

Culture Sketches

Case Studies in Anthropology

THIRD EDITION

Holly Peters-Golden

The University of Michigan



Boston Burr Ridge, IL Dubuque, IA Madison, WI New York
San Francisco St. Louis Bangkok Bogot Caracas Kuala Lumpur
Lisbon London Madrid Mexico City Milan Montreal New Delhi
Santiago Seoul Singapore Sydney Taipei Toronto

McGraw-Hill Higher Education

A Division of The McGraw-Hill Companies

CULTURE SKETCHES: CASE STUDIES IN ANTHROPOLOGY

Published by McGraw-Hill, an imprint of The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc. 1221 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY, 10020. Copyright © 2002, 1997, 1994 by The McGraw-Hill companies, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written consent of The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., including, but not limited to, in any network or other electronic storage or transmission, or broadcast for distance learning. Some ancillaries, including electronic and print components, may not be available to customers outside the United States.

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 FGR/FCR 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 0-07-228598-2

Editorial director: *Phillip A. Butcher*
Senior sponsoring editor: *Carolyn Henderson*
Marketing manager II: *Leslie A. Kraham*
Project manager: *Natalie J. Ruffatto*
Production supervisor: *Carol A. Bielski*
Media producer: *Shannon Rider*
Coordinator freelance design: *Artemio Ortiz Jr.*
Photo research coordinator: *Judy Kausal*
Cover design: *Adam Rooke*
Interior design: *Artemio Ortiz*
Typeface: *10/12 Palatino*
Compositor: *Shepherd Incorporated*
Printer: *Quebecor World Fairfield Inc.*

Photo Credits

Page 4: © Betty Press / Panos Pictures; Page 25: © John Neubauer / Photo Edit; Page 42 © GLOBALPHOTO; Page 63 © Rob Huibers / Panos Pictures; Page 80 © Ranney / Photo Edit, Inc; Page 101 © Art Wolfe / Photo Researchers, Inc.; Page 119 © World Images News Service; Page 135 © World Images News Service; Page 158 © Lisa Klopfer; Page 170 © Hutton-Deutch Collection / CORBIS; Page 186 © C. Brill; Page 198 © Per Andersen; Page 217 © Ludo Kuipers; Page 233 © Chris Rainer / CORBIS; Page 252 © Jerry Callow / Panos Pictures

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Peters-Golden, Holly.

Culture sketches: case studies in anthropology / Holly Peters-Golden. — 3rd ed.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-07228598-2 (alk. paper)

