

THE NUER

A DESCRIPTION OF
THE MODES OF LIVELIHOOD AND
POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS OF A NILOTIC PEOPLE

BY

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Introductory

I

From 1840, when Werne, Arnaud, and Thibaut made their ill-assorted voyage, to 1881, when the successful revolt of the Mahdi Muhammad Ahmed closed the Sudan to further exploration, several travellers penetrated Nuerland by one or other of the three great rivers that traverse it: the Bahr el Jebel (with the Bahr el Zeraf), the Bahr el Ghazal, and the Sobat. I have not been able to make much use of their writings, however, for their contact with the Nuer was slight and the impressions they recorded were superficial, and sometimes spurious. The most accurate and the least pretentious account is by the Savoyard elephant-hunter Jules Poncet, who spent several years on the borders of Nuerland.¹

A later source of information about the Nuer are the *Sudan Intelligence Reports* which run from the reconquest of the Sudan in 1899 to the present day, their ethnological value decreasing in recent years. In the first two decades after the reconquest there are a few reports by military officers which contain interesting, and often shrewd, observations.² The publication of *Sudan Notes and Records*, commencing in 1918, provided a new medium for recording observations on the customs of the peoples of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, and several political officers contributed papers on the Nuer. Two of these officers were killed in the performance of their duty, Major C. H. Stigand by the Aliab Dinka in 1919 and Captain V. H. Fergusson by the Nuong Nuer in 1927. In the same journal appeared the first attempt, by Mr. H. C. Jackson, to write a comprehensive

¹ Some of the writings from which I have derived information are Ferdinand Werne, *Expedition zur Entdeckung der Quellen des Weissen Nil* (1840-1), 1848; Hadji-Abd-el-Hamid Bey (C. L. du Couret), *Voyage au Pays des Niam-Niams ou Hommes d Queue*, 1854; Brun-Rollet, *Le Nil Blanc et le Soudan*, 1855; G. Lejean, *Bulletin de la Sociiiti de Giographie*, Paris, 1860; Jules Poncet, *Le Fleuve Blanc (Extrait des Nouvelles Annales de Voyages, 1863-4)*; Mr. and Mrs. J. Petherick, *Travels in Central Africa*, 1869; Ernst Mamo, *Reisen im Gebiete des blauen und weissen Nil, im egyptischen Sudan und den angrenzenden Negerlndnern, in den Jahren 1869 bis 1873, 1874*. Others are mentioned later, particularly on pp. 126-7 and 134

² These reports were used by Lieut.-Colonel Count Gleichen in his compilation: *The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan*, 2 vols., 1905

account of the Nuer, and great credit is due to him for the manner in which, in spite of serious obstacles, he carried it out.³

After I had begun my researches a book by Miss Ray Huffman, of the American Mission, and some papers by Father J. P. Crazzolaro, of the Congregation of Verona, were published.⁴ Although my own contributions to various journals are reprinted, in a condensed form, in this book, or will be reprinted in a subsequent volume, I allude to them here so that the reader may have a complete bibliography. I have omitted much detail that appeared in these articles.⁵

Lists of a few Nuer words were compiled by Brun-Rollet and Marno. More detailed vocabularies have been written by Major Stigand and Miss Huffman, and grammars by Professor Westermann and Father Crazzolaro. Professor Westermann's paper contains also some ethnological material.⁶

³ Major C. H. Stigand, 'Warrior Classes of the Nuers', S. N. & R., 1918, pp. 116-18, and 'The Story of Kir and the White Spear' *ibid.*, 1919, pp. 224-6; Capt. V. H. Fergusson, 'The Nuong Nuer', *ibid.*, 1921, pp. 146-55, and 'Nuer Beast Tales', *ibid.*, 1924, pp. 105-12; H. C. Jackson, 'The Nuer of the Upper Nile Province', *ibid.*, 1923, pp. 59-107 and 123-89 (this paper was reprinted as a book under the same title by El Hadara Printing Press, Khartoum, no date, and contained a terminal essay of 23 pages by P. Coriat on 'The Gaweir Nuers').

⁴ Ray Huffman, *Nuer Customs and Folk-lore*, 1931, 105 pp.; Father J. P. Crazzolaro, 'Die Gar-Zeremonie bei den Nuern', *Africa*, 1932, pp. 28-39, and 'Die Bedeutung des Rindes bei den Nuern', *ibid.* 1934, pp. 300-20.

⁵ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, 'The Nuer, Tribe and Clan', S. N. R., 1933, pp. 1-53, 1934, pp. 1-57, and 1935, pp. 37-87; 'The Nuer, Age-Sets' *ibid.*, 1936, pp. 233-69; 'Economic Life of the Nuer', *ibid.*, 1937, pp. 209-45, and 1938, pp. 31-77; 'Customs Relating to Twins among the Nilotic Nuer', *Uganda Journal*, 1936, pp. 230-8; 'Daily Life of the Nuer in Dry Season Camps', *Custom is King*, A. Collection of Essays in Honour of R. R. Marett, 1936, pp. 291-9; 'Some Aspects of Marriage and the Family among the Nuer', *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Rechtswissenschaft*, 1938, pp. 306-92; 'Nuer Time- Reckoning', *Africa*, 1939, pp. 189-216. The chapter on the Nuer (Chap. VI) in *Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan*, by Prof. C. G. and Mrs. B. Z. Seligman, 1932, was compiled from my notebooks.

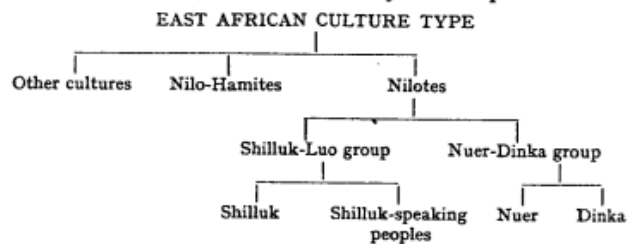
⁶ Brun-Rollet, 'Vokabularien der Dinka-, Nuehr- und Schilluk-Sprachen', *Petermann's Mittheilungen*, Erg. II. 1862-3, pp. 25-30; Marno, 'Kleine Vocabularien der Fungi-, Tabi-, Bertat- und Nuehr-Sprache', *Reisen im Gebiet des blauen und weissen Nil*, 1874, pp. 481-95; Professor Diedrich Westermann, 'The Nuer Language', *Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen*, 1912, pp. 84-141; Major C. H. Stigand, *A Nuer-English Vocabulary*, 1923, 33 pp.; Ray Huffman, *Nuer-English Dictionary*, 1929, 63 pp., and *English-Nuer Dictionary*, 1931, 80 pp.; Father J. P. Crazzolaro, *Outlines of a Nuer Grammar*, 1933, 218 pp.

INTRODUCTORY

II

I describe in this volume the ways in which a Nilotic people obtain their livelihood, and their political institutions. The information I collected about their domestic life will be published in a second volume.

The Nuer,⁷ who call themselves *Nath* (sing, ran), are round about 200,000 souls and live in the swamps and open savannah that stretch on both sides of the Nile south of its junction with the Sobat and Bahr el Ghazal, and on both banks of these two tributaries. They are tall, long-limbed, and narrow-headed, as may be seen in the illustrations. Culturally they are similar to the Dinka, and the two peoples together form a subdivision of the Nilotic group, which occupies part of an East-African culture-area the characteristics and extent of which are at present ill-defined. A second Nilotic subdivision comprises the Shilluk and various peoples who speak languages similar to Shilluk (Luo, Anuak, Lango, &c.). Probably these Shilluk-speaking peoples are all more alike to one another than any one of them is to the Shilluk, though little is yet known about most of them. A tentative classification may be thus presented:



Nuer and Dinka are too much alike physically and their languages and customs are too similar for any doubt to arise about their common origin, though the history of their divergence is unknown. The problem is complicated: for example, the Atwot, to the west of the Nile, appear to be a Nuer tribe who have adopted many Dinka habits,⁸ while the Jikany tribes of Nuerland are said to be of Dinka origin. Moreover, there has been

⁷ The word 'Nuer' is sanctioned by a century of usage. It is probably of Dinka origin. I use it in singular and plural, speaking of 'a Nuer man' and of 'the Nuer people'

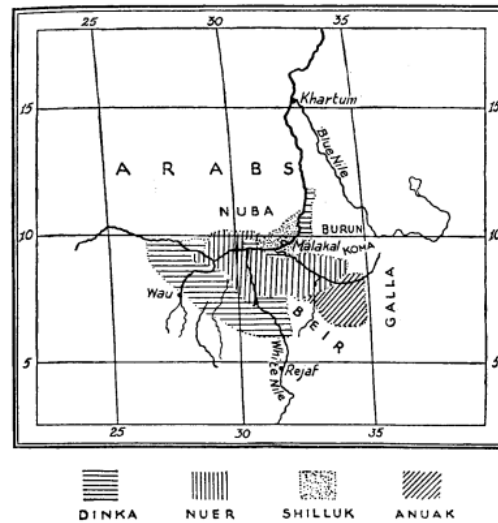
⁸ Poncet, op. cit., p. 54. They appear as Atot in the map on p. 129.

continuous contact between the two peoples that has resulted in much miscegenation and cultural borrowing. Both peoples recognize their common origin.

When we possess more information about some of the Shilluk- speaking peoples it will be possible to state what are the defining characters of Nilotic culture and social structure. At present such a classification is exceedingly difficult and I postpone the attempt, devoting this book to a plain account of the Nuer and neglecting the many obvious comparisons that might be made with other Nilotic peoples.

Political institutions are its main theme, but they cannot be understood without taking into account environment and modes of livelihood. I therefore devote the earlier part of the book to a description of the country in which the Nuer live and of how they obtain the necessities of life. It will be seen that the Nuer political system is consistent with their oecology.

The groups chiefly dealt with in the later part of the book are the people, the tribe and its segments, the clan and its lineages, and the age-sets. Each of these groups is, or forms part of, a segmentary system, by reference to which it is defined, and, consequently the status of its members, when acting as such towards one another and to outsiders, is undifferentiated. These statements will be elucidated in the course of our inquiry. We first describe the interrelation of territorial segments within a territorial, or political, system and then the relation of other social systems to this system. What we understand by political structure will be evident as we proceed, but we may state as an initial definition that we refer to relations within a territorial system between groups of persons who live in spatially well-defined areas and are conscious of their identity and exclusiveness. Only in the smallest of these communities are their members in constant contact with one another. We distinguish these political groups from local groups of a different kind, namely domestic groups, the family, the household, and the joint family, which are not, and do not form part of, segmentary systems, and in which the status of members in respect to each other and to outsiders is differentiated. Social ties in domestic groups are primarily of a kinship order, and corporate life is normal.



The Nuer and neighbouring peoples

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The Nuer political system includes all the peoples with whom they come into contact. By 'people' we mean all persons who speak the same language and have, in other respects, the same culture, and consider themselves to be distinct from like aggregates. The Nuer, the Shilluk, and the Anuak each occupy a continuous territory, but a people may be distributed in widely separate areas, e.g. the Dinka. When a people is, like the Shilluk, politically centralized, we may speak of a 'nation'. The Nuer and Dinka, on the other hand, are divided into a number of tribes which have no common organization or central administration and these peoples may be said to be, politically, a congeries of tribes, which sometimes form loose federations. The Nuer differentiate those tribes which live in the homeland to the west of the Nile from those which have migrated to the east of it. We find it convenient to make the same distinction and to speak of the Western Nuer and the Eastern Nuer. The Eastern Nuer may be further divided, for descriptive purposes, into those tribes which live near the Zeraf river and those which live to north and south of the Sobat river.

