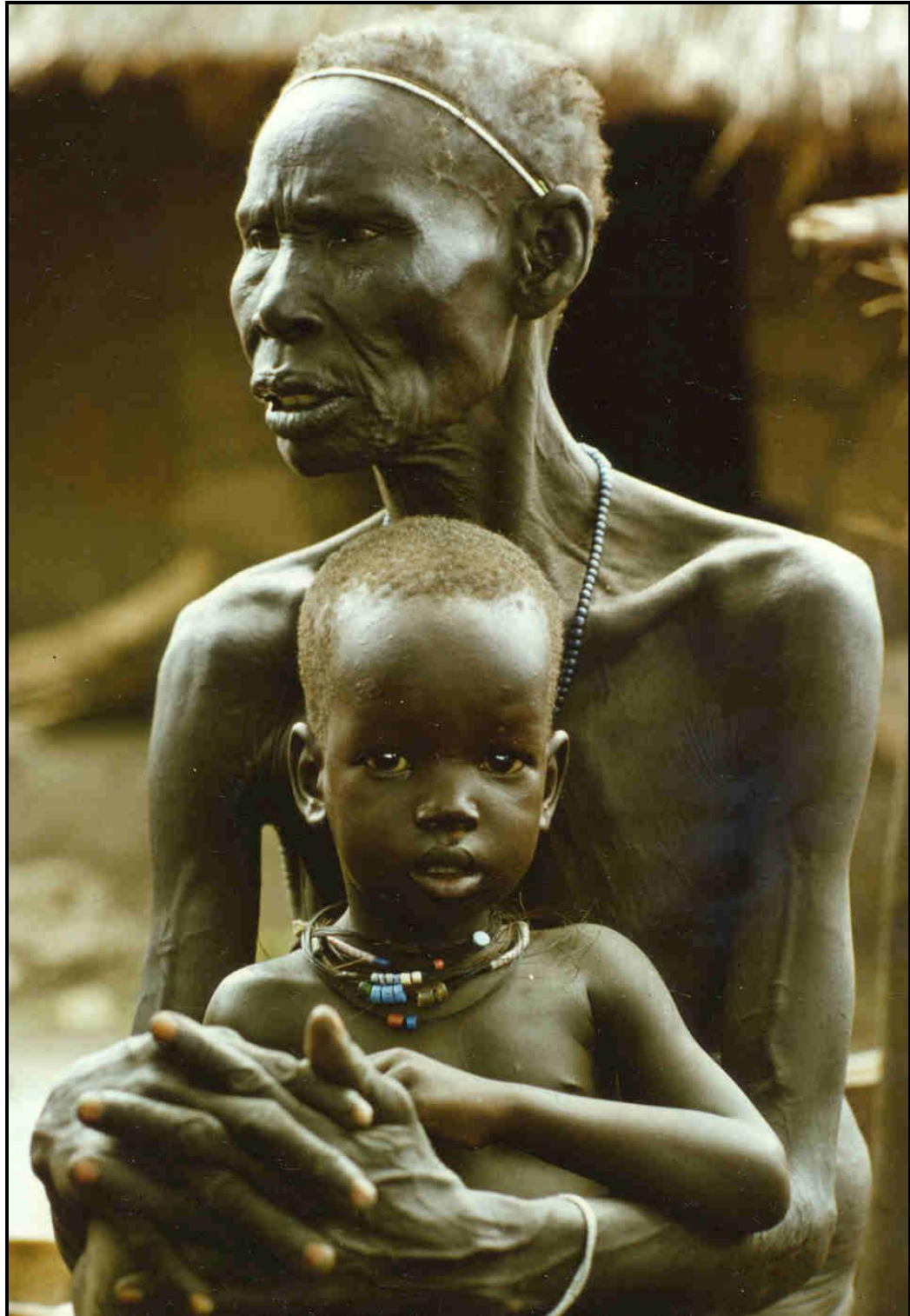


# *Begetting children...*

## *Procreation in different cultures*

(An introduction by Prof. Serge Tornay from the Musée de l'Homme, Paris)



Pour aborder ce sujet dans un état d'esprit constructif, il faut d'abord que chacun s'interroge sur ses préjugés! Qu'est-ce que je crois savoir sur le statut de la femme africaine, sur sa sexualité, sa "soumission" aux hommes, son "désir universel" de procréer de nombreux enfants etc. Rares sont les Européens et Européennes qui n'ont pas sur ces questions des idées arrêtées ! Il est donc indispensable, quand on aborde un nouveau "terrain", de se comporter comme si on avait tout à apprendre plutôt que tout à enseigner.