1. Ethnology—Cases studies. I. Title

GN378.P47 2002

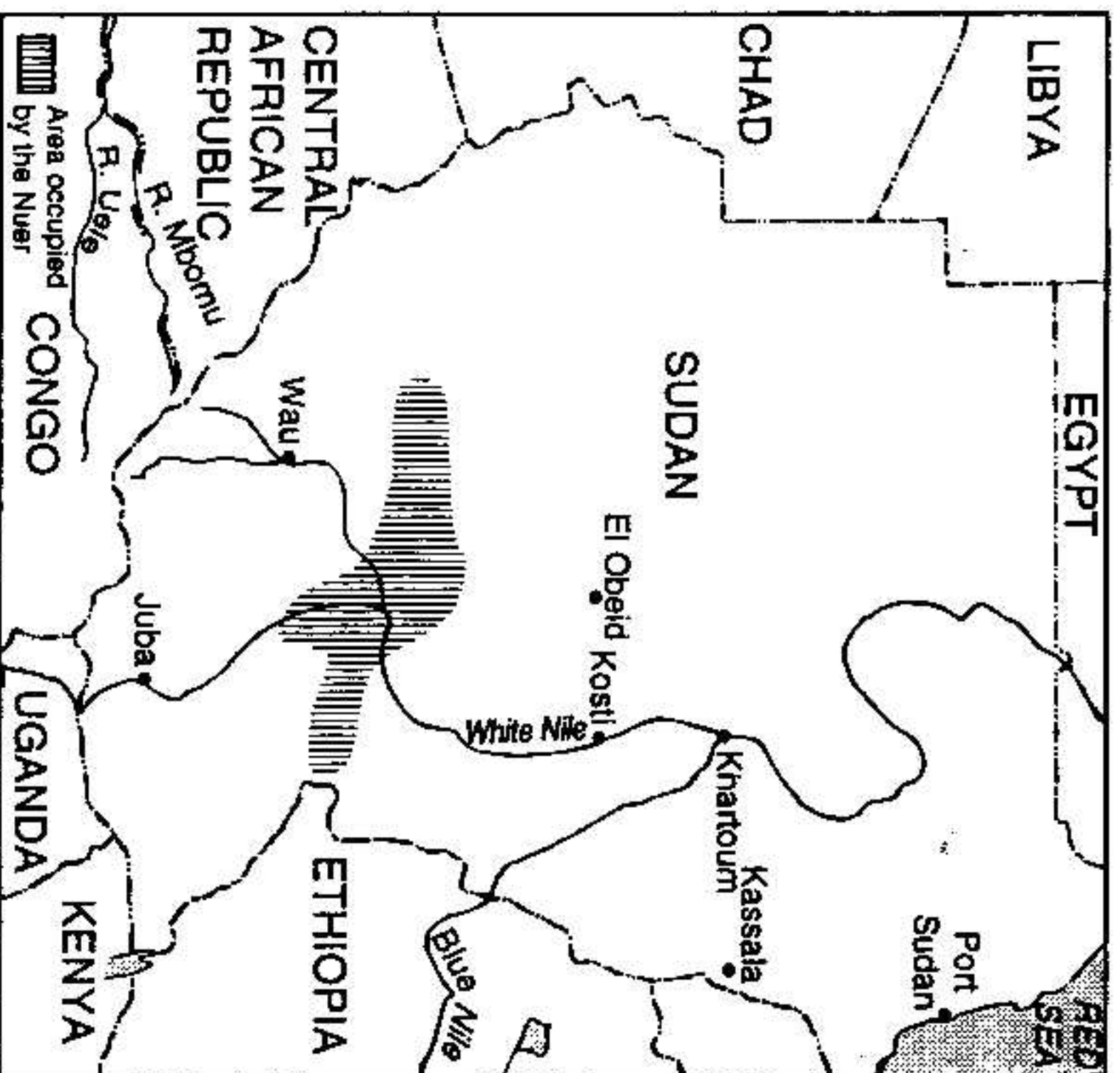
305.8—dc21 2001030590

www.mhhe.com

*for Rebecca and Jenna
my first students, and my best teachers*

The Nuer

Cattle and Kinship in Sudan



The Beginning

God is everywhere. He is like wind; he is like air. He falls in the rain and roars in the thunder. The rainbow is his necklace. We are like little ants in his sight. *Ne warka*—in the beginning—there was a tamarind tree in the western land. Her name was Lic, and she was the mother. God created us to drop from her branches like ripened fruit. *Ne warka*—in the beginning—we were as the fruit of a tamarind tree.

Introduction and Geography

Sudan is the largest country in Africa, its area encompassing nearly one million square miles. It lies in the northeastern part of the continent and is a land of widely differing geography. In the north, it is covered with vast deserts; grassy palms fill the central region; and steamy jungles and swamps lie to the south. The Nile River is by far Sudan's most important geographic feature. Most of southern Sudan consists of a flood plain formed by its branches, with dense, jungle-like vegetation covering much of the region. Mountain ranges rise along the borders shared with Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia. Rainfall averages from

thirty-two to fifty-five inches annually. Wild animals, including gazelles, giraffes, lions, leopards, and elephants roam the south. Along the Nile's branches live hippopotamuses and crocodiles.

The Nuer, now the second largest ethnic group in southern Sudan (Holzman 2000), number more than a million (Hutchinson 1996) and live in the open savannah and swamps that line both sides of the Nile. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, best-known ethnographer of the Nuer, observed that "from a European's point of view Nuerland has no favourable qualities" (1940:51), cycling seasonally as it does through a state of parched grass or soggy swamp. The Nuer themselves, however, held a very different view. "Nuer," Evans-Pritchard reports, "think that they live in the finest country on earth." (1940:51) As herders, they indeed assess their land correctly. Their soil is made of thick clay, which cracks in the sun during droughts. These deep grooves are soaked and filled in the rainy season, cradling enough water to allow certain species of grasses to thrive even during the driest of seasons, providing pasture for the cattle. During times of intense flooding, sandy areas in somewhat higher elevations offer refuge.

Rainfall and flooding from the rivers that cross their lands provide the Nuer with surface water and abundant grasses, which, at their peak, reach shoulder high. However, the change of seasons, from wet to dry and back again, are sudden and often cataclysmic. Soggy swampland is rendered sere in a short time, as the blazing sun quickly evaporates the surface water from the clay soil. This, coupled with insufficient rainfall, may result in a shortage of pastureland.

This cycle of flooding and drought results in an environmental system that steers the direction of Nuer social and economic life, as we shall see.

Ecology

Subsistence

Nuer economy is a mixture of pastoralism and horticulture. Such a mixed economy is dictated by their environment, as neither strategy alone would be sufficient to provide for their needs or those of their cattle. Of the two strategies, pastoralism is the one favored both by the environment and by the Nuer themselves. As Evans-Pritchard remarks, "the environmental bias coincides with the bias of their interest." (1940:57)

Although the Nuer might be able to rely solely on pastoralism, were it not for the threat of certain cattle diseases, the balance in their economic strategy could never shift such that horticulture would predominate. Climate, flooding, and the flatness of the land result in an inability to cultivate most Central African food plants. Their staple crop is millet, consumed in the form of porridge and beer, and they supplement this with a small amount of maize, and an even lesser quantity of beans. Some tobacco is encouraged to grow under the eaves of their huts, and gourds can send their vines up along the fences of cattle corrals.

Millet's hardiness is such that the Nuer can reap two harvests per year, but even so it will not survive too much standing water, and thus gardens have to

be established on higher ground. If the elevation is such that water from the gardens may be lost, running down the slope, small dams are often constructed as a solution.

Although millet is able to weather the harsh climate once it has been established, the process of it taking hold initially can be undependable. Even a short drought can cause new shoots to wither; unexpected rains can beat small plants into the ground or wash them away. Weather is not the only environmental threat to crops. Evans-Pritchard (1940:78) reports having witnessed the toll taken by such events as swarms of locusts, unfettered grazing by ostriches and antelopes, and a parade of elephants stomping across the seedling beds.

The Nuer practice neither crop rotation nor fallowing, and neither fertilize nor irrigate. Instead, they move on to another site when the land is depleted.

Moving with the Seasons |

The alternating floods and drought make it impossible for the Nuer to live in one location year-round. Floods send Nuer and their herds to higher ground; drought forces them out again. Those foodstuffs provided by their cattle—meat and milk products—must be supplemented by fish and grain. Millet is best sown inland; the rivers where fish are abundant are far away from these inland sites. During the rainy season, cattle must be moved to protected ground, because standing in sodden land quickly results in hoof disease. It is for this reason that villages are constructed on the highest ground available. However, once the rains cease, these elevated sites, selected precisely because they were the highest (and thus, driest) locations, soon must be abandoned for sites closer to pools and lakes in order to secure adequate water supplies. The vicissitudes of finding water are echoed in the search for vegetation. As they move seasonally, Nuer seek out both pastureland and drinking water, and drive their cattle to locations where they know both will be available. Their movement across the vast plains is never haphazard in nature, but rather aimed directly toward the most succulent grasslands. It is in this way that changing water supplies and vegetational growth determine both the time and direction of Nuer movement. When the rains begin again, they can return to their villages.