The largest political segment among the Nuer is the tribe. There is no larger group who, besides recognizing themselves as a distinct local community, affirm their obligation to

combine in warfare against outsiders and acknowledge the rights of their members to compensation for injury. A tribe is divided into a number of territorial segments and these are more than mere geographical divisions, for the members of each consider themselves to be distinct communities and sometimes act as such. We call the largest tribal segments 'primary sections the segments of a primary section 'secondary sections', and the segments of a secondary section 'tertiary sections'. A tertiary tribal section consists of a number of villages which are the smallest political units of Nuerland. A village is made up of domestic groups, occupying hamlets, homesteads, and huts.

We discuss the institution of the feud and the part played in it by the leopard-skin chief in relation to the political system. The word 'chief' may be a misleading designation, but it is sufficiently vague to be retained in the absence of a more suitable English word. He is a sacred person without political authority. Indeed, the Nuer have no government, and their state might be described as an ordered anarchy. Likewise they lack law, if we understand by this term judgements delivered by an independent and impartial authority which has, also, power to enforce its decisions. There are signs that certain changes were taking place in this respect, and at the end of the chapter on the political system we describe the emergence of prophets, persons in whom dwell the spirits of Sky-gods, and we suggest that in them we may perceive the beginnings of political development. Leopard-skin chiefs and prophets are the only ritual specialists who, in our opinion, have any political importance.

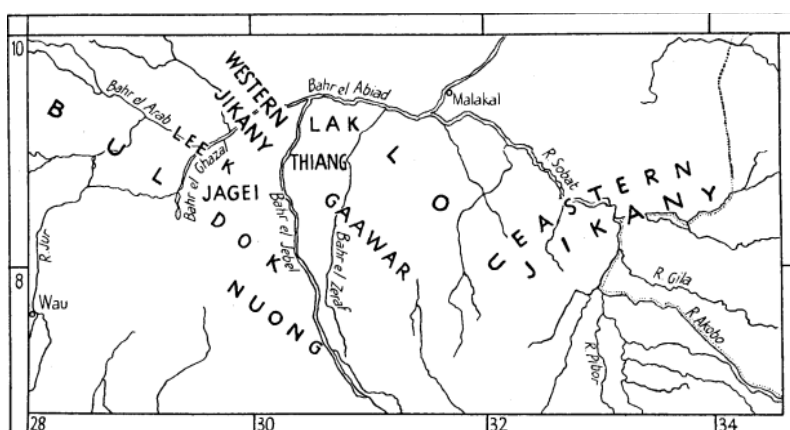
After an examination of the political structure we describe the lineage system and discuss the relation between the two. Nuer lineages are agnatic, i.e. they consist of persons who trace their descent exclusively through males to a common ancestor. The clan is the largest group of lineages which is definable by reference to rules of exogamy, though agnatic relationship is recognized between several clans. A clan is segmented into lineages, which are diverging branches of descent from a common ancestor. We call the largest segments into which a clan is divided its 'maximal lineages', the segments of a maximal lineage its 'major lineages', the segments of a major lineage its 'minor lineages', and the segments of a minor lineage its 'minimal

lineages'. The minimal lineage is the one to which a man usually refers when asked what is his lineage. A lineage is thus a group of agnates, dead or alive, between whom kinship can be traced genealogically, and a clan is an exogamous system of lineages. These lineage groups differ from political groups in that the relationship of their members to one another is based on descent and not on residence, for lineages are dispersed and do not compose exclusive local communities, and, also, in that lineage values often operate in a different range of situations from political values.

After discussing the lineage system in its relation to territorial segmentation we describe briefly the age-set system. The adult male population falls into stratified groups based on age, and we call these groups 'age-sets'. The members of each set become such by initiation and they remain in it till death. The sets do not form a cycle, but a progressive system, the junior set passing through positions of relative seniority till it becomes the senior set, after which its members die and the set becomes a memory, since its name does not recur. The only significant age-grades are those of boyhood and manhood, so that once a lad has been initiated into a set he remains in the same age-grade for the rest of his life. There are no grades of warriors and elders such as are found in other parts of East Africa. Though the sets are conscious of their social identity they have no corporate functions. The members of a set may act jointly in a small locality, but the whole group never co-operates exclusively in any activity. Nevertheless, the system is organized tribally and each tribe is stratified according to age independently of other tribes, though adjacent tribes may co-ordinate their age-sets.

The Nuer, like all other peoples, are also socially differentiated according to sex. This dichotomy has a very limited, and negative, significance for the structural relations which form the subject of this book. Its importance is domestic rather than political and little attention is paid to it. The Nuer cannot be said to be stratified into classes. Within a tribe there is slight differentiation of status between members of a dominant clan, Nuer of other clans, and Dinka who have been incorporated into the tribe, but, except perhaps on the periphery of Nuer expansion eastwards, this constitutes distinction of categories rather than of ranks.

Such, briefly, is the plan of this book and such are the meanings we attach to the words most frequently used to describe the groups discussed in it. We hope in the course of our inquiry to refine these definitions. The inquiry is directed to two ends: to describe the life of the Nuer, and to lay bare some of the principles of their social structure. We have endeavored to give as concise an account of their life as possible, believing that a short book is of greater value to the student and administrator than a long one, and, omitting much material, we have recorded only what is significant for the limited subject of discussion.



Sketch-map showing the larger Nuer Tribes



Youth (Eastern Gaajok) fastening giraffe-hair necklace on friend

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Azande before embarking on a new task. I also knew that a study of the Nuer would be extremely difficult. Their country and character are alike intractable and what little I had previously seen of them convinced me that I would fail to establish friendly relations with them.

I have always considered, and still consider, that an adequate sociological study of the Nuer was impossible in the circumstances in which most of my work was done. The reader must judge what I have accomplished. I would ask him not to judge too harshly, for if my account is sometimes scanty and uneven I would urge that the investigation was carried out in adverse circumstances; that Nuer social organization is simple and their culture bare; and that what I describe is almost entirely based on direct observation and is not augmented by copious notes taken down from regular informants, of whom, indeed, I had none. I, unlike most readers, know the Nuer, and must judge my work more severely than they, and I can say that if this book reveals many insufficiencies I am amazed that it has ever appeared at all. A man must judge his labours by the obstacles he has overcome and the hardships he has endured, and by these standards I am not ashamed of the results.

It may interest readers if I give them a short description of the conditions in which I pursued my studies, for they will then be better able to decide which statements are likely to be based on sound observation and which to be less well-grounded.

I arrived in Nuerland early in 1930. Stormy weather prevented my luggage from joining me at Marseilles, and owing to errors, for which I was not responsible, my food stores were not forwarded from Malakal and my Zande servants were not instructed to meet me. I proceeded to Nuerland (Leek country) with my tent, some equipment, and a few stores bought at Malakal, and two servants, an Atwot and a Bellanda, picked up hastily at the same place.

When I landed at Yoahnyang⁹ on the Bahr el Ghazal the Catholic missionaries there showed me much kindness. I waited for nine days on the river bank for the carriers I had been promised. By the tenth day only four of them had arrived and if it had not been for the assistance of an Arab merchant, who recruited some local women, I might have been delayed for an indefinite period.

On the following morning I set out for the neighbouring village of Pakur, where my carriers dropped tent and stores in the centre of a treeless plain, near some homesteads, and refused to bear them to the shade about half a mile further. Next day was devoted to erecting my tent and trying to persuade the Nuer, through my Atwot servant who spoke Nuer and some Arabic, to remove my abode to the vicinity of shade and water, which they refused to do. Fortunately a youth, Nhial, who has since been my constant companion in Nuerland, attached himself to me and after twelve days persuaded his kinsmen to carry my goods to the edge of the forest where they lived.

My servants, who, like most natives of the Southern Sudan, were terrified of the Nuer, had by this time become so scared that after several sleepless and apprehensive nights they bolted to the river to await the next steamer to Malakal, and I was left alone with Nhial. During this time the local Nuer would not lend a hand to assist me in anything and they only visited me to ask for tobacco, expressing displeasure when it was denied them. When I shot game to feed myself and my Zande servants, who had at last arrived, they took the animals and ate them in the bush, answering my remonstrances with the rejoinder that since the beasts had been killed on their land they had a right to them.

My main difficulty at this early stage was inability to converse freely with the Nuer. I had no interpreter. None of the Nuer spoke Arabic. There was no adequate grammar of the language and, apart from three short Nuer-English vocabularies, no dictionary. Consequently the whole of my first and a large part of my second expedition were taken

⁹ I take this early opportunity to inform readers that I have not spelt Nuer names and other words with phonetic consistency. I raise no objection, therefore, to any one spelling them differently. Generally I have given the nominative form, but an occasional genitive has crept into the text, diagrams, and maps.

up with trying to master the language sufficiently to make inquiries through it, and only those who have tried to learn a very difficult tongue without the aid of an interpreter and adequate literary guidance will fully appreciate the magnitude of the task.

After leaving Leek country I went with Nhial and my two Zande servants to Lou country. We motored to Muot dit with the intention of residing by the side of its lake, but found it entirely deserted, for it was too early for the annual concentration there. When some Nuer were found they refused to divulge the whereabouts of nearby camps and it was with considerable difficulty that we located one. We pitched our tents there and when the campers retired on Muot dit we accompanied them.

My days at Muot dit were happy and remunerative. I made friends with many Nuer youths who endeavoured to teach me their language and to show me that if I was a stranger they did not regard me as an obnoxious one. Every day I spent hours fishing with these lads in the lake and conversing with them in my tent. I began to feel my confidence returning and would have remained at Muot dit had the political situation been more favourable. A Government force surrounded our camp one morning at sunrise, searched for two prophets who had been leaders in a recent revolt, took hostages, and threatened to take many more if the prophets were not handed over. I felt that I was in an equivocal position, since such incidents might recur, and shortly afterwards returned to my home in Zandeland, having accomplished only three and a half months' work among the Nuer.

It would at any time have been difficult to do research among the Nuer, and at the period of my visit they were unusually hostile, for their recent defeat by Government forces and the measures taken to ensure their final submission had occasioned deep resentment. Nuer have often remarked to me, 'You raid us, yet you say we cannot raid the Dinka'; 'You overcame us with firearms and we had only spears. If we had had firearms we would have routed you'; and so forth. When I entered a cattle camp it was not only as a stranger but as an enemy, and they seldom tried to conceal their disgust at my presence, refusing to answer my greetings and even turning away when I addressed them.

At the end of my 1930 visit to Nuerland I had learnt a little of the language but had the scantiest notes of their customs. In the dry season of 1931 I returned to make a fresh attempt, going first for a fortnight to the American Mission at Nasser, where I was generously assisted by the American and Nuer staff, and then to cattle camps on the Nyanding river—an unfortunate choice, for the Nuer there were more hostile than those I had hitherto encountered and the conditions were harsher than any I had previously experienced. The water was scanty and foul, the cattle were dying of rinderpest, and the camps swarmed with flies. The Nuer would not carry my stores and equipment, and as I had only two donkeys, one of them lame, it was impossible to move. Eventually I managed to obtain a lorry and extricate myself, but not before experiencing the Nuer in his most paralyzing mood. As every effort was made to prevent me from entering the cattle camps and it was seldom that I had visitors I was almost entirely cut off from communication with the people. My attempts to prosecute inquiries were persistently obstructed.