Chez les humains, la procréation d'une descendance est universellement valorisée et de toute façon une société qui abandonne le projet procréatif est vouée à une rapide disparition.

Autant la valorisation de la procréation est universelle, autant sa mise en œuvre est variée, et cela pour de multiples raisons. Raisons écologiques et économiques : on sait que la population mondiale a commencé à croître de façon exponentielle à partir du Néolithique, c'est-à-dire du temps où les humains ont commencé à faire produire la Nature végétale et animale au lieu de simplement recueillir ce qu'elle produit spontanément. C'est le grand partage entre les Chasseurs-cueilleurs de la préhistoire et les Agro-pasteurs depuis le néolithique jusqu'à l'ère industrielle. En Afrique, la plupart des communautés sont encore agro-pastorales, la cueillette, la chasse et la pêche apportant toujours des compléments substantiels. Si le milieu (écologie) et les techniques de production sont des facteurs parfois favorables, parfois limitatifs et défavorables, à la procréation humaine, ils ne sont en aucun cas déterminants. On dit qu'il n'y a pas de déterminisme en ces matières car les humains apportent les solutions les plus variées à des situations comparables. Il existe donc des raisons culturelles et sociales qui font varier grandement les normes et les comportements d'une société à l'autre, ce qui n'empêche pas l'existence d'ensemble plus homogènes qu'on appelle des aires culturelles. Par exemple, on le verra, les populations du Soudan nilotique partagent, en matière de famille et de procréation, un certain nombre d'attitudes communes sur lesquelles chaque société brode ses différences. En Afrique, comme partout dans le monde, il y a deux niveaux principaux d'organisation de la société : la famille, niveau de base, et l'intégration des familles selon les modes les plus divers, sous l'angle de l'espace (localité, voisinage, sous-région, région, province etc.) comme sous celui de l'autorité politique. Une grande division a été mise au jour par les ethnologues et les historiens : il y a les sociétés sans Etat et les autres, que les Blancs connaissons mieux puisque peu d'entre eux sont nés et demeurent membres de sociétés sans Etat. Il faut comprendre que si les Soudanais sont en principe les citoyens du Soudan politique et donc citoyens d'un Etat, leurs groupes d'appartenance encore très ethniques aujourd'hui sont dans une vaste majorité des sociétés sans Etat (on d'ailleurs se demander si certaines royautes nilotiques (*Shilluk, Anyuak, Lotuho* etc.) sont ou non des Etats). Dans ces sociétés, la machine qui intègre les familles en unités politiques est très souvent un système lignager. Un tel système parvient à créer des ensembles de centaines, parfois de milliers de personnes au moyen d'un principe de filiation ou de descendance : on dit que le système est patrilinéaire si ce sont les hommes (à l'exclusion des femmes) qui transmettent à leurs enfants (garçons et filles) la qualité de membres du groupe (cela fonctionne comme la transmission du patronyme en Europe encore qu'aujourd'hui cette règle soit de plus en plus modifiée par la possibilité donnée à la mère de transmettre son propre nom de famille). Le système est matrilineaire si les enfants (garçons et filles) appartiennent au clan de leur mère. Au Soudan, les systèmes patrilinéaires (ceux des *Nuer, Dinka, Shilluk* etc.) sont plus nombreux que les matrilineaires (attestés dans les monts *Nuba*). Quelle que soit la règle de filiation, le pouvoir politique est en général accaparé par la partie masculine de la société. En tant que groupes politiques, les lignages africains sont en général natalistes, c'est-à-dire qu'ils cherchent à accroître leur pouvoir par leur force numérique. Mais ici encore, pas de déterminisme. Les *Borana*, par exemple, peuple pasteur *Oromo* du Nord Kénya et du Sud éthiopien, ont un système de lignage, mais ils sont bel et bien malthusiens, c'est-à-dire qu'ils cherchent non pas à procréer un maximum d'individus, mais au contraire à limiter les naissances, de sorte que leurs sociétés ne sont pas, ou ne sont plus en expansion. L'Afrique orientale, ce sous-continent qui constituent le Kénya, l'Ouganda, le Soudan, l'Ethiopie, la Somalie, Djibouti et l'Erythrée, est une aire culturelle spécifique de l'Afrique. Son originalité est due à l'existence de modes particuliers d'organisation sociale qu'on appelle les systèmes de classes d'âge et les systèmes générationnels. Ces systèmes ne remplacent pas totalement les lignages - ils peuvent se superposer à eux - mais surtout ils sont construits, on commence seulement à le comprendre en ethnologie, pour "encadrer" la fécondité des groupes. A ce titre, ils peuvent soit encourager la natalité, soit limiter les naissances. On retrouve ici les concepts du

