) included the following:

The meteorologist said human beings are completely incapable of making or stopping rain through magic or prayers while pointing out that the tropical interval fluctuates at certain times. The only way through which rain can form is the scientific method, following the same natural methods in forming rain.

In such discourse, the rainmaking is emphasised as a primitive technique that works on nature based on an incorrect understanding of nature. Consequently, the knowledge and technique of local rainmaking are often argued to be erroneous, a symbol of uncivilised behaviour, and a harmful custom that should be abolished.

Meanwhile, other opinions highlight that recent droughts have been brought about by climate change. From this perspective, the kings who are killed are pitiful victims of global climate change, and the focus of debate shifts to how measures should be taken to prevent them from being victims of communal violence. The latter is closer to the stance adopted by local governments regarding regicide. However, national and local government has limited capacity to mitigate climate-related stress and can take little effective action.

The locality and variability of rainfall are part of the everyday experience of people living in semi-arid regions. Moreover, given past cases of regicides, little persuasive evidence exists to support the idea that recent cases can simply be attributed to the impact of climate change. Local people, therefore, do not immediately associate it with the discourse of climate change.

Accordingly, what matters most for the Lopit people in the recent rain disputes? In the author's daily conversation with interlocutors, they joined the discussion on the cases of regicides several times. Some participants were asked how climate change can impact rainfall, but most either showed little interest or, even if they had heard of such influence, they were reluctant to link the cases with climate change. Almost all of the interlocutors had some knowledge of the rainstones and did not deny the instrumental efficacy.

The events at a Kenyan refugee camp in 2017 demonstrate the Lopit people's strong belief in the power of the rain chief. The following account is based on reports by Lopit and Lotuho refugees living in the Kakuma refugee camp.[8]

This year, the civil war in South Sudan intensified, coinciding with widespread drought. In February, the United Nations declared famine in two states of South Sudan (UNICEF, 2017). Eastern Equatoria State, where the Lopit and Lotuho people live, also experienced drought, resulting in severe food shortages. At the same time in Kenya, construction of the Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement began next to the Kakuma Refugee Camp to reduce overcrowding. Many people from different ethnic groups in South Sudan crossed the Kenyan border in search of food and sought refuge in Kakuma and Kalobeyei. Among them was a rain chief and his wife from a Lotuho village. The wife arrived at the settlement first, followed by her husband, the rain chief. They left for Kakuma with the rainstones without informing their fellow villagers. Several weeks after their departure, the *monyomiji* in the village realised the couple had gone to Kakuma. They sent people to the camp and arranged transport to bring the rain chief and his wife back to the village.

Shortly before the rain chief couple were to be returned to South Sudan, an incident occurred. One day, Lotuho refugees held a traditional dance in Kalobeyei to celebrate the birth of a baby. The dance lasted all night. The Kenyan police, who manage the refugee camp, intervened because they considered the drumming and dancing a disturbance. The next morning, the police arrested those who had participated and tried to confiscate the drums. The rain chief's wife then instructed the participants to fetch water in secret, avoiding police attention. When they returned with the water, the rain chief and his wife poured it on their faces and on rainstones. Clouds quickly formed in the previously clear sky, and it soon began to rain. The rain became so heavy that the police fled without taking the drums. Rain continued to fall over the Kalobeyei and Kakuma areas for several days, sometimes in the morning and evening, and sometimes throughout the entire day.

Although the rain may have begun by chance, among the Lotuho and Lopit refugees, it was clear that many believed the rain chief and the rainstones had caused the heavy downpour. The Kakuma Refugee Camp is much drier than their home villages, receiving only 200–300 mm of rain annually. Furthermore, the sudden appearance of clouds and the onset of rain on an otherwise clear morning convinced the refugees of the rain chief's power.

Such narratives on rainmaking indicate that they believe in the power of the rain chiefs extends beyond the community and to outsiders as well. Wendy James, who once studied rain politics among the Uduk of Sudan stated, "belief in rainstones, as in currency, is rooted in the local political structure of confidence and credit between people" (James, 1972: 57). Just as a currency is used to exchange goods and services because we believe it holds value, the Lopit people share a trust in the rainstones and the rain chiefs' power, which forms the foundation of their community politics.