Nuer are expert at sabotaging an inquiry and until one has resided with them for some weeks they steadfastly stultify all efforts to elicit the simplest facts and to elucidate the most innocent practices. I have obtained in Zandeland more information in a few days than I obtained in Nuerland in as many weeks. After a while the people were prepared to visit me in my tent, to smoke my tobacco, and even to joke and make small talk, but they were unwilling either to receive me in their windscreens or to discuss serious matters. Questions about customs were blocked by a technique I can commend to natives who are inconvenienced by the curiosity of ethnologists. The following specimen of Nuer methods is the commencement of a conversation on the Nyanding river, on a subject which admits of some obscurity but, with willingness to co-operate, can soon be elucidated.

I: Who are you?

Cuol: A man.

I: What is your name?

Cuol: Do you want to know my *name*?

I: Yes.

Cuol: You want to know my name?

I: Yes, you have come to visit me in my tent and I would like to know who you are.

Cuol: All right. I am Cuol. What is your name?

I: My name is Pritchard.

Cuol: What is your father's name?

I: My father's name is also Pritchard.

Cuol: No, that cannot be true. You cannot have the same name as your father.

I: It is the name of my lineage. What is the name of your lineage?

Cuol: Do you want to know the name of my lineage?

I: Yes.

Cuol: What will you do with it if I tell you? Will you take it to your country?

I: I don't want to do anything with it. I just want to know it since I am living at your camp.

Cuol: Oh well, we are Lou.

I: I did not ask you the name of your tribe. I know that. I am asking you the name of your lineage.

Cuol: Why do you want to know the name of my lineage?

/: I don't want to know it.

Cuol: Then why do you ask me for it? Give me some tobacco.

I defy the most patient ethnologist to make headway against this kind of opposition. One is just driven crazy by it. Indeed, after a few weeks of associating solely with Nuer one displays, if the pun be allowed, the most evident symptoms of 'Neurosis'.

From the Nyanding I moved, still without having made any real progress, to a cattle camp at Yakwac on the Sobat river where I pitched my tent a few yards from the windscreens. Here I remained, save for a short interval spent at the American Mission, for over three months—till the commencement of the rains. After the usual initial difficulties I at last began to feel myself a member of a community and to be accepted as such, especially when I had acquired a few cattle. When the campers at Yakwac returned to their inland village I had no means of accompanying them and intended to visit Leek country again. A severe attack of malaria sent me to Malakal hospital, and thence to England, instead. Five and a half months' work was accomplished on this second expedition.

During the tenure of a subsequent appointment in Egypt I published in *Sudan Notes and Records* essays which form the basis of this book, for I had not expected to have a further opportunity to visit the Nuer. However, in 1935 I was granted a two years' research fellowship by the Leverhulme trustees to make an intensive study of the Pagan Galla of Ethiopia. As delay was caused by diplomatic chicanery I spent two and a half

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months on the Sudan-Ethiopian frontier making a survey of the Eastern Anuak, and when, at last, I entered Ethiopia the imminence of Italian invasion compelled me to jettison my Galla studies and enabled me to advance my investigation of the Nuer, during a further seven weeks' residence in their country, by revising earlier notes and by collecting more material. I visited the Nuer who live on the Pibor river, renewed my acquaintance with friends of the Nasser Mission and at Yakwac, and spent about a month among the Eastern Jikany at the mouth of the Nyanding.

In 1936, after making a survey of the Nilotic Luo of Kenya, I spent a final seven weeks in Nuerland, visiting that part of it which lies to the west of the Nile, especially the Karlual section of the Leek tribe. My total residence among the Nuer was thus about a year. I do not consider a year adequate time in which to make a sociological study of a people, especially of a difficult people in adverse circumstances, but serious sickness on both the 1935 and 1936 expeditions closed investigations prematurely.

Besides physical discomfort at all times, suspicion and obstinate resistance encountered in the early stages of research, absence of interpreter, lack of adequate grammar and dictionary, and failure to procure the usual informants, there developed a further difficulty as the inquiry proceeded. As I became more friendly with the Nuer and more at home in their language they visited me from early morning till late at night, and hardly a moment of the day passed without men, women, or boys in my tent. As soon as I began to discuss a custom with one man another would interrupt the conversation in pursuance of some affair of his own or by an exchange of pleasantries and jokes. The men came at milking-time and some of them remained till midday. Then the girls, who had just finished dairy-work, arrived and insisted on attention. Married women were less frequent visitors, but boys were generally under the awning of my tent if grown-ups were not present to drive them away. These endless visits entailed constant badinage and interruption and, although they offered opportunity for improving my knowledge of the Nuer language, imposed a severe strain. Nevertheless, if one chooses to reside in a Nuer camp one must submit to Nuer custom, and they are persistent and tireless visitors. The chief privation was the publicity to which all my actions were exposed, and it was long before I became hardened, though never entirely insensitive, to performing the most intimate operations before an audience or in full view of the camp.

Since my tent was always in the midst of homesteads or windscreens and my inquiries had to be conducted in public, I was seldom able to hold confidential conversations and never succeeded in training informants capable of dictating texts and giving detailed descriptions and commentaries. This failure was compensated for by the intimacy I was compelled to establish with the Nuer. As I could not use the easier and shorter method of working through regular informants I had to fall back on direct observation of, and

participation in, the everyday life of the people. From the door of my tent I could see what was happening in camp or village and every moment was spent in Nuer company. Information was thus gathered in particles, each Nuer I met being used as a source of knowledge, and not, as it were, in chunks supplied by selected and trained informants. Because I had to live in such close contact with the Nuer I knew them more intimately than the Azande, about whom I am able to write a much more detailed account. Azande would not allow me to live as one of themselves; Nuer would not allow me to live otherwise. Among Azande I was compelled to live outside the community; among Nuer I was compelled to be a member of it. Azande treated me as a superior; Nuer as an equal.

I do not make far-reaching claims. I believe that I have understood the chief values of the Nuer and am able to present a true outline of their social structure, but I regard, and have designed, this volume as a contribution to the ethnology of a particular area rather than as a detailed sociological study, and I shall be content if it is accepted as such. There is much that I did not see or inquire into and therefore plenty of opportunity for others to make investigations in the same field and among neighboring peoples. I hope they will do so and that one day we may have a fairly complete record of Nilotic social systems.

CHAPTER 1

INTEREST IN CATTLE

I

A people whose material culture is as simple as that of the Nuer are highly dependent on their environment. They are pre-eminently pastoral, though they grow more millet and maize than is commonly supposed. Some tribes cultivate more and some less, according to conditions of soil and surface water and their wealth in cattle, but all alike regard horticulture as toil forced on them by poverty of stock, for at heart they are herds-men, and the only labour in which they delight is care of cattle. They not only depend on cattle for many of life's necessities but they have the herdsman's outlook on the world. Cattle are their dearest possession and they gladly risk their lives to defend their herds or to pillage those of their neighbours. Most of their social activities concern cattle and

cherchez la vache is the best advice that can be given to those who desire to understand Nuer behaviour.¹⁰

The attitude of Nuer towards, and their relations with, neighbouring peoples are influenced by their love of cattle and their desire to acquire them. They have profound contempt for peoples with few or no cattle, like the Anuak, while their wars against Dinka tribes have been directed to seizure of cattle and control of pastures. Each Nuer tribe and tribal section has its own pastures and water-supplies, and political fission is closely related to distribution of these natural resources, ownership of which is generally expressed in terms of clans and lineages. Disputes between tribal sections are very often about cattle, and cattle are the compensation for loss of life and limb that is so frequently their outcome. Leopard-skin chiefs and prophets are arbiters in questions in which cattle are the issue, or ritual agents in situations demanding sacrifice of ox or ram. Another ritual specialist is the *wut ghok*, the Man of the Cattle. Likewise, in speaking of age-sets and age-grades we find ourselves describing the relations of men to their cattle, for the change from boyhood to manhood is most clearly marked by a corresponding change in those relations at initiation.



Girl in kraal (Eastern Gaajok)

¹⁰ Nuer interest in their cattle has been emphasized by early travellers in their country. Vide Marno, op. cit., p. 343; Werne, op. cit., p. 439; du Couret, op. cit., p. 82.

Small local groups pasture their cattle in common and jointly defend their homes and herds. Their solidarity is most evident in the dry season when they live in a circle of windscreens around a common kraal, but it can also be seen in their wet season isolation. A single family or household cannot protect and herd their cattle alone and the cohesion of territorial groups must be considered in the light of this fact.

The network of kinship ties which links members of local communities is brought about by the operation of exogamous rules, often stated in terms of cattle. The union of marriage is brought about by payment of cattle and every phase of the ritual is marked by their transference or slaughter. The legal status of the partners and of their children is defined by cattle- rights and obligations.

Cattle are owned by families. While the head of the household is alive he has full rights of disposal over the herd, though his wives have rights of use in the cows and his sons own some of the oxen. As each son, in order of seniority, reaches the age of marriage he marries with cows from the herd. The next son will have to wait till the herd has reached its earlier strength before he can marry in his turn. When the head of the household dies the herd still remains the centre of family life and Nuer strongly deprecate breaking it up, at any rate till all the sons have married, for it is a common herd in which all have equal rights. When the sons are married they and their wives and children generally live in adjacent homesteads. In the early part of the dry season one sees a joint family of this kind living in a circle of windscreens around a common kraal, and in the big camps formed later in the year one finds them occupying a distinct section in the lines of windscreens. The bond of cattle between brothers is continued long after each has a home and children of his own, for when a daughter of any one of them is married the others receive a large portion of her bride-wealth. Her grandparents, maternal uncles, paternal and maternal aunts, and even more distant relatives, also receive a portion. Kinship is customarily defined by reference to these payments, being most clearly pointed at marriage, when movements of cattle from kraal to kraal are equivalent to lines on a genealogical chart. It is also emphasized by division of sacrificial meat among agnatic and cognatic relatives.

The importance of cattle in Nuer life and thought is further exemplified in personal names. Men are frequently addressed by names that refer to the form and colour of their favourite oxen, and women take names from oxen and from the cows they milk. Even small boys call one another by ox-names when playing together in the pastures, a child usually taking his name from the bull-calf of the cow he and his mother milk. Often a man receives an ox-name or cow-name at birth. Sometimes the name of a man which is handed down to posterity is his ox-name and not his birth-name. Hence a Nuer genealogy may sound like an inventory of a kraal. The linguistic identification of a man with his favourite ox cannot fail to affect his attitude to the beast, and to Europeans the custom is the most striking evidence of the pastoral mentality of the Nuer.

Since cattle are a Nuer's most cherished possession, being an essential food-supply and the most important social asset, it is easy to understand why they play a foremost part in ritual. A man establishes contact with the ghosts and spirits through his cattle. If one is able to obtain the history of each cow in a kraal, one obtains at the same time not only an account of all the kinship links and affinities of the owners but also of all their mystical connexions. Cows are dedicated to the spirits of the lineages of the owner and of his wife and to any personal spirit that has at some time possessed either of them. Other beasts are dedicated to ghosts of the dead. By rubbing ashes along the back of a cow or ox one may get into touch with the spirit or ghost associated with it and ask it for assistance. Another way of communicating with the dead and with spirits is by sacrifice, and no Nuer ceremony is complete without the sacrifice of a ram, he-goat, or ox.