Settlements

Nuer are forced to build villages for protection against the flooding rains (and mosquitoes) and to practice horticulture. They are driven out of these villages into migratory camps to escape drought and to fish.

The aim, in choosing a village site, is to secure enough room for building homesteads, planting gardens, and grazing cattle. Most villages are built on elevated mounds, above the floodline and the mosquitoes breeding in the standing water, which stretch for a mile or two in length. In front of these sandy ridges there is land for grazing; gardens are cultivated in the back. Open ground is preferable to wooded areas, as it provides better protection to the cattle (from

insect pests and predators in the woodlands) and because millet fares better in an open environment. Construction is of wood, and termite are generally better avoided in these open stretches of ground.

A typical Nuer homestead consists of a hut and a cattle barr. Families move from one section of the village to another, especially if there have been quarrels or pastures are exhausted. Huts and barns last about five years before they need to be rebuilt. After a decade or so, the gardens and pastures are no longer usable, and the entire village community may seek out a new site.

Camps, the Nuer settlements in the dry season, consist of flimsier structures, built close to the water source, and oriented so that their backs are to the wind and their front faces the cattle. These shelters can be erected in a few hours, using grassy material plastered with dung.

Throughout the dry season and in years when crops fail or herds fall victim to disease, it is fishing that sustains the Nuer. Opportunities to exploit the rivers, teeming with a variety of fish species, are as significant a factor as pasture and water when Nuer choose their camps.

Nuer have no need of complex fishing techniques because the rise of the rivers during floods carry huge numbers of fish downstream, depositing them into streams and lagoons where they are easily speared. At nightfall, dams are constructed and fishers wait downstream by firelight. In a single night, as many as a hundred fish may be speared. As the dry season advances, fish are trapped in pools, the outlets of which have dried up and receded. It is a simple matter for the Nuer to stand along the pool's edge and spear all the fish within. Nuer can rarely see the fish they spear, but the sheer numbers of the prey yield adequate results even when spears are flung into the water at random.

Although Nuer territory is rich in game, hunting is not a strategy much relied upon. They rarely set out to hunt, pursuing only those gazelle and giraffe who present themselves at the camps. Their herds provide them with meat enough to suit them. Lions may be killed to protect cattle; leopards are valued for their skins, which figure prominently in Nuer social life.

Cattle

"Their Social Idiom Is a Bovine Idiom" |

Cattle are the focus of Nuer life. They depend on the herds for their very existence; they delight in caring for them; and their love for cattle and zeal for acquiring them are at the core of Nuer culture. Cattle are the thread that runs through Nuer institutions, language, rites of passage, politics, economy, and allegiances.

Nuer relations with their neighbors are directed in large part by their preoccupation with the herds. They have nothing but disdain for neighboring tribes who own few or no cattle; they have entered into warfare with others solely for the purpose of stealing cattle and pastures. Internecine disputes are most often about cattle, and political divisions follow tribal distribution of pastures and water. Disputes that result from cattle are often

settled with cattle—such conflict often ends in grave injury or death, and cattle are the only acceptable compensation.

Cattle are cared for by groups of families because an individual household cannot protect or herd their cattle alone. In the dry season, when huts are hastily constructed around the cattle *kraal* (corral), one can identify which groups own and care for cattle together. Male household heads are identified as owning the herds, but wives and sons have some rights to their use. Sons marry in order of seniority, given head of cattle when they do. It is not until the stock has been replaced that the next son may marry and take his share. The bond between brothers, forged by co-ownership of cattle, persists even after they have married and started families of their own. The bridewealth paid for a daughter of one's brother is shared among the brothers, and kinship becomes defined in large part by reference to cattle payments. It is as if the transfer of cattle from one individual to another is equivalent to the lines drawn on a genealogy chart. (Evans-Pritchard 1940) When cattle are sacrificed, the meat is divided along kinship lines.

Personal names are frequently derived from features of the herd animals. Men are often called by names that refer to the color of a favorite ox; women take names from the cows they milk. When children play in the pastures, they call one another by cattle names; sometimes these names are proper names given at birth and handed down through the generations. Evans-Pritchard remarked that the genealogies he collected during his fieldwork often resembled the cattle inventory of a *kraal* more than a family tree. (Evans-Pritchard 1940)

It is not surprising that the centrality of cattle would be reflected in Nuer ritual life. If one endeavors to contact the spirit world, this may be accomplished only through the cattle. Cows are dedicated to spirits—those spirits that are attached to the lineage of the owner, have possessed a living family member, or are the ghosts of ancestors. Thus, when asking about the history of any cow in the herd, one receives information not only about the ways in which that cow links one person to another—having been secured as bridewealth, for example, or as payment for a dispute—but also of the spirit world connections the animal represents. By rubbing ashes on the back of the cow, its owner may contact a spirit and seek its intervention or assistance.