planning familial, mais combien sommes-nous à savoir que des sociétés traditionnelles, avec leurs concepts et coutumes traditionnels, ont inventé des systèmes efficaces de planning familial? Dans cette matière, tout ce que l'on concède à ces sociétés " primitives " relèvent du biologique : par exemple on dit que les femmes qui allaitent ne "retombent " pas facilement enceintes. Et comme les femmes africaines, grâce à la polygamie qui les décharge partiellement du fardeau de la procréation continuelle, allaitent très longtemps leurs bébés (un de mes amis *Nyangatom*, adulte, me dit qu'il se souvient très bien qu'à son retour de garder les chèvres il se précipitait sur sa mère pour la téter il devait avoir 4 ou 5 ans) elles sont enceintes moins fréquemment que des épouses monogames qui ne disposent d'aucune contraception. Tout cela n'est pas absurde, ni toujours faux. L'erreur est de croire qu'il n'y a pas d'autres mécanismes de limitation ou d'optimisation de la fécondité. Il serait hors de propos de faire une typologie complète des systèmes de classes d'âge et des systèmes générationnels de l'Est africain .

Contentons-nous ici de donner quelques exemples contrastants, dans le but de rendre plus intelligible la situation au Soudan méridional. Prenons les *Maasai*, un des peuples mythiques du tourisme ! À quoi doivent-ils leur notoriété? Depuis le début de la colonisation anglaise du Kenya, ils ont représenté, dans l'imaginaire des Blancs, l'image romantique du " Nomade, pur pasteur et pur guerrier ". En réalité les *Maasai* sont plutôt sédentaires, ils vivent rarement du seul produit de leurs troupeaux, et ils sont de grands pacifistes ! Mais derrière le mythe qu'ils ont imposé se situe une institution originale, leur système de classes d'âge, qui répartit mécaniquement les hommes en une succession de groupes qui occupent des " grades " qui ne peuvent être franchis que collectivement : du bas au haut de l'échelle, il y a les non-initiés, les moran junior, les moran senior, les jeunes mariés, les parrains de moran et au sommet les pères de moran. Ce n'est pas un hasard que le moran soit devenu l'image emblématique de la culture *maasai* : en effet, les jeunes hommes circonscrits vers 15 ou 18 ans sont fixés dans le rôle de pasteurs de zébus et contraints au célibat jusqu'à plus de trente ans par leurs aînés et leurs pères dont l'idéal est une polygamie accentuée. Evidemment, si les jeunes hommes sont interdits de mariage, les plus vieux ne se privent pas d'épouser toutes les jeunes filles que les règles lignagères ne leur interdisent pas d'épouser. On a donc une population masculine mariée beaucoup moins nombreuse que la population féminine mariée. Mais cette dissymétrie n'a pas d'incidence négative sur la procréation qui, chez les *Maasai*, est universellement prisée et encouragée. En d'autres termes, les *Maasai* ont été un peuple en expansion, les immenses plaines du Rift, pour eux qui au XVIIIe s. venaient du nord, peut-être de l'actuel pays *lotuko* au Soudan ou du pays *Turkana* au nord Kenya, semblaient sans limites. Leurs troupeaux se multipliaient à loisir (jusqu'à vingt têtes de bétail pour un humain, alors que la plupart des pasteurs est-africains doivent se contenter de deux ou trois têtes par habitant...) et les sections ou groupes territoriaux se renforçaient de même, au point de parfois se faire la guerre (les *Maasai* n'avaient aucun intérêt à exterminer leurs voisins bantous - *Kikuyu*, *Meru* etc. susceptibles de les nourrir en céréales en cas de disette et d'épizootie... comme lors des terribles pestes bovines qui ravagèrent l'Est africain au XIXe s. Le système *maasai*, qui repose sur un contrôle strict des jeunes hommes et leur maintien forcé en célibat par les seniors, peut donc être qualifié, comme le système lignager des *Nuer*, de " système d'expansion prédatrice " (*Marshall Sahlins*). Le système *Maasai*, qui est un système de classes et d'échelons d'âge, manifeste une certaine " résonance générationnelle ", que l'on retrouve ailleurs pleinement actualisée : chez les Bantous (*Meru*) les *Oromo* et dans toute l'aire *karimojong*. Chez les *Maasai*, on comprend que les hommes plus âgés " dégoutent " leurs cadets du mariage, non pas pour limiter les naissances, mais pour se réserver le privilège de " reproducteurs " de la société. Ils castrant la plupart des zébus mâles et ne conservent que " l'aristocratie mâle " pour assurer la reproduction de leurs troupeaux. Même si les moran - heureusement - ne sont pas castrés par les anciens, ils sont réduits à la condition d'eunuques pour une bonne partie de leur vie. L'essentiel, pour une démographie croissante, est que les jeunes filles initiées ne soient pas interdites de procréation, ce qui l'option retenue par les *Maasai*. On observe l'option inverse, aussi bien chez les sédentaires *meru* des flancs du Mont Kenya que chez les pasteurs nomades *borana* et nombre d'autres peuples *oromo*. Ces peuples ont élaboré, en dehors et au-dessus des lignages, des systèmes générationnels. L'idée en est très simple : au lieu que, comme chez les Européens, le niveau générationnel des personnes ne soit connu et pertinent que dans le cadre d'une parenté peu étendue (l'univers des cousins, oncles, tantes, neveux, nièces, grands-parents et petits-enfants), l'appartenance à une génération et à une seule est connue de tous et concerne tous les membres de la société. Les générations se succèdent selon un comput