We have seen in a brief survey of some Nuer institutions and customs that most of their social behaviour directly concerns their cattle. A fuller study of their culture would show everywhere the same dominant interest in cattle, e.g. in their folklore. They are always talking about their beasts. I used sometimes to despair that I never discussed anything with the young men but livestock and girls, and even the subject of girls led inevitably to that of cattle. Start on whatever subject I would, and approach it from whatever angle, we would soon be speaking of cows and oxen, heifers and steers, rams and sheep, he-goats and she-goats, calves and lambs and kids. I have already indicated that this obsession—for such it seems to an outsider—is due not only to the great economic

value of cattle but also to the fact that they are links in numerous social relationships. Nuer tend to define all social processes and relationships in terms of cattle. Their social idiom is a bovine idiom.

Consequently he who lives among Nuer and wishes to understand their social life must first master a vocabulary referring to cattle and to the life of the herds. Such complicated discussions as those which take place in negotiations of marriage, in ritual situations, and in legal disputes can only be followed when one understands the difficult cattle-terminology of colours, ages, sexes, and so forth.

Important though horticultural and piscatorial pursuits are in Nuer economy, pastoral pursuits take precedence because cattle not only have nutritive utility but have a general social value in other respects. I have mentioned a few situations in which this value is manifested, but have not recorded every role of cattle in Nuer culture, for they are significant in many social processes, including some I have mentioned, which lie outside the limited scope of this book. It seemed necessary to give an introductory sketch on these lines in order that the reader might understand that Nuer devotion to the herdsman's art is inspired by a range of interests far wider than simple need for food, and why cattle are a dominant value in their lives. We shall ask later how this value is related to environmental conditions and how far the two, taken together, help us to explain some characteristics of Nuer political structure.

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Before the present century Nuer were far richer in cattle than they are now and it is probable that they cultivated less millet. Their stock has been impaired by repeated outbreaks of rinderpest, which still decimate the herds. It was probably more destructive in the past than now, though the attacks I witnessed were severe; but in the past the warlike Nuer could always restore their losses by raiding Dinka. All Nuer agree that in the last generation their herds were more considerable and that the payments of bride wealth and blood-wealth were forty, and sometimes fifty to sixty, head of cattle, whereas to-day the kinsmen of a bride do not expect to receive more than twenty to thirty. At the

present time I would say, on a general impression, that the Nuer are far richer in stock than the Shilluk, but not so prosperous as the more favoured of the Dinka tribes.

It was difficult to make a census of cattle, even in a small area, and Nuer would certainly have regarded such an attempt with repugnance. On the few estimates made I would reckon an average of ten head of cattle and five goats and sheep to the byre. A byre of the ordinary size cannot hold more than a dozen or so adult kine. As there are some eight persons to a byre the cattle probably do not greatly exceed the human population. Cows predominate and probably compose about two-thirds of the herds. Many plates in this book show the appearance of Nuer cattle. Nuer say that a very large hump shows Beir origin and that very long horns are evidence of Dinka stock.

Some tribes are richer in cattle than others. Lou country is considered especially suitable for raising stock and is renowned for its large herds. The Eastern Jikany were once very rich in cattle, but their herds are still recovering from losses in epidemics that forced the people to cultivate more extensively. Cattle are everywhere evenly distributed. Hardly anyone is entirely without them, and no one is very rich. Although cattle are a form of wealth that can be accumulated, a man never possesses many more beasts than his byre will hold, because as soon as his herd is large enough he, or one of his family, marries. The herd is thereby reduced to two or three beasts and the next few years are spent in repairing its losses. Every household goes through these alternating periods of poverty and comparative wealth. Marriages and epidemics prevent accumulation of cattle and no disparity in wealth offends the democratic sentiment of the people.

When we come to examine the Nuer political system we shall keep in mind that till recent years they have probably been more exclusively pastoral, and more nomadic, than at the present time, and that the dwindling of their herds may partly explain their persistent aggressiveness.

III

Although cattle have many uses they are chiefly useful for the milk they provide. Milk and millet (sorghum) are the staple foods of the Nuer. In some parts of their country,

especially among the Lou, the millet supply seldom lasts the whole year, and when it is exhausted people are dependent on milk and fish. At such times a family may be sustained by the milk of a single cow. In all parts the millet crop is uncertain and more or less severe famines are frequent, during which people rely on fish, wild roots, fruits, and seeds, but mainly on the milk of their herds. Even when millet is plentiful it is seldom eaten alone, for without milk, whey, or liquid cheese, Nuer find it stodgy, unpalatable, and, especially for children, indigestible. They regard milk as essential for children, believing that they cannot be well and happy without it, and the needs of children are always the first to be satisfied even if, as happens in times of privation, their elders have to deny themselves. In Nuer eyes the happiest state is that in which a family possesses several lactating cows, for then the children are well-nourished and there is a surplus that can be devoted to cheese-making and to assisting kinsmen and entertaining guests. A household can generally obtain milk for its little children because a kinsman will lend them a lactating cow, or give them part of its milk, if they do not possess one. This kinship obligation is acknowledged by all and is generously fulfilled, because it is recognized that the needs of children are the concern of neighbours and relatives, and not of the parents alone. Occasionally, however, after an epidemic or, to a lesser degree, after two or three youths of the group have married, an entire hamlet, or even a whole village may experience scarcity. Sometimes, also, shortage is caused by a tendency for the cows of a village to cease lactating at about the same time.

Nuer value their cows according to the amount of milk they give and they know the merits of each in this respect. The calves of a good milch cow are more highly prized than the calves of a cow that gives little milk. A cow is never to them just a cow, but is always a good cow or a bad cow, and a Nuer who is owed a cow will not accept in payment of his debt one that does not meet with his approval. If you ask a Nuer in a cattle camp which are the best and worst cows in the herd he can tell you at once. In judging their points he pays little attention to those aesthetic qualities which please him in an ox, especially fatness, colour, and shape of horns, but he selects those which indicate a good milch cow: a broad loose back, prominent haunch bones, large milk-veins, and a much-wrinkled milk-bag. In judging the age of a cow he notes the depth of

the trenches which run on either side of its rump towards the tail, the number and sharpness of its teeth, the firmness of its gait, and the number of rings on its horns. Nuer cows have the familiar angular and thin-fleshed characteristics of dairy stock.

Milking is performed twice daily by women, girls, and uninitiated boys. Men are forbidden to milk cows unless, as on journeys or war expeditions, there are no women or boys present. The milker squats by the cow and milks a single teat at a time into the narrow mouth of a bottle-necked gourd balanced on her thighs (see Plates III and V). She milks with thumb and first finger but, the other fingers being closed, the teat is to some extent pressed against the whole hand. It is both a squeezing and a pulling motion. The gourd is kept in position by the downward stroke of the hands which press it against the thighs. When a pot, or a gourd with a wider mouth, is used it is held between the knees and the milker squeezes two teats at a time. Occasionally one sees two girls milking a cow, one at either side. If a cow is restless a man may hold it still by putting his hand in its mouth and gripping its muzzle, and if it kicks, a noose is placed round its hind legs and they are pulled together (see Plate III). I was told that sometimes they ring the nose of a cow that is habitually restless during milking.

The process of milking is as follows. The calf is loosened and with its tethering-cord round its neck runs at once to its dam and begins violently butting her udder. This starts the flow of milk, and Nuer hold that if the calf were not first to suck the cow would hold up its milk. They do not pat the udder with the hand unless the calf is dead, for this is considered bad for the cow. When the calf has sucked a little it is dragged away, resisting stubbornly, and tethered to its dam's peg, where it rubs against her forelegs and she licks it. The girl now milks the first milking, known as the *wic*. When the teats become soft and empty the calf is again loosened and the process is repeated. The second milking is called *tip indit*, the greater tip. As a rule there are only two milkings, but if it is a very good milch cow at the height of her lactation period the calf may once more be loosened and a third milking, called *tip intot*, the lesser tip, be taken. When the girl has finished milking she wipes her thighs and the milk-gourd with the cow's tail and loosens the calf to finish off what milk is left. The first milking takes longer time and

produces more milk than the second, and the second more than the third. The morning yield is greater than the evening yield.



Milking a restless cow (Lou)

A series of measurements suggest that four to five pints a day may be regarded as a general average for Nuer cows during their lactation period, which lasts, on an average, about seven months. It must be remembered, however, that this is an estimate of the yield for human consumption. The calf gets its share before, during, and after the milking. It is possible, moreover, that, as Nuer declare, some cows hold up their milk for their calves, since the calves often suck for several minutes after milking before their dams refuse them by kicking them or moving so that they cannot reach their udders. Sometimes a small boy drags the calf away and milks the udders himself, licking the milk off his hands, or shares the teats with the calf, but as a rule the calf gets the remainder of the milk. The total yield may, therefore, be as high as seven to nine pints a day and it appears to be far richer than milk given by English cows. It is not surprising that the yield is small, because Nuer cows receive no artificial feeding, succulent pasturage is often difficult to obtain, and they have to endure great hardship. It must, moreover, be emphasized that whereas English dairy farmers require only milk, Nuer

herdsmen require milk and also wish to preserve every calf. Human needs have to be subordinated to the needs of the calves, which are the first consideration if the herd is to be perpetuated.

Milk is consumed in various ways. Fresh milk is drunk, especially by children, and is also consumed with millet-porridge. Fresh milk is chiefly drunk by adults in the heat of the dry season when a refreshing draught is most appreciated and food is scarce. Some milk is put aside, where it soon, very rapidly in hot weather, sours and thickens, in which condition it is relished. Nuer like to have a gourd of sour milk always at hand in case visitors come. Part of the daily yield is kept for making cheese, and if there are several cows in lactation one may be reserved for this purpose. Milk for churning is drawn into a different gourd to that used for drinking milk. It is then transferred to a churning gourd (see Fig. 1), in which it stands for several hours, and as churning gourds are not cleaned, unless they smell bad, the acids which remain from the previous churning curdle the milk.



Fig. 1. Churning Gourd

After standing it is churned by a woman, or girl, who sits on the ground with her legs stretched in front of her, and, raising the gourd, brings it down with a jerk on her thighs where she rocks it a few times before repeating her actions: a simple but lengthy way of churning. A small quantity of water is poured into the gourd when the curds are

beginning to form to make them set well and to increase the quantity of whey, and some ox's urine may be added to give them consistency. When they have formed, the woman pours the milk into a cup-shaped gourd and scoops them out with a mussel shell into another gourd vessel which is hung up in a hut. The whey, mixed with fresh milk, is mainly drunk by women and boys. Every day they add to the supply of curds and now and again stir some ox's urine with them to prevent them from going bad. They may add to the supply for several weeks before the final boiling over a quick fire, which turns the curds, lieth in bor, into solid deep yellow cheese, lieth in car. After boiling for a time the liquid is poured into a gourd and the oil on top is removed, to be used as a flavouring for porridge. The cheese is suspended in a net from the roof of a hut in a round gourd, a piece of the shell of which has been cut out so that cords run through it and it acts as a sliding lid (see Fig. 2), and, if air is excluded by a coating of cattle dung, it will keep in good condition for months. Milk may thus be stored in the form of cheese. It is eaten with porridge and is also used for anointing the body.

Sheep and goats are also milked in the mornings, but little importance is attached to their yield, which is drunk by small children and not used for dairy work. The woman milks and the kids and lambs finish what is left in the udders. As they run with their dams at pasture an evening milking is not taken; but during the day hungry herd boys often squeeze the udders and lick the milk off their hands.