Most of the interlocutors focused on whether the accusations levelled at rain chiefs were legitimate, how the misunderstanding between the rain chief and *monyomiji* come about, and how the rain chiefs and *monyomiji* should behave in a rain crisis. For them, questions of justice and morality over the regicide were more significant than global climate change, from which they felt detached in their everyday experience.

In what follows, the two cases (Case 1 and 5 of Table 2) of regicide that occurred among the Lopit-the investigation and negotiation between the rain chief and the people including the *monyomiji*-are investigated to clarify how the *monyomiji* came to decide upon burying the rain chief alive. Media reports provide a brief account, stating only the direct causes and consequences of the regicide, and the whole picture remains unclear. Therefore, adding primary sources obtained during fieldwork, the victimisation mechanism of rain chiefs is explained below.

Case 1: burial alive of Hobon

Case 1 occurred in July 2021 in the Mura-Lopit village (Mura). The victim, named Hobon, was a 43-year-old rain chief from Mura-Lopit. The following is based on various explanations provided in multiple interviewers in Kakuma.[9] Incumbent *monyomiji* members from Mura and neighbouring communities provided detailed answers.

Many interlocutors agreed that this incident did not happen suddenly. According to their account, a series of accusations and counteraccusation occurred between Hobon and the *monyomiji*. The following two primary reasons for his eventual execution were cited. First, he was believed to have hidden the rainstones, thus deliberately stopping the rains. Second, despite demanding various 'gifts', he failed to bring rain to the community.

8 The interview took place with a Lopit man in his forties during research at Kakuma Refugee Camp on 25 August 2025. This account was later confirmed on 26 January 2026 through a telephone interview with a Lotuho man in his forties, also living in Kakuma Refugee Camp, who provided additional details.

9 I conducted interviews with four Lopit refugees at Kakuma Refugee Camp on 25 August 2025. On 5 February 2026, I verified this account through a telephone interview with two Lopit men living in Kakuma, both relatives of the late Hobon. Furthermore, from late January to early February 2026, the author's informant conducted interviews with 50 people in Mura village. Based on these results, revisions and additions were made to the information compiled earlier.

Hobon became rain chief in 2005. Before him, his grandfather and elder brother had held this role. His elder brother inherited the title after their grandfather died in the 1980s. However, after the *monyomiji* suspected interference with rainfall, Hobon's elder brother was removed from the position and left for Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. After his exile, a man who had served as their grandfather's assistant effectively took charge of rainmaking rituals throughout the 1990s. In 2000, Hobon himself was exiled from the village and fled to Uganda after he was accused by the *monyomiji* of interfering with rainfall, although he was not yet the rain chief. Hobon stayed in Uganda for 3 years. Hobon returned to his home village, the year after the *Igari* generation of *monyomiji* handed over power to the younger generation, Tome, in 2002. In 2005, the *Tome* generation of *monyomiji* tasked Hobon to become a rainmaker, and he accepted the role. Hobon worked effectively with the community, bringing rain and food to Mura. The *monyomiji* did not question about his past misconducts, and his relationship with the villagers remained peaceful for several years. As a result, Mura prospered and relations with other villages improved. People showed him respect, the *monyomiji* tilled his fields, and women brewed beer for him. In 2013, even after the *Tome* generation transferred power to the younger *Idumele* generation, Hobon continued to perform his duties as rain chief.

However, the drought of 2021 caused friction between Hobon and the people. In February of that year, people began to dig the land in the mountain fields for sowing of sorghum and maize. In March, when the first planting season begins, people begin sowing their seeds; but in 2021, despite April marking the start of the rainy season, no sign of rain was seen. People began to feel anxious about crop failures. The *monyomiji* asked Hobon why no rainfall had occurred and requested that he summon rain. Hobon replied that 'it did not rain because a certain person in the village had not repaid a past debt to him, so the person must pay with livestock'. Accordingly, the *monyomiji* asked the person in question to pay Hobon and the debt was paid with cattle. Apart from that payment, *monyomiji* presented Hobon with four bulls and five goats.