spécifique, qui ne découle pas des usages familiaux. Dans le système *Gada* des *Oromo*, on retrouve systématiquement une période de quarante ans, subdivisée en cinq tranches de huit ans qui représentent des “grades” à l’intérieur de la génération, comme la distance temporelle incompressible entre deux générations. On trouve donc des générations de “fils”, de “pères”, de “pères de pères”. Mais la grande originalité est que filles et femmes sont également classées en générations et ne peuvent sous aucun prétexte en changer. Le système générationnel devient alors malthusien puisqu’il contient une règle formelle et intangible : l’interdiction pour les membres, tant masculins que féminins, d’une génération-fille de procréer dans le temps où les couples de la génération-mère sont encore féconds ou tout au moins autorisés à procréer. Toutes sortes de moyens sont utilisés pour contraindre les jeunes hommes et leurs compagnes à attendre trente ans et plus pour avoir le droit de procréer : pression morale, blâme des déviants, avortement ou infanticide... dans les meilleurs cas, il y a adoption des “nés trop tôt” par un groupe-ami de chasseurs-cueilleurs. Mais le résultat est que la démographie est stationnaire, voire régressive, ce qui peut correspondre à une nécessité matérielle. Sur les flancs du Mont Kénya, les agriculteurs *meru* ne disposent pas d’assez de terres cultivables pour se multiplier et s’étendre à chaque génération. Cette contrainte n’existe pas pour les pasteurs borana et pourtant ils appliquent la même règle restrictive : les fils ne sauraient se marier et procréer tant que leurs pères ne sont pas “exclus” de la vie sexuelle par le système. Il est historiquement attesté, par le moine éthiopien Bahrey, que les *Oromo* étaient dès la fin du XVIe s. en expansion car “chaque classe gada devait guerroyer et conquérir un territoire nouveau”. À cette époque, le système devait plus ressembler à celui des *Maasai*, mais on ignore pourquoi la logique nataliste a été inversée en une logique malthusienne. Pour terminer ce bref survol et revenir au Soudan, nous y trouvons un système générationnel dont la finalité est exactement inverse de celle des *Meru* et des *Oromo*. Il s’agit du système des peuples de l’aire karimojong (Karimojong cluster). Il s’agit des Karimojong, Jie et *Dodos* de l’Ouganda, des *Turkana* du Kénya, des *Nyangatom* d’Ethiopie et des *Jiye* et *Toposa* du Soudan (Eastern Equatoria). Chez ces peuples le système générationnel ne reconnaît que deux positions statutaires, celles des Fils du pays et des Pères du pays. Les fils des Fils sont classés du côté de la “main” et assimilés aux Pères en titre, tandis que les pères des Pères, s’il en survit, sont dans la “main” et considérés comme Fils du pays. La grande différence avec les systèmes générationnels des *Meru* et *Oromo* et que les filles, qui naissent certes comme leurs frères dans la génération qui suit celle des procréateurs, ne sont aucunement liées par cet “acte de naissance”. Les hommes de toutes les générations peuvent les demander et les obtenir en mariage : elles sont alors assimilées à la génération de leur mari, dont les enfants, garçons et fille, naîtront de ce fait sans ambiguïté dans la génération idoine. Nous retrouvons ici une situation comparable à celle, nataliste, des *Maasai* (qui sont des Nilotes ou Paraniotes ? ex-nilo-hamites - , ne l’oublions pas). Les *Nyangatom* considèrent l’infanticide pratiqué par leurs voisins (*Karo* ou *Hamar*) comme une insulte à *Akuj*, la divinité. Ils ressemblent fort à de nombreux autres peuples nilotiques qui vivent - depuis toujours? - sous le spectre de l’oliganthropie, la crainte constante de “manquer de bras” pour faire face au travail agricole et pastoral certes, mais aussi à la concurrence des groupes voisins, en quête perpétuelle de nouveaux espaces à “coloniser”.