Some points that arise from an account of milking and dairy-work deserve emphasis. (1) The present number and distribution of cattle do not permit the Nuer to lead an entirely pastoral life as they would like to do, and possibly did at one time. On a generous estimate the average daily yield to the byre is probably no more than twelve pints, or one and a half pints per person. A mixed economy is, therefore, necessary. (2) Furthermore the fluctuation in household resources, due to epidemics and transmission of bride-wealth, is further accentuated by the organic character of the staple diet, for cows only produce milk for a certain period after calving and the yield is not constant. It follows that a single family is not a self-sufficient unit, as far as milk is concerned, for it cannot always ensure an adequate supply. Therefore, since milk is considered essential, the economic unit must be larger than the simple family group. (3)

Environmental conditions, as well as need for cereal food to supplement their milk diet, prevent Nuer from being entirely nomadic, but milk food enables them to lead a roving life for part of the year and gives them mobility and elusiveness, as their history shows and as has been recently demonstrated in the Government campaign against them. Milk requires neither storage nor transport, being daily renewed, but, on the other hand, involves a straight dependence on water and vegetation which not only permits, but compels, a wandering life. Such a life nurtures the qualities of the shepherd—courage, love of fighting, and contempt of hunger and hardship—rather than shapes the industrious character of the peasant.

IV

Nuer are also interested in their cattle for meat, boiled and roasted. They do not raise herds for slaughter, but sheep and oxen are frequently sacrificed at ceremonies. There are always ghosts and spirits in whose honour a sacrifice would at any time be appropriate, and such sacrifices are generally long overdue, so that there does not lack a proper excuse for a feast when people desire one. Fertile cows are sacrificed in mortuary rites, but, otherwise, only barren females are killed. At sacrifices most people are interested more in the festal than the religious character of the rites. Sometimes, as at marriage ceremonies, the people who perform the ritual are different from those who eat the meat, while at other ceremonies there is a general scramble for the carcass. Desire for meat is shown without shame on these occasions, and Nuer recognize that some men sacrifice without due cause. In some years it is a custom in the rains for young men to join together at a homestead with the purpose of slaughtering oxen and gorging themselves with meat. Except on such occasions, however, people ought not to kill an ox solely for food—it being even thought that the ox may curse them—and they only do so in severe famine. The Lou, who are rich in cattle, have a reputation, of which they are rather ashamed, for killing oxen for meat. Nevertheless, nowhere in Nuerland are cattle ordinarily slaughtered for food, and a man would never kill even a sheep or goat merely on the grounds that he desired meat. On occasions of minor importance sheep or goats are sacrificed rather than oxen, as they are less valuable.

Any animal which dies a natural death is eaten. Even when a youth's favourite ox dies he must be persuaded to partake of its flesh, and it is said that were he to refuse his spear might avenge the insult by cutting his foot or hand on some future occasion. Nuer are very fond of meat, and declare that on the death of a cow, 'The eyes and the heart are sad, but the teeth and the stomach are glad.' 'A man's stomach prays to God, independently of his mind, for such gifts.'

Though oxen are sacrificed and eaten they are not valued only for these purposes, but also for display and for the prestige their possession confers. Colour and shape of horns are significant, but the essential qualities are bigness and fatness, it being considered especially important that the haunch bones should not be apparent.

Nuer admire a large hump which wobbles when the animal walks, and to exaggerate this character they often manipulate the hump shortly after birth.

Like other pastoral peoples in East Africa the Nuer extract blood from the necks of their cattle, and this is a supplementary article of diet in dry season camps, where one may generally see at least one cow bled each evening. Cows are bled for culinary purposes more frequently than oxen.



Fig. 2. Gourd for Storing Cheese

The operation, called bar, consists of tying a cord tightly round a cow's neck so that the veins stand out and one of them can be stabbed, on the head side of the cord, with a small knife bound with cord or grass to prevent it entering too deeply. The blood spurts out, and when a large gourd has been filled they loosen the cord and it ceases to flow. Some dung is smeared over the wound. If one examines the neck of a cow one sees a row of small cicatrices. Cows appear to be a little giddy after the operation and may totter slightly, but otherwise seem none the worse for their experience. Indeed, it may well be, as Nuer assert, that they are the better for it, for they lead a sluggish life. The blood is boiled by women till it is fairly consistent and can be used as a meat flavouring with porridge; or the men let it stand till it coagulates into a solid block, and, after roasting it in the embers of a fire, cut it up and eat it.

Nuer do not regard the blood of cows as a staple article of diet and it does not play an important part in their cuisine. Indeed, they say that they do not perform the operation to acquire food, though they confess that roasted blood is delicious, but for the benefit of the cows. Bleeding is designed to cure a cow of any unfitness by letting out the bad blood of the sickness. Also, Nuer say, it makes the cow fat, for next day it will be more lively and graze avidly. Bleeding, moreover, in their opinion, decreases the desire of a cow to be served. Nuer say that if a cow is served too frequently it may eventually become barren, whereas, if it is bled now and again, it will only require to be served once and will be in calf. Cattle are sometimes bled for medical reasons in the rainy season, when people may be so replete that the blood is given to the boys of the kraal and to the dogs. Sometimes they make incisions in the noses of calves and let the blood flow to the ground in order, to make them fat. I have seen Nuer scarify their own legs and the small of their backs to induce fleetness and strength.

The following two points seem to us to be significant, (i) Whilst Nuer normally do not kill their stock for food, the end of every beast is, in fact, the pot, so that they obtain sufficient meat to satisfy their craving and have no pressing need to hunt wild animals, an activity in which they engage little. (2) Except when epidemics are rife the usual occasions of eating meat are ritual and it is the festal character of rites which gives them much of their significance in the life of the people.

Apart from milk, meat, and blood, cattle furnish Nuer with numerous household necessities, and when we consider how few are their possessions we can appreciate the importance of cattle as raw material. The bodies and bodily products of cattle have the following uses:

Their skins are used for beds, trays, for carrying fuel (Plate XVII), cord for tethering and other purposes, flails (Fig. 15), leather collars for oxen (Fig. 4), and for the tympana of drums. They are employed in the manufacture of pipes, spears, shields, snuff-containers, &c. The scrota of bulls are made into bags to contain tobacco, spoons, and other small objects (Fig. 3). Tail-hairs are made into tassels used as dance ornaments by girls and to decorate the horns of favourite oxen (Plate IV). Their bones are used for the manufacture of armlets, and as beaters, pounders, and scrapers. Their horns are cut into spoons (Fig. 14) and are used in the construction of harpoons.



Fig. 3. Bags made from the scrota of a bull and a giraffe.

Their dung is used for fuel and for plastering walls, floors, and the outsides of straw huts in cattle camps. It is also employed as a plaster in minor technological processes and

to-protect wounds. The ashes of burnt dung are rubbed over men's bodies, and are used to dye and straighten the hair, as a mouth wash and tooth powder, in the preparation of sleeping-skins and leather bags, and for various ritual purposes. Their urine is used in churning and cheese-making, in the preparation of gourd-utensils, for tanning leather, and for bathing face and hands.

The skins of sheep and goats are worn as loin garments by married women (Plate XXIII (a)), used as rugs to sit on, made into bags for storing tobacco and millet, and are cut into strips to be tied round their ankles by youths when dancing. Their dung and urine are not utilized.

The Bedouin Arab has been called the parasite of the camel. With some justice the Nuer might be called the parasite of the cow. It may, however, seem that the list we have compiled does not cover a very wide range of uses, but so simple is Nuer material culture that it accounts for a very considerable part of their technology and contains items on which they are highly dependent, e.g. the use of dung as fuel in a country where it is difficult to obtain sufficient vegetable fuel for cooking, let alone for the large fires that burn day and night in every byre and windscreen.

We have seen that apart from their many social uses Nuer are directly concerned with cattle as producers of two essential articles of diet, milk and meat. We now perceive that the economic value of cattle is more extensive. Taking into consideration also the more general social value of cattle, briefly indicated in Section I, we may already note that there is over-emphasis on a single object, which dominates all other interests and is consistent with those qualities of simplicity* single-mindedness, and conservatism, so characteristic of pastoral peoples.



Ox with tassels hanging from its horns (Lou)

VI

In later chapters we shall describe how the needs of cattle, water, pasturage, protection from carnivorous beasts and biting insects, and so forth, are attended to, and show in what manner they determine human routine and affect social relations. Leaving these broader issues on one side, we ask here whether the Nuer, who are so reliant on their cattle and who value them so highly, are competent herdsmen. It is unnecessary to state that they give their beasts every attention that their knowledge allows, but it is pertinent to inquire whether their knowledge suffices. It was especially noted where Nuer practice is not in accord with the conventions of farming, and the reasons for the divergence were investigated. A few of the more evident difficulties and some general observations on Nuer husbandry are recorded below.

1. Since the cows are not brought back to the kraals at midday the smaller calves must go without nourishment for many hours each day. However, Capt. H. B. Williams, Director of the Sudan Veterinary Department, tells me that Nuer oxen have the reputation of being as good as any in the Sudan, so that their development as young calves cannot be seriously arrested. In the rains the cows are seldom milked before 9 to 10 a.m. and again at about 5 p.m., but in the dry season they may be taken to pasture

as early as 8 a.m. and not return till about 5.30 p.m., so that they cannot suckle their calves for about ten hours. However, this long interval is not easily avoided, for in the dry season the grazing grounds are often distant and owing to lack of good pasturage the cattle require longer to feed than in the rains. In the rains it would be a simple matter to pasture the herd at daybreak and bring it home at midday, as many East African peoples do, for the cows to suckle their calves and chew the cud. But Nuer say that when the cattle come out of their hot smoky byres they like to rest a while in the kraal before going to pasture, and their lethargy, which contrasts with their eagerness to graze after a night in the open in dry season camps, seems to justify this statement. Nuer realize that the heat and smoke of byres are bad for the cattle, but they consider mosquitoes worse.

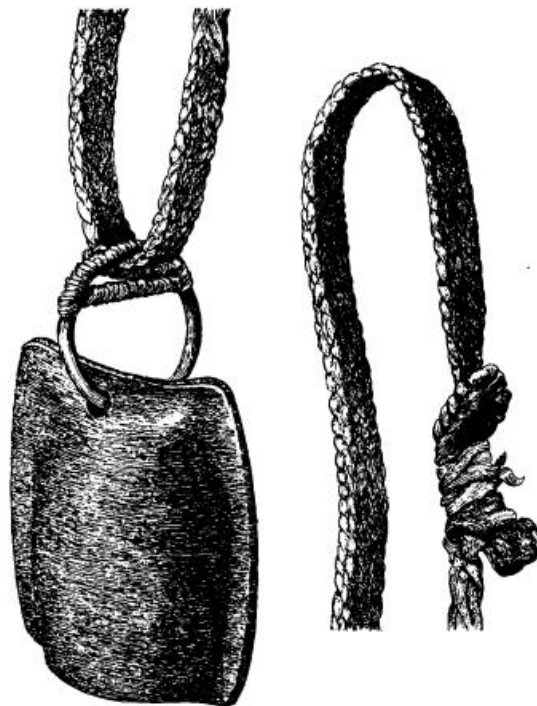


Fig. 4. Ox-bell and collar.

Also by waiting till the dew has evaporated they consider they lessen the risk of digestive troubles, for in the rains the ground is cold and damp till a late hour. A further reason for keeping the cattle late in the kraals is that if they are loosened early they soon graze to repletion and begin to wander in all directions, since they are not usually herded in the rains.