As Evans-Pritchard soon learned, in order to understand the culture of the Nuer, one must first be thoroughly versed in the language of cattle. The complex negotiations surrounding marriage exchange, ritual, and the settlement of disputes were only intelligible once he could decipher the terminology of cattle colors, ages, size, sex, and other features. He laments, "I used sometimes to despair that I never discussed anything with young men but livestock and girls, and even the subject of girls led inevitably to that of cattle. (1940:19) Try though he might, every subject, approached in any way, soon yielded commentary on cows, heifers, oxen, steers, or kids. As he observed, "their social idiom is a bovine idiom." (1940:19)

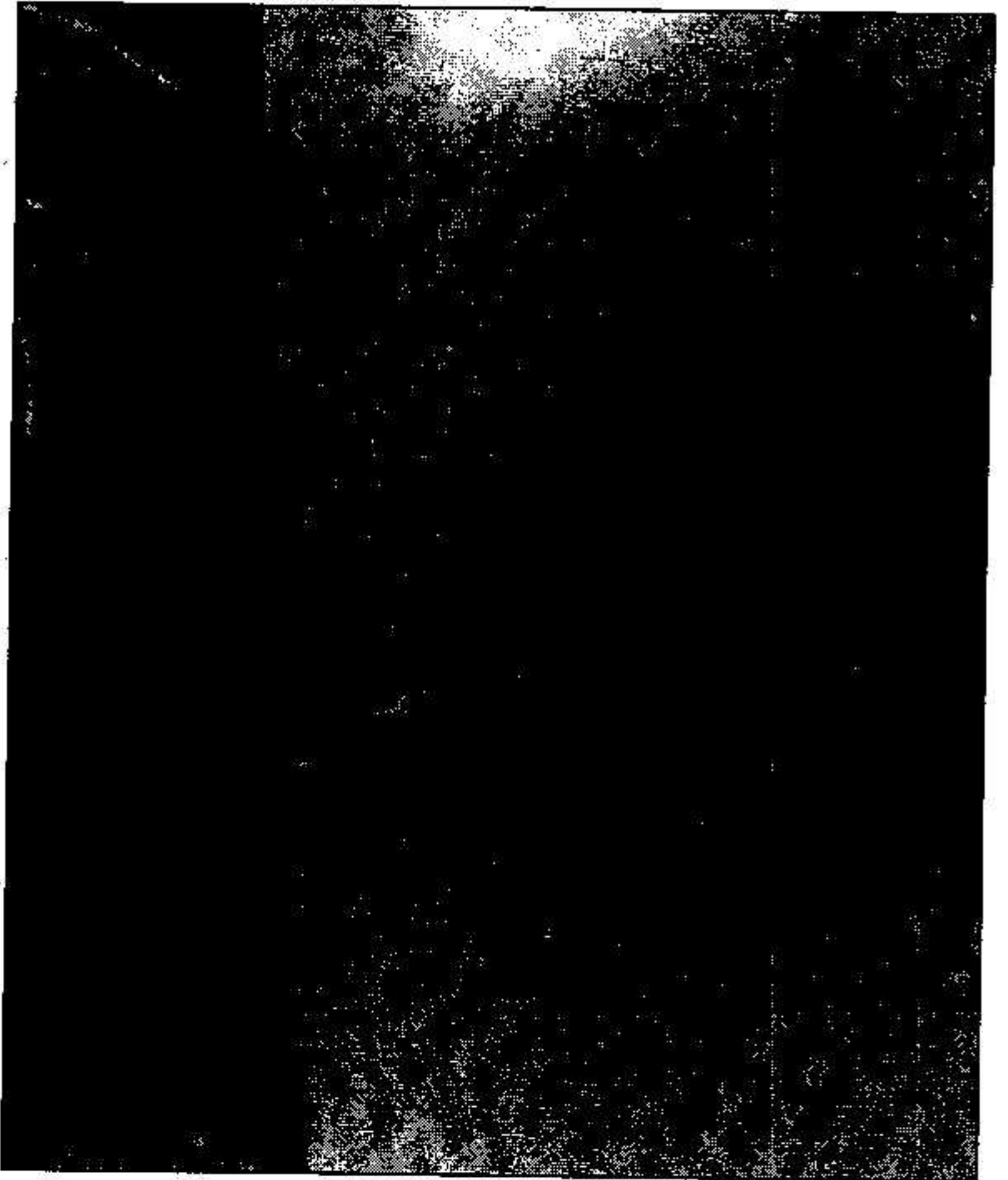
Cattle are, of course, essential in a more mundane sense as well. Milk and millet are the mainstays of the Nuer diet, and whereas millet rarely lasts

through the year, milk can be depended upon as a daily food. A single cow can sustain an entire family when milk is supplemented with fish. Even when the millet crop is abundant, Nuer depend on milk and cheese to make it palatable. Children especially need milk daily, and the Nuer say that children cannot be happy, much less healthy, without a dependable daily source of milk, of which elders will deprive themselves in order to assure the children's share. Where there is milk enough for the children, extra can be made into cheese. If a family cannot secure enough milk for their small children, relatives will unhesitatingly provide a cow, because kinship obligations include caring for the children of one's kin and neighbors. This is never thought to be the sole responsibility of the child's parents.

Because milk is so essential, cows are often judged by the amount of milk they produce, and one cow is never equivalent to another if its milk production is not commensurate. Any Nuer can immediately list, in rank order, the best and worst cows of the herd, paying no attention to those qualities he might cite in his oxen—fatness or color or horn shape—but only those features that promise a good milk cow. Nuer can scrutinize the back and haunches, veins, and bone structure of a cow and predict with great accuracy its lactating capacity.

Their dependence on dairy products directly influences other aspects of Nuer life and social structure. Cattle are not as numerous as they once were, owing largely to disease caused by cattle pests, and this relative shortage prevents the Nuer from leading an exclusively pastoral lifestyle, although this might be their preference. A mixed economy is essential to supplement their diet. As previously mentioned, one family unit often needs to depend on the larger kin group for dairy products, mandating that the basic economic unit for the Nuer must be a larger one than a single household. However, the importance of milk products not only introduces constraints, such as the foregoing, into Nuer daily life, but also provides flexibility. For example, while their need for horticulture prevents them from leading an exclusively nomadic life, their reliance on dairy products does allow them considerable mobility. Milk can be both stored and transported in the form of the dairy cows, and is accessible wherever the herd may be. Moreover, since the production of milk depends on water and pastureland, this diet not only permits, but also *requires*, frequent movement.