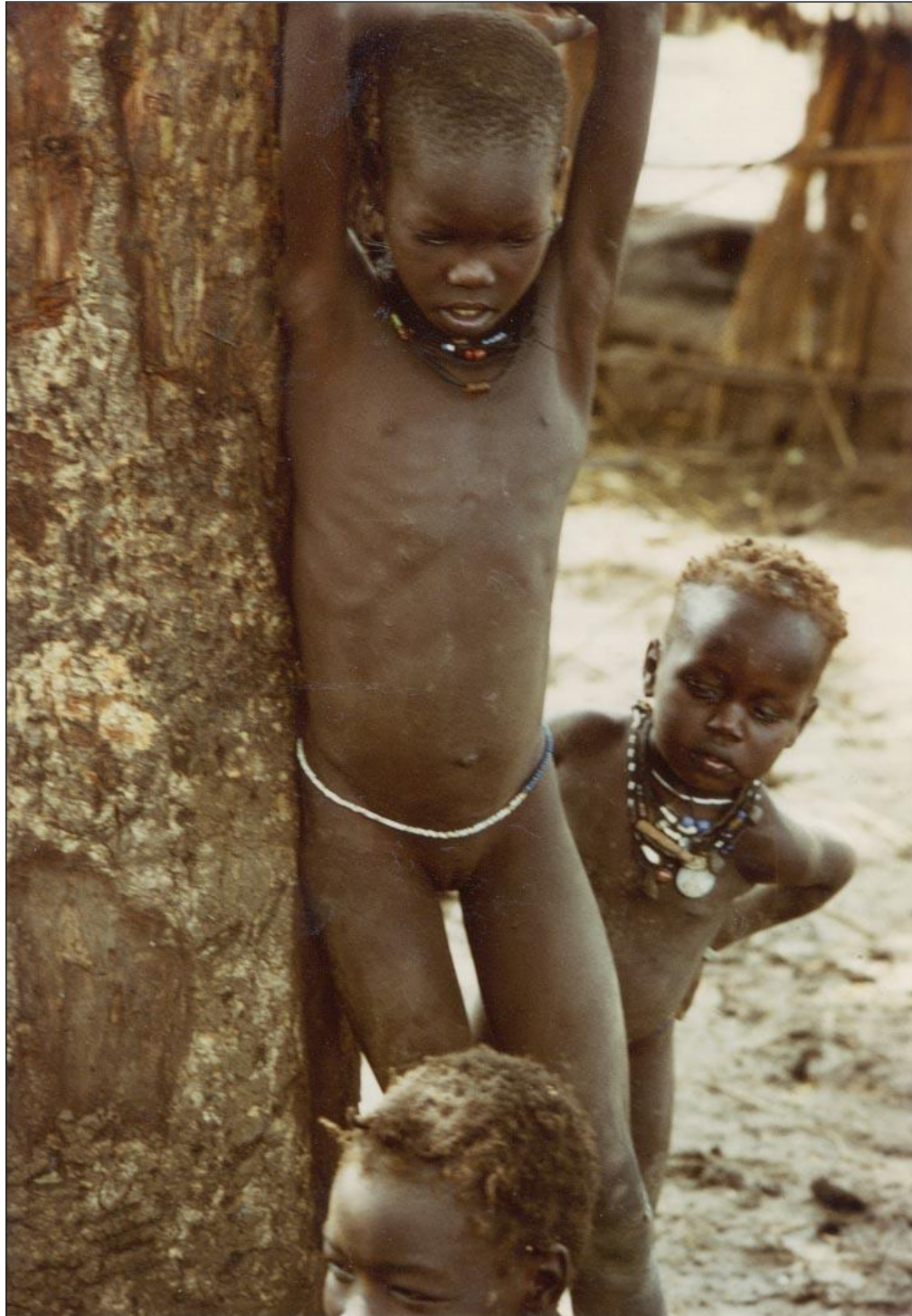


Au cours du dernier quart du XXe s., le Soudan a connu des guerres cruelles et sans précédent. Les populations ont été meurtries et ravagées de mille façons. Il appartient aux “humanitaires” sur le terrain d’étudier avec soin et amour si les coutumes anciennes concernant la sexualité et la procréation apportent encore, ou n’apportent plus, les solutions indispensables à la continuation de la vie humaine dans ces régions lointaines, et pour beaucoup de nos contemporains, oubliées.

## *Begetting children*

*“Sex is nothing, it’s not really important:  
it’s all about Procreation...”*

(TOPOSA)



*“The primary role of a family is procreation, the significance of which is ingrained in Dinka ideology and belief. The living and the death are believed to be in perpetual interaction. The only real dead man is the one who has no children to perpetuate his name; people believe that the dead and the living share in each other’s lives”<sup>1</sup>*

One of our *Päri* friends puts all the importance of human procreation into full evidence when he states that *“for a man, to die without a heir is considered to be the end of his life as nobody will continue it (while for a woman it does not play any role)”*. This rather emotionless statement makes us immediately understand how a person without a heir (that is a male child) must feel desperate to get a boy and miserable if he fails: to have (or not to have) a male heir is really a question of life and death! In the mind of the *Acholi*, *“someone without a child is an outcast! When he has passed away, a grass is put on his grave in order to stop that curse”*. Amongst all possible curses, the one of dying without children is really the worst one.

In this chapter, we shall see what methods the people living in the Southern Sudan may use in the hope to get children, and we shall also speak about one category of persons who for physical reasons are scorned by society and who may not get children because the girls do not want to start a relationship with them. However, the chapter will start with a story about human procreation or rather about individual persons who are, for one reason or another, not in a physical position to get children: it is a real drama of life!

*A page out of Anyuak royal History...<sup>2</sup>*