2. It at once strikes a European that the condition of drinking water at periods of the dry season leaves much to be desired, especially if he has to drink it himself. Sometimes the pools have almost dried up and contain foul, even slimy, water which men and cattle drink. I have wondered why they do not move sooner from these small pools, such as that shown on Plate XXI (b), around which they camp in the early drought, to the rivers and lakes where they make their final concentrations, but I do not distrust their judgement, for they are fully aware that dirty water is neither palatable to, nor good for, the cattle, and when circumstances permit they are at pains to ensure that they are supplied with clean water as often as they require it. In moving camp they have to take into account a number of desiderata: pasturage, fishing, the harvest of *Balanites aegyptiaca*, the second millet harvest, &c., besides conditions of water.
3. Unlike some East African peoples Nuer do not keep too many entire animals. If they err at all it is in keeping too few. On the limited observations made it was estimated that there is one adult bull to about thirty or forty adult cows. Nuer try to select as stud bulls the calves of their best milch cows so that they may breed good milch cows from them. They say that if they did not castrate most of the bull calves the cows would get no peace and there would be constant fighting in the kraals and commotion in the byres. A calf is not castrated till it is about eighteen months to two years old: 'When its dam has had another calf and a third is in its womb.' It is thrown, the scrotum is cut with a spear, and the testicles drawn out and severed. There is little loss of blood and the animal soon recovers. A calf may be castrated for sacrificial purposes at any time, but otherwise Nuer prefer to perform the operation in the dry season for there is less chance of inflammation than in the rains. Bulls are not discouraged from fighting unless they belong to the same herd, and fights are often cited in tradition as the cause of fission and migration of lineages. A very large number of steers and oxen are slaughtered in sacrifices.
4. Heifers are not served till their third year. Nuer know when a cow is on heat by its behaviour in the kraal: it is restless, lows, swishes its tail, sniffs at the vulvas of other cows, and tries to mount them. If a cow has mated in the grazing grounds

—for bulls run with the herd—the first signs of pregnancy are said to be vulvar changes. If you ask Nuer when a cow which has been served at a certain time will calve they can at once, and accurately, tell you. They say that if a cow has had no serious illness it will bear about eight calves.

In my experience there is very slight mortality among calves. Nuer give them every attention. When a cow is seen to be about to calve for the first time its owner sits up with it all night, or accompanies it to pasture, to assist delivery. An experienced cow is left to drop its calf itself, but a man is usually present to assist if it is in trouble. He must be present if it calves in the bush, because the calf is too weak to follow its dam, which will stay with it, and they may become separated from the herd and fall a prey to wild beasts. If a calf dies in the womb Nuer try to remove it, and when it is necessary to turn it in the womb they perform this operation. If the afterbirth does not fall, or if the cow does not lick its calf, they administer medicines. When a calf dies they resort to various devices to persuade its dam to give milk. They stuff the head with straw (see Fig. 5), and rub some of the dam's urine on it; or, especially when a cow aborts, they stuff the whole calf, insert stumps of wood to act as legs, and place it in front of its dam and push its head against her teats, while they gently squeeze and pull them and a boy blows up the vagina.



Fig. 5. Stuffed calf's head.

Nuer say that if a calf is only a day or two old and its dam dies it will also die, but once it knows the *cak tin bor*, 'the white milk' which follows the colostrum, it can be saved. It is fed by hand from a small gourd with a funnel mouth and efforts are made to get another cow in lactation to suckle it. Since Nuer believe, erroneously it seems, that it is dangerous for a calf to drink the discolored milk at the top of the colostrum, they milk this off before allowing the calf to suck, and if by inadvertence it sucks first they administer a purgative. They regard it as more serious if there is any blood in the milk.

For the first three or four days a calf sucks all its dam's milk except the part drawn off. Then close kinsmen, who live nearby, are summoned to eat porridge over which is poured the first milk taken for human consumption. At this ceremony the end hairs of the calf's tail are cut off and its owner spits on them and waves them over the back of the dam, for otherwise the calf will sicken because it resents people stealing its milk. Afterwards, however, they can still say, 'We do not yet share with its calf', for they take very little milk for the first fortnight in order to give it a chance [to get strong and for its teeth to harden. When the calf is stronger they take more milk and they then say that the calf shares (*buth*) the milk with men. It continues to suck till its dam is again in calf and refuses it. Weaning devices are not as a rule employed, but if the dam suckles when it is pregnant and it is found impracticable to keep it apart from its calf in the pastures they place a ring of thorns round the calf's muzzle (Fig. 6), which allows it to graze but prevents it from sucking, for the thorns prick the dam's udder and she kicks it aside. It will be seen from this account how Nuer solve the herdsman's problem of making cows provide for their masters without depriving their calves of essential nourishment.

Small calves, after the adult herd has gone to the grazing grounds, are housed till the late afternoon in byres in wet-season villages, and tethered in the shade of a tree in dry-season camps.

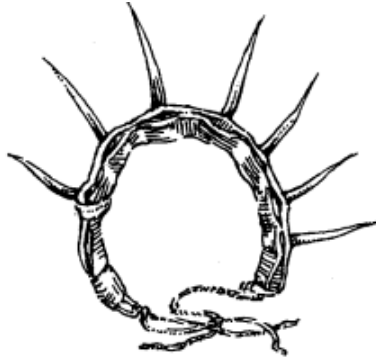


Fig. 6. Calf's weaning ring.

They are watered during the afternoon, and boys bring them grasses, especially poon (*Oryza Barthii*), which is very fattening. They begin to go to pasture with the elder calves, under the care of herdboys, in about their third month and are kept apart from their dams by being driven in the opposite direction to that taken earlier in the day by the adult herd. They run with the herd when they are about a year old, by which time their dams are again in calf.

We shall have opportunities for noting further the attention Nuer give to their cattle and the wisdom of their methods. I have merely given in this section a few examples to illustrate a general conclusion reached in the course of my study: that Nuer cattle husbandry could not in any important particular be improved in their present oecological relations; that, consequently, more knowledge than they possess would in no way assist them; and that, as will be shown, were it not for their unceasing vigilance and care the cattle would not survive the harsh conditions of their environment.

VII

It has been remarked that the Nuer might be called parasites of the cow, but it might be said with equal force that the cow is a parasite of the Nuer, whose lives are spent in ensuring its welfare. They build byres, kindle fires, and clean kraals for its comfort; move from villages to camps, from camp to camp, and from camps back to villages, for its health; defy wild beasts for its protection; and fashion ornaments for its adornment. It lives its gentle, indolent, sluggish life thanks to the Nuer's devotion. In truth the relationship is symbiotic: cattle and men sustain life by their reciprocal services to one

another. In this intimate symbiotic relationship men and beasts form a single community of the closest kind. In a few paragraphs I direct attention to this intimacy.



Girl milking (Lou)

The men wake about dawn at camp in the midst of their cattle and sit contentedly watching them till milking is finished. They then either take them to pasture and spend the day watching them graze, driving them to water, composing songs about them, and bringing them back to camp, or they remain in the kraal to drink their milk, make tethering-cords and ornaments for them, water and in other ways care for their calves, clean their kraal, and dry their dung for fuel. Nuer wash their hands and faces in the urine of the cattle, especially when cows urinate during milking, drink their milk and blood, and sleep on their hides by the side of their smoldering dung. They cover their bodies, dress their hair, and clean their teeth with the ashes of cattle dung, and eat their food with spoons made from their horns. When the cattle return in the evening they tether each beast to its peg with cords made from the skins of their dead companions and sit in the windscreens to contemplate them and to watch them being milked. A man knows each animal of his herd and of the herds of his neighbours and kinsmen: its colour, the shape of its horns, its peculiarities, the number of its teats, the amount of milk it gives, its history, its ancestry and its progeny. Miss Soule tells me that most Nuer know the points of the dam and grand-dam of a beast and that some know the points of

its forebears up to five generations of ascent, A Nuer knows the habits of all his oxen, how one bellows in the evenings, how another likes to lead the herd on its return to camp, and how another tosses its head more than the rest are wont to do. He knows which cows are restless during milking, which are troublesome with their calves, which like to drink on the way to pasture, and so forth.

If he is a young man he gets a boy to lead his favourite ox, after which he takes his name, round the camp in the morning and leaps and sings behind it; and often at night he walks among the cattle ringing an ox-bell and singing the praises of his kinsmen, his sweethearts, and his oxen. When his ox comes home in the evening he pets it, rubs ashes on its back, removes ticks from its belly and scrotum, and picks adherent dung from its anus. He tethers it in front of his windscreen so that he can see it if he wakes, for no sight so fills a Nuer with contentment, and pride as his oxen. The more he can display the happier he is, and to make them more attractive he decorates their horns with long tassels, which he can admire as they toss their heads and shake them on their return to camp, and their necks with bells, which tinkle in the pastures. Even the bull calves are adorned by their boy-owners with wooden beads and bells (Fig. 13). The horns of young bulls, destined to be castrated later, are generally cut so that they will grow in a shape that pleases their masters. The operation, called *ngat*, is probably performed towards the end of their first year and usually takes place in the dry season, as it is said that a steer may die if its horns are cut in the rains. The animal is thrown and held down while its horns are cut through obliquely with a spear. They grow against the cut. The beasts appear to suffer much pain during the operation and I have sometimes heard Nuer compare their ordeal to the initiation of youths into manhood.

When a Nuer mentions an ox his habitual moroseness leaves him and he speaks with enthusiasm, throwing up his arms to show you how its horns are trained. 'I have a fine ox', he says, 'a brindled ox with a large white splash on its back and with one horn trained over its muzzle'—and up go his hands, one above his head and the other bent at the elbow across his face. In singing and dancing they call out the names of their oxen and hold their arms in imitation of their horns.

The attitude towards cattle varies with varying situations in social life and with changes in social development. As soon as children can crawl they are brought into close intimacy with the flocks and herds. The kraal is their playground and they are generally smeared with dung in which they roll and tumble. The calves and sheep and goats are their companions in play and they pull them about and sprawl in the midst of them. Their feelings about the animals are probably dominated by desire for food, for the cows, ewes, and she-goats directly satisfy their hunger, often suckling them. As soon as a baby can drink animal's milk its mother carries it to the sheep and goats and gives it warm milk to drink straight from the udders.

The games of rather older children of both sexes centre round cattle. They build byres of sand in camps and of moistened ashes or mud in villages, and fill the toy kraals with fine mud cows and oxen (Fig. 7), with which they play at herding and marriage. The first tasks of childhood concern cattle. Very small children hold the sheep and goats while their mother's milk them, and when their mother's milk the cows they carry the gourds and pull the calves away from the udders and tether them in front of their dams. They collect urine in gourds and wash themselves in it. When they are a little older and stronger they have to clean the byres and kraals, assist in the milking, and herd the small calves and the sheep and goats at pasture.

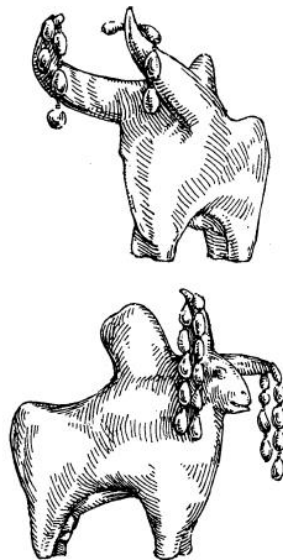


Fig. 7. Mud figures of oxen decorated with tassels.