Although herds are not raised for the purpose of slaughter, meat is important to the Nuer diet and economy as well. Sacrifices to honor a ghost or spirit, for mortuary rites, and for marriage ceremonies are all occasions where barren cows are sacrificed and consumed. (Such rituals are more commonplace during the rainy season, or early into the draught, because the festivities are never complete without beer, brewed from the millet available during these times of year.) Never do Nuer slaughter animals solely because they desire to eat meat. There is the danger of the ox's spirit visiting a curse on any individual who would slaughter it without ritual intent, aiming only to use it for food. Any animal that dies of natural causes is eaten, although Evans-Pritchard notes that when a favorite animal has died, its owner often has to be persuaded to overcome his sorrow and share the meat. On an occasion such as this, the Nuer



explain "The eyes and the heart are sad, but the teeth and the stomach are glad." (Evans-Pritchard 1940:26)

In addition to their value as foodstuff and ritual objects, oxen are also items of great prestige. Wealth is defined differently in different places; among the Nuer, it is only cattle that are truly valued in this way. (Gross 1992:44) Prestige is derived from the shape, color, size, and form of the oxen, and Nuer will actively intervene in shaping the oxen, beginning at birth. They will manipulate the humps on a newborn ox's back, or train its horns to grow in a certain configuration. Cattle also provide raw materials for the manufacture of leather goods, drums, rugs, clothing, pipes, spears and shields, containers, ornaments, and cutlery. Their dung is used as plaster in construction and burned to provide ashes both for ritual use and also as "toothpaste" and mouthwash. Their urine is used not only for churning cheese, but to wash hands and face.

Sociopolitical Organization

The Nuer have no centralized political leadership. There is a kin-based society, and it is only through an understanding of the kinship organization that one can apprehend the way in which their social system functions.

Evans-Pritchard found the Nuer to be a "deeply democratic" (1956:181) people, with an egalitarian approach to their communal life. It is the obligation of kin to help one another. When one household has a surplus, it is shared with neighbors. Amassing wealth is not an aim. Although a man who owns a large

herd of cattle may be envied, his possession of numerous animals does not garner him any special privilege or treatment.

Segmentary Lineage Organization

The Nuer are perhaps best known as the most often cited example of the segmentary lineage organization. Marshall Sahlins (1961), in his classic study of this type of system, describes it as the inevitable result of tribal growth.

Among the Nuer, there are roughly twenty patrilineal clans. Each of these can be divided into maximal lineages, which can in turn be divided into major lineages. These are segmented into minor lineages, which are divided into minimal lineages. A minimal lineage group reckons its descent from one great-grandfather. It is these most minimal groups around which Nuer daily life revolves. There is neither leadership nor formal organization in the higher levels. They are potential connections waiting to be activated should the need arise. In a dispute between different minimal lineages, alliances can be formed by drawing from people related at a higher level. Each side of the conflict can mobilize more and more kin by reaching out to more and more distant kin. Mary Douglas (1966) comments, "[t]he Nuer afford a natural illustration of how people can create and maintain a social structure in the realm of ideas and not primarily, or at all, in the external, physical realm of ceremonial, palaces or courts of justice." (p 143)

Warfare, Raiding, and Blood-Feuds

In the early nineteenth century, Nuer territory spanned about 8700 square miles. Their neighbors, the Dinka, held nearly ten times that amount of land. By the end of that century, however, the Nuer had expanded their territory at the expense of the neighboring Dinka. The Nuer cut a wide swath through Dinka territory, in the end increasing their holdings to 35,000 square miles. Dinka culture resembled that of the Nuer in many respects, save the one that seems to have given the Nuer a significant military advantage—the segmentary lineage organization. (Evans-Pritchard 1940:240)

The Dinka, who were the first to settle in the Sudan, had no neighbors to defend against, and thus had none of the mechanisms in place to mobilize distant tribal members. Sahlins (1961) suggests that the unique alliance-forming properties of the segmentary lineage system of organization allow its members to raid nearby territories held by groups without the ability to mobilize forces. Relatives are available for defense, too, but it especially allows groups to decide to make the first strike because lineage segments are assured that they can draw reinforcements from other lineages related to them at a higher level of the clan.

The Nuer are a people with a penchant for fighting (Evans-Pritchard 1956), and these disputes frequently end in death. One is unlikely to find an older tribe member without copious evidence of the visit of clubs and spears. An insult is justification for a fight, and the Nuer have been described as easily taking offense. Since there is no formal mechanism for redress if an insult has been

hurled, an individual must take it upon himself to seek justice. He issues a challenge to a duel, and the challenge must be accepted. Children are instructed to settle any grievance by fighting, and skill in this endeavor is uniformly admired.

Whereas boys fight one another with spiked bracelets attached to their wrists, men fight those closest to them with clubs. Spears are reserved for use outside the local community, as there is a greater danger for more serious injury or death, and this has the potential to escalate into a blood-feud. After the battle is joined, no onlooker may intervene, and the combat rages until one of the parties is severely injured, at which point they will generally be pulled apart by those gathered around to watch the spectacle.

When the dispute involves men from different villages, however, it generally takes a different form. Spears are the weapons of choice, and every man in both villages is expected to participate. Because such a fight cannot end until there are several dead, Nuer are loath to enter into such a battle lightly. Instead, they will allow the conflict to be mediated by an informal adjudicator, the leopard-skin chief.

The Leopard-Skin Chief |

Despite their reluctance to enter into a blood-feud, the Nuer fight often, and homicide is not uncommon as the battles escalate. When a life is taken, there must be compensation. Because the Nuer have no formal system of adjudication, it falls to the holder of an informal ritual office of mediation, the leopard-skin chief, to intervene and prevent further bloodshed. Although one advantage of the segmentary lineage organization is its effectiveness in mobilizing allied kin, the ease with which full-scale disruption can escalate is something that must be kept in check. Although the leopard-skin chief has no power to enforce his judgments, his intervention is generally successful.