However, a lack of rain persisted. Hobon travelled to Hiyayahi village[10] on the western side of the Lopit Mountains, where some of his relatives lived. In Mura, the *monyomiji* discovered that two of the thirteen rainstones and several spears were missing from the *hiduri*. People suspected that he intentionally stopped the rain in his village. They travelled to Hiyayahi village to meet Hobon and discuss the missing rainstones.

When Hobon returned to his village from Hiyayahi, he was armed with a gun, which aroused suspicion. People wondered why he carried a gun. The *monyomji* summoned him and surrounded him with fire. According to the interlocutors, the purpose was to make him experience the scorching heat of the sun as they themselves suffer. Moreover, the *monyomiji* sought to compel Hobon to confess to hiding the rainstones. However, Hobon endured the heat for 2 hours, sitting in silence encircled by the fire, under the watchful eyes of the *monyomiji*. Consequently, the *monyomiji* gave up further torture and released Hobon.

There was no rainfall until July. This prolonged dry spell led to a second confrontations between the rain chief and the community. The *monyomiji* asked Hobon to bring rain. Hobon replied that a young man had committed adultery with his daughter and that rain would not come unless compensation was paid. The *monyomiji* ordered the man to pay compensation in cattle, which he did.

However, rainfall continued to fail. Occasionally clouds gathered over the hills before drifting away. Neighbouring villages were also affected by drought and hunger spread throughout the region. The *monyomiji* and the elders decided to convene an emergency meeting called *hiwaha*. This special assembly was held when the village faced a critical situation and was heralded by beating a large drum.

Hobon was summoned to the meeting and asked why he had not brought rain. He replied that the *monyomiji* should hand over his wife as a tribute if people wanted rainfall, a demand that puzzled them. At some points, Hobon was suspected of having relations with other men's wives, although no evidence was presented.

Hobon left his home and attempted to escape to a village on the western side of the Lopit Mountains. However, he was captured and returned to his village. On 1 July, he was seized in the evening and bound with a rope beside a huge fire throughout the night. The following morning, Hobon was interrogated by the *monyomiji* about the missing rainstones. The patient did not disclose any secrets. Hobon declared that he was not prepared to work with the *Idumele* generation because he was not a rain chief under *Idumele* but *Tome* generation, and would only listen to the Tome *monyomiji*. This statement angered the Idumele *monyomiji*, who then decided to bury him alive. Hobon was led outside the settlement and instructed to enter a ditch formed by soil erosion near a stream. As he entered the ditch, large stones and soil were placed over his body.

On 3 July, to the astonishment of the people, heavy rain began to fall. The rain continued for several days, reviving crops in the fields and allowing livestock to graze. Despite the delayed rainfall, the harvest in 2021 was reasonably good. Meanwhile, Hobon was said to have spent 2 days murmuring himself inside the ditch. People suspected that he had remained alive by drinking a secret cure he had brought from Uganda.

Following Hobon's burial, the *Idumele* monyomiji issued a strict order forbidding funerals anywhere within or outside the village. Those who defined the order faced either a fine or a curse from the *monyomiji*. In Kenya, a funeral had been scheduled at the compound of Hobon's nephew in Kakuma Refugee Camp. However, following a telephone request from the *monyomiji* to cancel it, the ceremony was halted before it could take place. Posting condolence messages on social media was also prohibited. In an interview with the local media, a representative of Mura stated the following:

He [Hobon] was complaining that he needed something from the community, and you know when you ask something, and the community gives and you do not deliver on your part, then you become a victim.

In other words, the fundamental logic behind regicide is 'we kill the rain chief because they are about to endanger the entire community through drought and starvation'. For the community, the killing of the rain chief was understood as justice for his refusal to return rain as a gift after receiving various gifts by them. In their belief about rainfall, both the rain chief and the people are bound by moral principles. The people fulfil their duty by honouring the rain

10 Hiyayahi village is also called Yagiyagi among the Lopit.

chief and providing services such as labour in the fields and portions of the harvest. In return, the rain chief must ensure the wellbeing of the community and livestock by bringing rain. Should rain chiefs act against the welfare of the village and abuse their power, it violates the community's moral code and renders them subject to sanctions.

The murder of Hobon unfolded as the rain chief and the community alternately blamed each other for causing the drought. This mechanism is also observed in previous instances of regicide among ethnic groups around the Lopit (Simonse, 2017: 348-66). While people suspected that the rain chief was deliberately withholding rain as the cause of the drought, the latter used the drought as a means to compel the community to repay debts and acquire women.