Food and play contacts with the cattle have changed to labour contacts. At this age the interests of the sexes in cattle begin to diverge and the divergence becomes more apparent as they grow up. The labour of girls and women is restricted to the byres and the kraals and is concerned mostly with the cows, while boys herd the calves at pasture, as well as assisting in the kraal and after initiation they herd the adult cattle and in the kraal give their attention mainly to the oxen. The women are dairy-maids; the men herdsman. Moreover, to a girl the cows are essentially providers of milk and cheese and they remain such when she grows up and is married and milks and churns for her husband's people, whereas to a boy they are part of the family herd in which he has property rights. They have entered the herd on the marriage of his kinswomen and one day he will marry with them. A girl is separated from the herd on marriage; a boy remains as its owner. When a boy becomes a youth and is initiated into manhood the cattle become something more than food and the cause of labour. They are also a means of display and marriage. It is only when a man marries and has children and an independent household and herd, when he has become an elder and man of position, that he often uses cattle as sacrifices, invests them with a sacred significance, and employs them in ritual.

The Nuer and his herd form a corporate community with solidarity of interests, to serve which the lives of both are adjusted, and their symbiotic relationship is one of close physical contact. The cattle are docile and readily respond to human care and guidance. No high barriers of culture divide men from beasts in their common home, but the stark nakedness of Nuer amid their cattle and the intimacy of their contact with them present a classic picture of savagery. I ask the reader to look at some of the illustrations, for example the Frontispiece and Plates III, V, and XVII, which will convey to him better than I can do in words the crudity of kraal life.

Cattle are not only an object of absorbing interest to Nuer, having great economic utility and social value, but they live in the closest possible association with them. Moreover, irrespective of use, they are in themselves a cultural end, and the mere possession of, and proximity to, them gives a man his heart's desire. On them are concentrated his immediate interests and his farthest ambitions. More than anything else they determine

his daily actions and dominate his attention. We have remarked on the over-emphasis on cattle produced by their wide range of social and economic uses. So many physical, psychological, and social requirements can be satisfied from this one source that Nuer attention, instead of being diffused in a variety of directions, tends, with undue exclusiveness, to be focused on this single object and to be introvertive, since the object has a certain identity with themselves. We will now examine briefly some linguistic material wherein we shall perceive further evidence of this hypertrophy of a single interest and of the identification of men with cattle to which I have alluded.

VIII

Linguistic profusion in particular departments of life is one of the signs by which one quickly judges the direction and strength of a people's interests. It is for that reason, rather than for its intrinsic importance, that we draw the reader's attention to the volume and variety of the Nuer cattle vocabulary. Like all the pastoral Nilotes they use an enormous number of words and phrases about cattle and the tasks of herding and dairy-work, and from this vast assortment we select for comment a single class: the terms by which they describe cattle, chiefly by reference to their colours.¹¹ These terms are more than a linguistic technique which enables Nuer to speak of cattle with precision in situations of practical husbandry and in the many social contexts in which they figure, for they establish associations on the one hand between wild creatures and cattle and on the other hand between cattle and their masters; they furnish certain ritual categories; and they greatly enrich the language of poetry.

In naming a Nuer cow one has to notice its colours and the way in which they are distributed on its body. When it is not of one colour the distribution of colours is the significant character by which one names it. There are ten principal colour terms: white (*bor*), black (*car*), brown (*lua*), chestnut (*dot*), tawny (*yaw*), mouse-grey (*lou*), bay (*thiang*), sandy-grey (*lith*), blue and strawberry roan (*yil*), and chocolate (*gwir*). When a cow is of a single colour it is described by one of these terms. An animal may combine two or more colours, but a combination of more than two, known as *cuany*, is very rare.

¹¹ I have recorded some information on this neglected subject among a neighboring people in 'Imagery in Ngok Dinka Cattle-Names', Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, 1934.

Normally there is a combination of white with one other colour and twelve common distributions of this combination are shown in Figs. 8 and 9. There are, however, many more combinations, at least twenty-seven, one of the commonest being varieties of a striped or brindled coat (nyang).

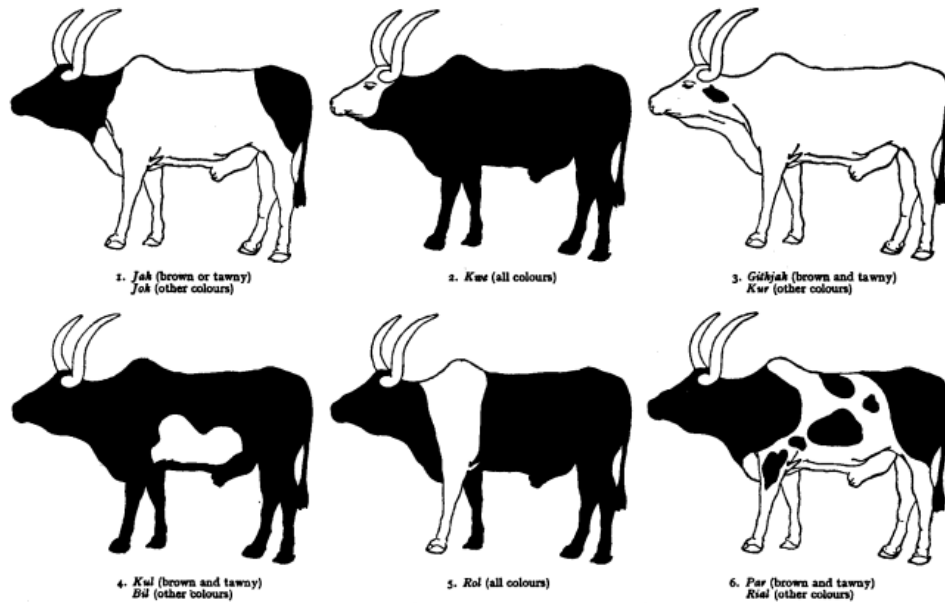


FIG. 8. Diagrammatic representation of colour distributions.

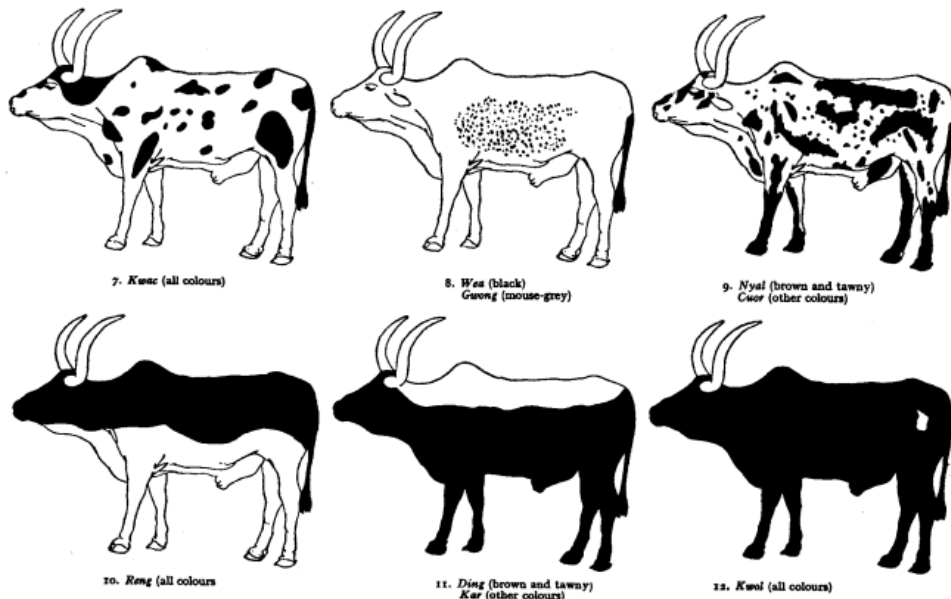


FIG. 9. Diagrammatic representation of colour distributions.

In describing a beast one often denotes both the form of distribution and the colour that is combined with white. Thus an ox may be entirely mouse-grey (*lou*); have a mainly mouse-grey colour with a white face (*kwe looka*), white back (*kar looka*), white splash on barrel (*bil looka*), white shoulder (*rol looka*), or white belly (*reng looka*): be brindled mouse-grey (*nyang looka*): be white with large mouse-grey patches (*rial looka*), medium mouse-grey patches (*kwac looka*), or a mouse-grey rump (*jok looka*), &c. There are at least a dozen terms describing different combinations of white and mouse-grey and there are a similar number of terms for a combination of white with each of the other colours. A further example is given to illustrate the wide range of variations: a white shoulder and foreleg (*rol*) may be found on a cow of any colour, e.g. *rol car a*, *rol yan*, *rol thiang*, *rol yili*, &c. There may also be a combination of one form of distribution with another and, in this case, the two combinations constitute the terms of reference and there is no need to denote the colouring that occurs in them, e.g. a white shoulder and foreleg (*rol*) may be combined with a white face (*kwe roal*), black spots (*rol kwac*), speckling (*rol cuor*), brown patches (*rol paara*), white back (*kar roal*), white face and black ears (*kur roal*), &c. There are at least twenty-five terms which include the *rol* distribution, and the other distributions likewise have wide ranges of combinations with colours and with one another.

As I shall elsewhere, and at length, analyse the principles of colour terminology and abstract the rules of nomenclature,¹² I need no more than remark here that it is evident from the few examples cited that there are several hundred colour permutations.

Some colours and combinations of colours are associated with animals, birds, reptiles, and fish, and this association is often indicated by secondary terms of reference and by ritual usages, e.g. *lou* (mouse-grey) is the bustard, *nyang* (striped) is the crocodile, *lith* (sandy-grey) is associated with *manlieth*, the grey kestrel, *thiang* (bay) is the *tiang*, *dwai* (brown with white stripes) is the female *sitatunga*, *kwe* (white-faced) is the fish eagle, *kwac* (spotted) is the leopard, *cuor* (speckled) is the vulture, *gwong* (spotted) is the guinea-fowl, *nyal* (brown-spotted) is the python, &c. These linguistic identifications and

¹² 'Nuer Cattle Terms', to appear in Sudan Notes and Records.

other colour associations lead to many fanciful elaborations of nomenclature, e.g. a black ox may be called *rual mim*, charcoal-burning or *won car*, dark clouds; a brown ox *riem dol*, red blood, or *rir dol*, red tree-cobra; a blue roan ox *bany yiel* after the blue heron; a mouse-grey ox *duk lou*, the shady gloom of forests, &c. These fancy names add greatly to the list of Nuer cattle terms.

Besides the vast vocabulary which refers to colours, distribution of colours, and colour associations, cattle can also be described by the shape of their horns and, as the horns of oxen are trained, there are at least six common designations in use besides several fancy names. Words denoting shape of horns add considerably to the number of permutations, for they can be combined with many of the colour and distribution terms, e.g. a sandy-grey cow with horns which almost meet in a curve above the head is a *duot lieth*, a shorthorn with *rial* markings is a *cot rial*, a brindled ox with one horn trained across its face is a *gut nyang*, &c. The ears of cattle, sheep, and goats are often cut in different shapes and it is permissible, and with sheep and goats usual, to describe them by reference to these incisions. Sheep and goats have very different mixtures of colours from those one finds among cattle, but the same terms can be used to cover all combinations, because they are never exact descriptions of colour dispositions but represent ideal distributions, to one or other of which any actual disposition approximates.