Part of the leopard-skin chief's effectiveness derives from his status as an outsider to the lineage network. Such an individual is generally a man whose own lineage is not one of the local village. This affords him a more neutral stance, so neither his attempts at mediation nor his judgment about payment of compensation are seen as favoring one side or the other.

Sometimes a leopard-skin chief can step in and encourage de-escalation of a dispute before blood is shed. More often, however, he is sought out after there has already been a murder, and his role is to arrange settlement between the aggrieved lineages, allowing both sides to step back from the battle without admitting defeat and preventing any further bloodshed.

When one man has killed another, he retreats at once to the home of the leopard-skin chief, so named for the skin he wears draped about his shoulders as the insignia of his office. This is neutral ground for the murderer. While he is in residence there, no kinsmen of the deceased will seek revenge. The leopard-skin chief has the ability to ritually cleanse the slayer, and this begins immediately. The murderer must neither eat nor drink until the leopard-skin chief has released the blood of the dead man out of his body, which is accomplished by

making several incisions down the length of his arm with a fishing spear. Once this is accomplished, the murderer presents the leopard-skin chief with an animal to sacrifice, and the cleansing is complete.

A man may remain in the sanctuary of a leopard-skin chief's home for quite some time, because negotiations cannot begin in earnest until the family of the deceased have completed their mortuary ceremonies and anger has begun to cool. His first attempts at negotiations may be met with some resistance. After ascertaining how many head of cattle the culprit's family are willing to offer as compensation, the chief approaches the victim's kin. It is a point of honor that they refuse this first overture. Negotiations proceed slowly, and generally the injured family begrudgingly accepts the payment—in theory forty to fifty animals, paid out over the course of several years—when they determine that the chief has made his best offer and is becoming increasingly impatient with their refusals. When at least twenty head of cattle have been paid, the family of the murderer may begin to feel safe, no longer fearful of being ambushed by the enemy family as they walk abroad. It is the leopard-skin chief who delivers the payment, with the murderer remaining in the asylum of the chief's home until completion of the initial transfer.

Even years after the debt has been paid, there is enmity between the two families. There is official prohibition against the families' eating or drinking together until the entire payment and all accompanying sacrifice are complete. However, in actuality they may choose not to share food for years, or even generations, out of injured feelings. Of this they say, "a bone lies between us." The healing is never really complete, as the murdered man's family is thought ever after "to have war in their hearts." (Evans-Pritchard 1956:154)

Religion and Expressive Culture

The Nuer speak of *kwoth*, spirit, as the creator, as a father and judge, as a guiding force and recipient of their prayers. Evans-Pritchard (1956) found that this over-arching concept could be roughly analogized to a Western notion of "God." However, there are also two other categories of supernatural beings that figure prominently in Nuer religious thought. These are the "spirits of the above" and "spirits of the below." One of the ways in which these spirits differ from the rather larger concept of God, *kwoth*, is that different individuals accord various spirits of the above and below varying interest and respect. A certain spirit may be significant for some individuals and families but not for others, whereas God is recognized and revered similarly by all Nuer.

Spirits of the Above |

Whether a person feels personally connected to any of the spirits ordinarily has to do with whether or not the individual or any family member has had direct contact with the spirit, usually in the form of possession. Sudden illness may be seen as possession and, once recovered, the sufferer may come to regard the

spirit that has sent the illness as one of his or her own *kuith*, the term applied to all spirits. Descendants of this individual may then continue to attend to this spirit. If they do not, the inherited spirit may send a reminder to alert the family to its need for attention. When the Nuer fall sick without an obvious cause, they may realize they have been neglecting a *kuith* who has visited an illness as a signal that it is not happy to have been forgotten.

Temporary spirit possession can be remedied by sacrifice. An animal is dedicated to the offending spirit, and recovery is expected to follow. There are instances, however, of spirit possession that is permanent. This may occur independent of an episode of illness, or may follow it. Abnormal behavior may be manifest for some time, and it is then realized by others that this individual has been given, by the possessing spirit, powers of healing, prophecy, and divination. That person is then *gwam kwoth*, the owner of that spirit, hollowed out by the possession, and filled up with the gifts bestowed by the spirit. Such an individual's character is forever altered. (Evans-Pritchard 1956)

In this new role, the prophet—usually male—is relied upon for certain ritual functions. He may perform sacrifices, or aid in curing. But the most important function of one permanently possessed by a spirit of the above is in the realm of warfare. Orders to fight come through him, the possibility of victory is in his hands, and no large-scale military effort is ever undertaken without these prophets performing sacrifices and singing hymns. The main social function of such prophets is to direct cattle raids on neighboring tribes, most notably the Dinka.

One sort of spirit of the above is the *coltvic*, who were once Nuer themselves. Individuals who have been struck by lightning, killed in windstorms, or found dead in the bush, unaccountably, are thought to have undergone a metamorphosis and emerged divine. Most lineages can cite at least one *coltvic* patron spirit. Death by lightning is not uncommon, and violent electrical storms are cause for great anxiety. However, such a death is not thought to be retribution for any misconduct on the part of the deceased, as some deaths are regarded. Rather, the electrocuted person is seen as having been chosen by God to be changed into a *coltvic*. It is said that the individual has actually entered into a kinship relation with God, as a result of this special selection. (Evans-Pritchard 1956:54)

Spirits of the Below |

Spirits of the above are also known as "spirits of the air." They are "great spirits" and much revered. Spirits of the below, however, are regarded quite differently. They are believed to have fallen from above, and as "spirits of the earth" they are "little spirits" and not held in the same reverence.