One of the informants stated that disputes over the drought are complex and intricate. The transactions between the rain chief and the community influence the power balance and reciprocal relations between the two. Normally, the reciprocal relations are positive, but once the rain chief is considered to be incompetent or malicious to the community in drought, relations turn negative and may escalate as far as the execution of the rain chief.

The method of burial alive may be considered an exceedingly cruel and unusual form of execution; however, the Lopit's notion concerning the spirits of the dead must also be noted. In reality, the most frequently practiced method of putting a rain chief to death is burying them alive (9 of the 24 regicide cases) (Simonse, 2017:37) as the villagers fear their specific power. The belief is that if any one person were to kill the rain chief, and the latter knew who had killed him, that person would suffer at the hands of the vengeful spirit of the rain chief. The vengeful power of the rain chief is so formidable that this power is said to affect the descendants of those cursed for generations. Therefore, rather than having a specific individual inflict physical harm upon the rain chief and bear the risk of becoming the target of his vengeance, the *monyomiji* avoid incurring the curse of the rain chief by digging a grave and urging them to enter themself.

Although not mentioned in the local media, the informants stated that after Hobon was buried alive, it rained continuously for several weeks in the Mura village. This is often reported in cases of regicide, such as that of Nyiburu, queen-widow of the Pari (Kurimoto, 1986). The accounts stating that it rained immediately after such burial reflect the community's expectation that the king, sacrificed for the collective, would restore the cosmological order through his death and lead to the natural blessing of rain.

Case 5: burial alive of Oture

In Case 5, Oture, the approximately 50-year-old rain-chief of Lohobohobo village was buried alive in October 2024. Lohobohobo village is a neighbouring village of Mura-Lopit village. This incident was first reported by local media and subsequently covered by Al Jazeera. However, as the Al Jazeera article states, 'In Lohobohobo, nearly a year after Oture's death, his killing is a taboo subject, and details of what happened are difficult to obtain' (Falzetta and Coleman, 2025).

The author conducted an interview with Oture's second cousin, who lives in the Kakuma Refugee Camp. To confirm the accuracy of the information, the author also verified details with Oture's uncle, who resides in the Lohobohobo village.[11] The following account is based on the primary information collected from these sources.

In this village, the position of rain chief is passed from elder to younger brother or from father to son, along the line of the same clan. In 2017, when Oture's uncle was killed in combat during cattle raiding by a neighbouring ethnic group, the *monyomiji* of Lohobohobo requested the deceased man's younger brother to succeed the position. However, the late rain chief's younger brother refused the request and instead had his nephew, Oture take over. However, relations between Oture and the community gradually became strained.

Oture had personal issues with *A*, who held the position of *nyakangan*. Among the Lopit, *nyakangan* is an opinion leader chosen from among the *monyomiji*, and typically a person of eloquent speech, leadership ability, and often wealthy. *A* had a relationship with the daughter of Oture's uncle, impregnating her three times. However, *A* refused to pay Oture and his uncle the bride wealth, so the latter would not consent to the marriage between *A* and his daughter.

When drought hit Lohobohobo village in 2021, Oture was expelled from the village due to his failure to bring rain despite the villagers' pleas. Oture was also said to be inexperienced and could not perform the rainmaking ritual properly. Even after returning to his own village in 2023, he faced unfounded suspicions from the neighbouring village that he might be the culprit who deliberately buried a baboon skull to stop the rain.

In 2024, the rains failed to materialize in March, and the July rains were not far less than anticipated. However, as far as the author was told, the village had rainfall in October, when Oture was buried alive, and some crops had reached a harvestable state. Consequently, drought or hunger were unlikely to have been the direct causes of his killing.

Therefore, why was Oture buried alive? According to the informant, the direct cause lay in a quarrel between Oture and *A*. One day, they began to quarrel in the village square, which escalated into a wrestling match. Oture threw *A* to the ground, and *A* was injured, causing him to bleed. Afterwards, rumours spread among the *monyomiji* that Oture was trying to stop the rain. The Lopit believe that if blood is shed during a dispute within the village, misfortune such as crop failure will befall the community. Whether all the *monyomiji* believed the rumour to be entirely true is not certain.