A further range of permutations is created by prefixes which denote the sex or age of an animal, e.g. *tut*, bull, *yang*, cow, *thak*, ox, *nac*, heifer, *ruath*, male calf, *dou*, female calf, *kol*, calf which has not yet begun to graze, and so forth. Thus one may speak of a *tut ma kar looka*, *dou ma rial*, *thak ma cuany*, &c. Indeed, if we were to count every possible mode of referring to animals of the flocks and herds they would be found to number several thousand expressions—an imposing and complicated system of ramifications which bears eloquent witness to the social value of cattle.

Furthermore, as we have mentioned, every man takes one of his names from the term by which one of his oxen is described, and these ox-names are the preferred salutations among age-mates. A youth generally takes his first ox-name from the beast his father

gives him at his initiation, but he may later take further names from any oxen of his herd which delight him. Men salute one another with these names and shower them, with many a fanciful elaboration, on their companions at dances. They also chant them when they display themselves with their oxen in camps, sing them in their poems, and shout them when they spear men, animals, or fish.

A man may be called by the identical name of his ox, e.g. Bi(l)rial, Kwac(c)uor, Werkwac, and so forth, but generally one part of the term is dropped and the other part is prefixed by a new term, usually descriptive of some ornament worn by the ox or some characteristic of it, not employed in defining its own name, e.g. *luth*, a large bell (Fig. 4), *gier*, a small bell, *lue*, a long tassel, *ihuor*, a short tassel (Plate IV), *wak*, the tinkling of an ox-bell, *lang*, a brass ring attached to an ox's collar or tethering-cord (one can be seen on the animal in the foreground of Plate II), *rot*, bellowing of oxen, *cwai*, fatness, *boi*, shining whiteness, &c. Thus a man whose favourite ox has *rial* distribution of colours may be called Luthrial, Gierrial, Luerial, Dhuonial, Boirial, and so on. When ox-names are used between age-mates at dances they are generally preceded by dance-names which are selected to harmonize with the ox-names, euphony being considered of great importance in all these word formations. Ox-names are voluminous and abstruse, and in describing them, as in describing cattle-colours, I have not only made a meagre selection from the wealth at my disposal, but have also chosen for illustration the simplest examples and neglected the more obscure.

Names of cattle, especially of oxen, and ox-names of men are used profusely in songs. The Nuer, like most pastoral peoples, are poetic and most men and women compose songs which are sung at dances and concerts or are composed for the creator's own pleasure and chanted by him in lonely pastures and amid the cattle in camp kraals. Youths break into song, praising their kinsmen, sweethearts, and cattle, when they feel happy, wherever they may be. I give a free translation of the first verses of two songs, the first sung by girls as they sit together in the evening after the day's work is done, and the second sung by its creator when he is happy.

1. The wind blows wirawira;¹³
 Where does it blow to?
 It blows to the river.
 The shorthorn carries its full udder to the pastures;¹⁴
 Let her be milked by Nyagaak;
 My belly will be filled with milk.
 Thou pride of Nyawal,
 Ever-quarrelling Rolnyang.¹⁵
 This country is overrun by strangers;
 They throw our ornaments into the river;
 They draw their water from the bank.¹⁶
 Blackhair my sister,
 I am bewildered.
 Blackhair my sister,
 I am bewildered.
 We are perplexed;
 We gaze at the stars of God.¹⁷
2. White ox good is my mother
 And we the people of my sister,
 The people of Nyariau Bui.
 As my black-rumped white ox,
 When I went to court the winsome lassie,
 I am not a man whom girls refuse.
 We court girls by stealth in the night,
 I and Kwejok

pasture when the cows give plenty of milk: hence the connexion between the first three lines and those which follow them

¹³ Literally 'My wind'. The singer runs against it and seems by so doing to add to its strength. This is the north wind which blows at the time of rich

¹⁴ The cow has refused to suckle its calf or to be milked before going to graze

¹⁵ The strangers are Government forces. The reference to drawing water from the bank is obscure.

¹⁶ Blackhair is a girl's name. The Nuer are perplexed by foreign invasion and the last line is a prayer to God to help them in their adversity

¹⁷ The ox referred to in the first and fourth lines is the poet's ox. Kwejok is a friend, whose mother is Nyadeang

Nyadeang.
We brought the ox across the river,
I and Kirjoak
And the son of my mother's sister Buth Gutjaak.
Friend, great ox of the spreading horns.
Which ever bellows amid the herd.
Ox of the son of Bui Maloa.¹⁸

It is not necessary to add more examples of cattle-terms and their uses to demonstrate that we are dealing with a galaxy of words in the arrangement of which a thesaurus of some magnitude might be compiled. I need only emphasize that this intricate and voluminous vocabulary is not technical and departmental but is employed by every one and in manifold situations of ordinary social life. I have only treated a fragment of a fragment of the linguistic field relating to cattle.

I could enter into further detail, but, at best, I have only surveyed, and in an amateur way, that field, which invites broader and more specialist research. My purpose has been to draw attention to it and to show how a study of the dominant interest of Nuer might be approached from this angle. The subject is necessarily vast, because, as we have seen, it is not possible to discuss with Nuer their daily affairs, social connexions, ritual acts, or, indeed, any subject, without reference to cattle which are the core round which daily life is organized and the medium through which social and mystical relations are expressed. Nor is Nuer interest in cattle confined to their practical uses and social functions, but is displayed in their plastic and poetic arts, in which they are the chief theme. The over-emphasis on cattle is thus strikingly shown in language, which, moreover, by compelling reference to cattle, whatever be the subject of speech, continually focuses attention on them and makes them the superlative value of Nuer life.

¹⁸ Buth is the birth-name of a friend whose ox-name is Gutjaak. The poet, who is a son of Bui Maloa, addresses his ox as his friend in the final lines

Another way in which Nuer engrossment in cattle can be illustrated—our last exemplification thereof—is by noting how readily and frequently they fight about them, for people risk their lives for what they greatly value and in terms of those values.

At the present time cattle are the main cause of hostility towards, and suspicion of, the Government, not so much on account of present taxation as of earlier tax-gathering patrols which were little more than cattle raids and of the avowedly plundering expeditions of the Egyptian Government era that preceded them. Nuer war with the Dinka has been almost entirely offensive and directed towards appropriation of herds and annexation of grazing grounds. Cattle have also been the chief occasion of strife among Nuer themselves. Indeed, after a successful raid on Dinka stock there is often further fighting over the booty. Moreover, Nuer tribes raid one another for cattle. Thus the Leek raid the Jikany, Rengyan, and other western tribes, and cattle raids are of common occurrence along tribal boundaries elsewhere, for to 'steal' (kwal) cattle from another tribe is regarded as laudable. Within a tribe, also, fighting frequently results from disputes about cattle between its sections and between individuals of the same section, even of the same village or homestead. Nuer "fight on slight provocation and most willingly and frequently when a cow is at stake. On such an issue close kinsmen fight and homes are broken up. When ownership of cattle is in dispute Nuer throw over caution and propriety, showing themselves careless of odds, contemptuous of danger, and full of guile. As my Nuer servant once said to me: 'You can trust a Nuer with any amount of money, poufids and pounds and pounds, and go away for years and return and he will not have stolen it; but a single cow— that is a different matter.'

Nuer say that it is cattle that destroy people, for 'more people have died for the sake of a cow than for any other cause'. They have a story which tells how, when the beasts broke up their community and each went its own way and lived its own life, Man slew the mother of Cow and Buffalo. Buffalo said she would avenge her mother by attacking men in the bush, but Cow said that she would remain in the habitations of men and avenge her mother by causing endless disputes about debts, bride-wealth, and adultery, which would lead to fighting and deaths among the people. So this feud

between Cow and Man has gone on from time immemorial, and day by day Cow avenges the death of her mother by occasioning the death of men. Hence Nuer say of their cattle, 'They will be finished together with mankind', for men will all die on account of cattle and they and cattle will cease together.

It must not, however, be supposed that Nuer live in continuous turmoil: the very fact that they are prepared to resist any infringement of their rights in cattle induces prudence in the relations between persons who regard themselves as members of the same group. It may be said, furthermore, that the great vulnerability of cattle coupled with the extensive living-space required for them are compatible only with a far recognition of conventions in the settlement of disputes, or, in other words, the existence of a tribal organization embracing a large territory, and of some feeling of community over yet larger areas.

Fighting about ownership of cattle and seizing cattle for what are claimed as debts and compensation for losses are of a somewhat different order to raiding for cattle over which no rights, other than the power of the strong, are asserted. War against foreign peoples, as distinct from warfare within a tribe, is almost entirely for plunder. Nuer war against the Dinka, therefore, differs from most primitive warfare in that its primary object is acquisition of wealth, for cattle are a form of wealth that not only lasts a long time and reproduces itself, but is, also, easily seized and transported. Furthermore, it enables invaders to live on the country without commissariat. Crops and dwellings can be destroyed, but cattle can be confiscated and taken home. This quality, which has given pastoral peoples a bias in favour of the arts of war rather than the arts of peace, has meant that the Nuer are not entirely dependent on their own cattle, but can augment their herds and restore the ravages of rinderpest, and have, in fact, for a long time increased their stock, and hence supplemented their food- supply, by raiding; a condition that has shaped their character, economy, and political structure. Skill and courage in fighting are reckoned the highest virtues, raiding the most noble, as well as the most profitable, occupation, and some measure of political agreement and unity a necessity.

We hasten to add that an explanation of warfare between Nuer and Dinka by reference to cattle and pastures alone is too simple a reduction. Hostility is expressed in terms of cattle, and desire for cattle accounts for some peculiarities of the struggle and some characteristics of the political organizations involved in it, but the struggle itself can only be fully understood as a structural process and we present it as such later.

We now pass to a brief examination of the oecological system of which Nuer and their cattle form part to discover the conditions in which cattle-husbandry is practised and how far its practice in a certain environment influences political structure.

CHAPTER II

OECOLOGY

I

From a European's point of view Nuerland has no favourable qualities, unless its severity be counted as such, for its endless marshes and wide savannah plains have an austere, monotonous charm. It is throughout hard on man and beast, being for most of the year either parched or a swamp. But Nuer think that they live in the finest country on earth and, it must be admitted, for herdsmen their country has many admirable features. I soon gave up trying to convince Nuer that there is any country more suited for cattle husbandry than their own, an attempt rendered more useless since a few of them have been taken to Khartoum, which they consider to be the home of all white men, and, having seen the desert scrub of that latitude, have been confirmed in their opinion that their land is superior to ours.

The grasses necessary for the welfare of the herds depend for existence on suitable conditions of soil and water. The soils of Nuerland are heavy clays, broken by the sun into deep cracks in the drought and sodden in the rains. They hold up water and consequently enable certain species of grasses to survive the dry months and provide pasture for the cattle. Nuer and their cattle would not, however, be able to live if it were not that there are more sandy elevated spots on which they can take refuge in flood-time and where they can practice horticulture.

Surface water comes partly from rainfall and partly from the flooding of the rivers which traverse Nuerland and is more than adequate to make grass. In an average year the rains commence in April, when a few showers fall and the sky is overclouded, but it is not till the end of May that they set in with a will. At their maximum, in July and August, the weather is cool, even cold in the mornings and evenings, the sun is overcast during most of the day, and a south-westerly wind prevails. Showers become lighter and less frequent in October and usually have ceased altogether by the middle of November when the north wind begins to blow. It blows consistently down the valley of the Nile