Spirits of the below can be classified into several categories, the most important of which is that of totemic spirits. These attach to specific clans and lineages, and are usually described in animal form—lion, lizard, crocodile, various birds, and snakes. Plants may be inspirited too, as may rivers and streams. Each of these aspects of nature is a material representation of a "spirit of the

below." These spirits can act positively through the plant or animal, if the totem by which they are represented is shown the proper "respect" by the Nuer. This respect can be demonstrated by refraining from hurting or eating it; paying it the courtesy of acknowledgment, should it be met along one's way; or by some act meant to demonstrate regret, should it be encountered dead or hurt.

Spirits as Social Refraction |

It is evident that the spiritual conceptualizations of the Nuer are intricately bound up with their social order. Spirits who "belong" to one lineage do not visit individuals of another lineage. Those that are represented by totems can act only for the clans whose totems they rightfully are. However, there are larger spiritual representations that do indeed belong to all Nuer, and in this way their religious structure resembles their social structure. The principle of segmentary lineage organization is that although lineages may be distinct and opposed to one another at one level, those same lineages may be affiliated with one another and opposed to another lineage at a different level of segmentation. It is in this same way that they can conceive of the spiritual realm as being specific to a smaller group at one level, yet "belong" to a larger segment, higher up.

God and Nuer: Death, Soul, and Sin |

Evans-Pritchard (1956) points out that to the Nuer, religion is a "reciprocal relation" between God and humanity. Their religious tenets tell them not only about the nature of God and various spirits, but also about their own nature.

The Nuer fear death, and it has been suggested that this is because they have no tradition of an afterlife. They profess neither knowledge nor interest in what happens to them after they die. Life comes from *kwoth*, and it returns to *kwoth*, in some sense, after death. They make a distinction between the mere "life" or "breath" of an individual, that which demonstrates being alive, and what might be thought of as the "soul," that property that bestows unique personhood on an individual. Mere animation is not sufficient to demonstrate this latter property. This is demonstrated by the story of Gathuogh, a man who returned to his village after years of wandering, having been given up for dead. He returned changed—he was distracted, disengaged, not communicative. It was said of him that he was alive but he no longer had his soul. Similarly, mortuary rites and mourning periods are not observed in the event of a small child's death. Although the Nuer describe conception as a result of male sperm entering the uterus, a child is also created by God, and is thus a product of both human and divine construction. Only when children are old enough to have begun to participate in the social life of the Nuer will they be deemed "real people." They are certainly alive, but not in possession of souls.

In the relationship of human to divine, sin is of paramount importance. The Nuer say that God is both very near and very distant. This is what they want, as he can be of assistance if close, but not dangerous in his powers of retribution if far away. The greatest "sinful" transgression regards a failure to show

respect. This demonstration of respect is a broad concept, incorporating elements of avoidance, abstention, modesty, deference, and restraint. Such respectful relationships—*thek*—exist in a wide range of configurations. They are found between a man and his wife's parents, a woman and her bridewealth cattle, an individual and food belonging to strangers, the living and a corpse. Transgressions in these relationships bring dire consequences. Evans-Pritchard (1956) says of *thek* relationships that "[t]hey are intended to keep people apart from other people or from creatures or things, either altogether or in certain circumstances or with regard to certain matters, and this is what they achieve." (pp. 180–181) The result of sinning in these circumstances is the highest form of shame and despicability, in addition to the prospect of more corporeal punishment, such as illness, blindness, and death. Homicide, adultery, and incest are among the most serious infractions a Nuer can commit. These acts, however, pose particular dilemmas for the Nuer.

Evans-Pritchard reports that incest is something much talked about among the Nuer, and it is not difficult to see why. Two factors contribute to the frequency of incest outside close kin: the first is the lack of disapproval accorded to casual sexual relations before marriage, and the second is the nature of kinship relations in Nuer society. An individual may not be able to reckon with complete certainty whether a particular person in fact occupies a relational role that is prohibited or not. Homicide poses a dilemma as well, in that while the Nuer believe that killing a member of one's community is wrong, this disapproved behavior may occur as a result of following another *approved* behavioral code. Douglas (1966) points out that Nuer boys are instructed from an early age to use force in defending their rights. This may at times lead to homicidal behavior, however unintentional. Adultery, according to Evans-Pritchard (1951, in Douglas 1966) may be regarded "as a risky sport in which any man may normally be tempted to indulge." But it is dangerous behavior because it brings sickness to the wronged husband, who is at risk for severe pains in his lower back, caused by the pollution of his subsequent relations with his wife. Payment of an ox to the husband can avert this fate.

Mary Douglas, in her classic volume *Purity and Danger*, reflects on the utility of these threats of pollution, which she asserts can "serve to settle uncertain moral issues." Regarding incest, she writes:

The Nuer cannot always tell whether they have committed incest or not. But they believe that incest brings misfortune in the form of skin disease, which can be averted by sacrifice. If they know they have incurred the risk they can have the sacrifice performed; if they reckon the degree of relationship was very distant, and the risk therefore slight, they can leave the matter to be settled *post hoc* by the appearance or non-appearance of the skin-disease. (1966)

As she goes on to point out, in a system such as the Nuer's, where the social structure is made up entirely of individuals whose relationships to one another are defined by marital categories and incest prohibitions, violations of the rules regarding incest and adultery strike at the heart of the local community's integrity. "To have produced such a society the Nuer have evidently needed to

make complicated rules about incest and adultery, and to maintain it they have underpinned the rules by threats of the danger of forbidden contacts. These rules and sanctions express the public conscience." Moreover, because there is often no general outrage over adultery, Douglas suggests that the threat of pollution can act, in an impersonal way, to take up the moral slack when indignation is not engendered.

Modern Times

Conrad Kottak (1997) suggests that "collective armed resistance can be an effective response to state intervention in tribal life." (p. 496) He cites examples from both Southeast Asia and Africa, where tribes have mounted indigenous resistance to thwart development projects that threatened not only the local economy and culture, but the ecosystem as well.