Aware that the villagers' hostility was directed at him, Oture fled to the home of relatives living in the Hiyayahi village, which is several hours' walk from his village. However, *A* was plotting revenge against Oture. Weeks later, he directed a group of uninitiated young boys called *inyaruharu* to the place where Oture was staying and had him brought back to Lohobohobo village. In the village, the *monyomiji* had already split into two groups awaiting him. One group was in the square, while the other had dug a pit outside of the village in which to bury him alive.

11 The interview with Oture's second cousin, a man in his forties, was conducted in Kakuma Refugee Camp on 26 August 2025. Later, I asked the informant to contact his father, who resides in Lohobohobo village, by mobile phone to verify and confirm the information obtained.

Early the next morning, Oture was summoned by the *monyomiji* and led to the square. Oture was asked if he knew what he had done; he replied that he had no idea. The *monyomiji* then bound his hands with rope and led him out of the village. Oture walked calmly without resistance to the freshly dug pit. Upon reaching the pit, he climbed in. Then, the *monyomiji* covered his body with earth and buried him alive.

Owing to the small number of informants, how villagers perceive the murder of Oture remains unclear. However, one informant expressed concern over the waning trust in the rain-chiefs among villagers. According to them, Oture's murder is understood as a deliberate killing orchestrated by a small group of individuals wielding significant influence over village decision-making.

The fact that this case does not fit the conventional conditions under which regicide occurs is noteworthy. Normally, a rain chief should only be summoned in front of the people during drought, when lack of rain could threaten the harvest and food security. However, the burial of Oture took place in October, when the area still had rain and the harvest was plentiful around the end of the farming season. The interlocutor harshly criticised the case as an act of betrayal against the rain chief driven by unfounded accusations. This can be viewed as a case where a personal dispute between the rain chief and an influential villager was treated as if it were a problem caused by drought, rather than as grounds for holding the rain chief responsible for intentionally stopping the rains.

He emphasised that no regicide had previously occurred in Lohobohobo village, making this the first such case, and stated that 'once upon a time, all villagers showed respect to the rain chief, and whenever they performed rain rituals, rain would surely fall. However, in recent times, more people have begun to doubt the power of rain chiefs, and people no longer show the respect they once did.' In their belief in rain, mutual trust between the rain chief and the people constitutes morality. Just as the rain chief must not abuse his power, it is also immoral for the *monyomiji* to exercise authority arbitrarily and exclude rain chiefs. The loss of mutual trust between rainmakers and people, as it once existed, was perceived as moral decay.

In the kingship communities of South Sudan, conflict between the king and the people during droughts is by no means uncommon. The weather is the central issue in a perpetual debate in which king and people take turns in playing the role of accused and accuser (Simonse, 2017:345). However, some people emphasised that the decline in trust and reciprocal relationships between the rain-chief and the people lies behind recent events. These opinions focus less on directly linking the recent cases of killing rain-chiefs to climate change and more on the moral decay of the community.

Discussion

Ambiguous power of rain

This study examines recent incidents of kings being killed to explore how perceptions, discussions, and concerns about drought in South Sudan connect to the increasingly prominent global discourse on climate change within the country. It highlights the locally constructed knowledge systems based on human–nature interactions among South Sudanese agro-pastoralists, as revealed in this article, before reconsidering the reported link between recent media coverage of regicide and climate change.

Among South Sudanese agro-pastoralists, including the Lopit, nature and humans are seen as coexisting within an interconnected world. In this ecological region, where subsistence livelihoods depend on rainfall, precipitation is essential for survival. However, rain is unpredictable and variable, and drought remains a persistent threat to entire communities. As a result, a religious-political system controlling rain—which could be termed a rain complex—has developed, with rituals intended to control and address ecological risks, such as rain and drought.

Van Beek (2025) analyses rain complexes across Africa, including among South Sudanese agro-pastoralists, where rain symbolises power. Although their forms and functions differ, the structure linking kingship to popular wellbeing is widespread but inherently contradictory. As Van Beek (2025) describes, rain acts as a 'rain trap': it is both the source of the king's authority and a potential threat. The cases of regicide discussed in this article clearly demonstrate the ambivalent power of rain within the rain complex.