In the early 1970s, a canal was planned in the southern Sudan, engineered to span the homelands of both the Nuer and the neighboring Dinka, among other groups. Ten years later, the local tribes had succeeded in sabotaging the construction. Individuals who joined together under the banner of the Sudan People's Liberation Army raided camps set up by construction sites.

This canal, the Jonglei, was designed to channel water north from the Nile, to provide water for farmers in the north. This agriculture produced cash crops, such as cotton, for export. This diversion of water would have resulted in the destruction of southern pasturelands crucial to pastoralists, such as the Nuer, who depend on their herds for their lives and livelihood. As Kottak (1997) points out, the expectation of Sudan's government was that nomadic groups would acquiesce to assuming a more "advanced" sedentary lifestyle. The Nuer economy was deemed lesser, devalued because it provided mere subsistence, and not a marketable product.

Nuer in the United States

The 1990s, however, brought another challenge to the Nuer and their neighbors. Civil war in Sudan has cost millions of lives and resulted in widespread resettlement. Holtzman (2000) reports that half a million southern Sudanese, many of them Nuer, took refuge in camps in Ethiopia. The subsequent Ethiopian revolution forced many to move on to settlements in Kenya, which provided not only a safe haven, but the opportunity for an escape from refugee life. Programs designed to assist in finding permanent new homes allowed Nuer to emigrate, and by 1996 nearly 4000 southern Sudanese were living in the United States. (Holtzman 2000) In the midwest, Nuer are challenged to forge a new community without the kinship ties and village links that are the underpinnings of traditional Nuer solidarity. Jon Holtzman, an anthropologist who has done fieldwork among Nuer both in Sudan and in Minnesota, has found that local church congregations have reached out to Nuer refugees. Since most of the resettled Nuer had been converted to Christianity by missionaries

in Sudanese schools or Ethiopian camps, Holtzman observes that the church offers "perhaps the only continuity between Nuer life in Africa and Minnesota." (2000:123)

Church affiliation in Minnesota may derive from prior association in Sudan, but may often be an extension of the resettlement effort. Individual church members, or the congregation at large, offered sponsorship to Nuer families, securing for them the ability to seek refuge in the United States. Thus, families often chose to join the sponsoring congregation. This was not necessarily part of the bargain; often Nuer sought out the denominations most familiar to their home community. Holtzman (2000) points out that Nuer often found joining any congregation a challenge, owing to their understandable desire to conduct services in their own language. One church accommodated their wishes, providing separate space for worship at the same time as regular services. Problems soon arose:

[T]he Nuer service was a raucous, lively affair, with spirited singing to the pounding beat of African drums. This proved incompatible with the English service going on upstairs, and the minister was upset at having the tranquility of the chapel interrupted by persistent drumming—not to mention the effect this had on his sermon. (Holtzman 2000:126)

In addition to the sponsorship instrumental in helping Nuer to gain resettlement permission, church groups often continued to raise money to provide material goods for resettled families. Thus, Holtzman found that "spiritual relationships have become deeply entangled in the negotiation of material ones" (2000:127), although the aid is provided out of a sincere dedication to humanitarianism and the promotion of Christianity.

The majority of Minnesotan Nuer are young families and single men in their late teens and twenties. Holtzman (2000) explains that parents were eager for their adult children to resettle, adventure being a prerogative of youth, while they remained to care for the family's traditional home. Close ties are maintained with relatives in Sudan or Ethiopia, to whom remittances are sent, and who are often called upon to fulfill ritual requirements in their relatives' absence.

Traditionally, kinship is the paramount social bond in Nuer society, where everyone is related, however distantly, to everyone else. These various sorts of kinship bonds, activated at times when alliances need to be forged, are diffused in resettled Nuer, whose daily lives take on a more individualistic focus. Minnesotan Nuer find ways to reconstitute allegiances, often focusing on the larger shared "Nuer identity" than on Sudanese concepts of kinship. Holtzman found that his questions about the tribal, clan, and sub-clan affiliations of a Minnesotan community were brushed aside dismissively with the comment "Those things don't matter here. Here we are just all Nuer." (2000:44)

Some Minnesotan Nuer express the desire to return to their homeland, if peace can be found in Sudan. The high cost of living, long hours at work, and missing those who remained behind are all reasons that tug at those who wait for the opportunity to go home. (Holtzman 2000) Not all who have resettled

consider their move a temporary one, however. Those who have found educational opportunities and employment are committed to finding even greater success for themselves and their children. They look to the future, content to carve out a new life in a new land

For Further Discussion

The Nuer traditionally employed a form of political organization called the segmentary lineage organization (SLO). It provided an effective way to resolve disputes and mobilize support. In the 1990s, however, civil war in Sudan brought a grave challenge to the Nuer and their neighbors. War has cost millions of lives, and resulted in widespread resettlement. Many Nuer took refuge in camps in Ethiopia. The subsequent Ethiopian revolution forced many to move on to settlements in Kenya. The search for permanent new homes brought many thousands of Nuer to the United States. Given the importance of political systems and the traditional Nuer way of life, what might be some of the challenges of forging a new community without the political ties and village links that are the underpinnings of traditional Nuer solidarity?

References

- Douglas, M. *Purity and Danger*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966.
- Evans-Pritchard E. E. *The Nuer*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1940.
- Evans-Pritchard E. E. *Nuer Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1956.
- Gross, D. *Discovering Anthropology*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1992.
- Holtzman, J. *Nuer Journeys, Nuer Lives*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2000.
- Hutchinson, S. *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War, and the State*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.
- Kottak, C. *Anthropology: The Exploration of Human Diversity*, 7th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997.
- Sahlins, M. "The Segmentary Lineage: And Organization of Predatory Expansion" *American Anthropologist* 63 (1961):322-343.