Among the Lopit, the rain-chief holds the exclusive authority to control rainfall and is responsible for providing rain to the people within his domain according to the calendar, thereby protecting their wellbeing and the health of their livestock. As an intermediary between the humans and the gods, the rain-chief plays a central role in maintaining and restoring relations between people and divinities. Rain rituals involving rainstones are secret ceremonies conducted only by the rain-chief and a few specialists, including an assistant. Although people often highlight successful rainmaking rituals, these rituals always carry the risk of failure. The heavy rains brought to the refugee camp described in Section *Regicide: media discourse and local perspectives* strengthen the rain chief's authority, while failures in rain rituals, as discussed in Section *Case 1: burial alive of Hobon*, weaken it. In practice, negotiations take place between the rain chief and the people before they ultimately decide on regicide. The rain chiefs try to avoid becoming a scapegoat by offering explanations for the lack of rain or, in truly dangerous situations, fleeing in advance. The rain crisis often becomes a social drama that unfolds between the rain chiefs and the people, centred on questions of justice.

The pursuit of the rain chief's responsibility during droughts also exposes the underlying social conflicts. As shown in Section *Case 5: burial alive of Oture*, the tension between the rain chief and the *monyomiji* leader is connected to the broader power dynamics between the rain chief and *monyomiji*. Among the various communities of this ecological region, referred to as 'the Monyomiji System' by Kurimoto and Simonse (1998), both the king and *monyomiji* are responsible for the community's safety and wellbeing, which creates potential for conflict. The power struggle between the king and the *monyomiji* in this case indicates that, although drought may not have directly caused the king's removal, the decision was a political judgement by the *monyomiji* related to the ongoing debate about rain. Thus, the king's indictment was shaped by both adverse weather and internal social dynamics.

Climate-change discourse and local issue: limitations and policy implications

This article compares local perspectives on regulations with global discourse on climate change. Both domestic and international media attribute the drought leading to regicide to climate change rather than human intervention. Meanwhile, interlocutors from Lopit, including refugees living in Kenya, tend to link drought to local political and moral issues. Why do they prefer causal explanations rooted in local contexts to global climate change, even when exposed to information that global climate change affects their region? Below, this article examines the extent to which global climate change aligns with weather variability experienced by local communities and analyses the limitations of addressing this question. It also considers how attributing drought to the actions of communities or individuals relates to people's agency in controlling the weather.

Different views exist regarding whether climate change is visible or invisible. The main divide lies between physical scientists and experimental psychologists, who argue that climate change is inherently invisible, and anthropologists, indigenous advocates, and environmentally inclined Western citizens, who often state that climate change is visible and already observable (Rudiak-Gould, 2013). The term "climate change," referring to long-term trends and gradual climatic shifts, became perceptible only after the standardisation of instruments used to measure rainfall, wind speed, and sunshine duration. These instruments enable the analysis of long-term averages and typical weather patterns. As a result, climate change, which can only be demonstrated through numerical data and charts, should be distinguished from weather variability experienced and interpreted by people within rain complexes. The Lopit religious-political system addresses weather variability within a specific climate rather than climate change itself.

A common issue concerns regional bias within a territory, where rainfall may occur in one area but not another. People do not always hold the rain chief personally responsible for drought if it affects neighbouring villages across the wider rain area. However, the fact that rain often falls locally where rainstones move, even during droughts, strengthens the connection between the rain chief and rainfall and between rainfall and the community. Therefore, unless clear evidence demonstrates that climate change is directly linked to weather variability in the study region, regicides should not be attributed to climate change.

To demonstrate a direct correlation between climate change and the frequency of rainfall conflicts, it would be necessary to analyse long-term rainfall patterns in the target region alongside data on the frequency of rainfall conflicts, particularly those resulting in regicide. However, this study was limited by insufficient data for both variables, making it impossible to establish a clear correlation.

Even if clear evidence were to show that global climate change alters weather patterns, such as decreasing rainfall in Lopit areas, it is unlikely that scientific explanations of drought would completely override local knowledge systems concerning rainfall. Schnegg et al. (2021) examined how indigenous communities accept or reject scientific explanations of climate change through an analysis of 28 ethnographic cases. They note a tendency for local communities to accept climate-change discourse while linking it to local concepts, often favouring a form of "self-blame", attributing responsibility to their own actions or those of specific members of the community. For instance, the Maasai of Tanzania accept that Western industries and lifestyles contribute to climate change, yet maintain that ultimate authority over rainfall rests with the will of their sky god, the *Eng'ai* (de Wit, 2020). The Maasai believe that declining rainfall reflects a gradual moral decay in Maasai life and the eroding power of ritual rain specialists known as *oloiboni*.

Self-blame therefore becomes a common interpretive strategy through which communities incorporate abstract external concepts about climate change into existing cosmologies. In the Lopit case, such self-blame is ultimately attributed to a specific individual, the rain chief. By doing so, people are able to understand, accept, and resolve changing climate patterns caused by global climate change, a phenomenon otherwise beyond their control within their cosmological framework. In other words, by linking changing weather patterns to the community's political and moral order, people create a means of avoiding passive victimhood and maintaining agency in a changing environment. Therefore, it is not surprising that some interlocutors consider restoring the morality of rain belief, which is gradually eroding within the community, essential for restoring normalcy in rainfall. Rather than framing climate change as rendering them passive victims of global environmental change, accepting it as a moral issue within the community empowers them to seek solutions.

This article also examines the ethical issues related to cultural violence against rain chiefs and considers the policy implications for the affected communities. The practice of communities burying rain chiefs alive in response to drought raises ethical challenges for cultural relativism, which maintains that cultural practices should be understood within their specific context, even when such acts involve extreme violence. Once the community entrusts the rain chief with his role, he faces the threat of violence that may eventually be directed at him. Because the local climate is unpredictable, the rainmaking ritual is certain to fail at some point, making his sacrifice to the community almost inevitable. If climate change increases the frequency of droughts, the risk of failure becomes even greater.

According to domestic reports, the local government has indicated its intention to investigate the regicide and apprehend those responsible (Radio Tamazuj, 2021; Radio Tamazuj, 2024). However, subsequent reports indicate that the police have not arrested a single person in connection with the deaths of Hobon or Oture (Falzetta and Coleman, 2025). Several reasons explain why no one has been punished. First, in the case of the rain chief's live burial, identifying a specific culprit is difficult, and it is not feasible to arrest and punish all the members of the *monyomiji*. In addition, the *monyomiji* themselves prevent the government from intervening in their custom. In South Sudan, where state governance does not fully reach peripheral areas, the government lacks the coercive power to stop local customs, even when these practices are considered violations of individual human rights. This inability of the state to fully protect individual rights is common and not limited to the research regions.

Therefore, individuals who are qualified to become rain chiefs must decide whether to take on this high-risk role. In both the villages studied in this article, Mura-Lopit and Lohobohobo, the succession of the rain chiefs has become a practical issue. In Mura-Lopit, the *monyomiji* appointed the younger brother of Hobon, who had been buried alive, as a rain chief. However, the new rain chief

soon fled the village with the rainstones to another different ethnic group within the same state and has not returned for several years. In Lohobohobo, a year has passed since the rain chief's death. Ideally, a new rain chief should be appointed within a year; however, no successor has been chosen thus far. In both villages, the rain chief's assistants have temporarily taken over ritual duties. The absence of a rain chief is not favourable for villages that need rainfall; however, the rain chief has not been forcibly brought back, nor has a replacement been brought in from the neighbouring ethnic groups.

This article presents the following policy implications. First, instead of attributing the drought that led to the regicide solely to climate change and blaming human actions, it is necessary to examine the social background and circumstances that contributed to the regicide and to investigate its root causes. Second, it is important to recognise the significant risks faced by rain chiefs in that society and to establish organisations or counselling services to support individuals held responsible for rainfall. Third, if the community cannot resolve issues related to the succession of rain chiefs, the government should consider possible interventions. If the government lacks the capacity to act, the involvement of NGOs should also be considered.

Data availability statement

Requests to access the datasets presented in this article should be directed to murahashi.isao@gmail.com.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Research Ethics Review Commitee, University of Shizuoka. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that generative AI was not used in the creation of this manuscript.

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