King Adhiedhi, the “Son of the mighty spear”, could not get any children. He passed away without leaving any children behind.

After King Adhiedhi’s death, his brother Odol “winy Tok” was crowned to be the new king.

Odol was of a gigantic stature and he was an outstanding runner. Thanks to his long legs he was able to catch up with the fastest antelopes and to capture them by his mere hands... But Odol was also a very brave and clever fighter: when the much feared Ajiba-people attacked the inhabitants of Adongo-region, the people asked Odol for help; kneeling on the wet ground, Odol chased off the enemies all by himself; even today the deep marks left by his knees in the ground can be seen, one near the river at Abecan and the other one at 10km distance on the river Oboth.

Odol was moreover an excellent blacksmith who forged his own, extremely long and heavy spears; some of these spears witness even today of the huge stature of the king and of his artistic skills: as if they were anchored in a rock they are pinned into an enormous ancient tree near the village of Pina on the river Akobo. From his unfortunate brother Adhiedhi, King Odol had inherited a number of wives. One of those women was tired of never experiencing the joys of sex and she asked her new husband to sleep with her. But Odol had to refuse: “Don’t you see, really, that this is quite an impossible thing?”, he asked, pointing at his huge and heavy penis. But the woman’s desire for lust, tenderness and love was bigger than her understanding: all the time she went to see the King and begged him to accept her. Eventually, Odol gave in to the women’s urgent demands. At least he would try it... But the attempt of making love to his wife ended with the expected catastrophe: the woman got literally blown up from within by the King’s overmighty organ, and she was torn into pieces. Sadly, love had ended with death.

Another of the late Adhiedhi’s wives was called Ogol. Even she was languishing for love and desperate in quenching her thirst for getting sexual satisfaction. As

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from *Mangor Ring* in, “*Property, poverty and people*”, p.193 (ed. P.T.W. Baxter ) Manchester Univ. 1990

<sup>2</sup> The story was told by my regretted friend *Ojullo Okoth* in 1976.

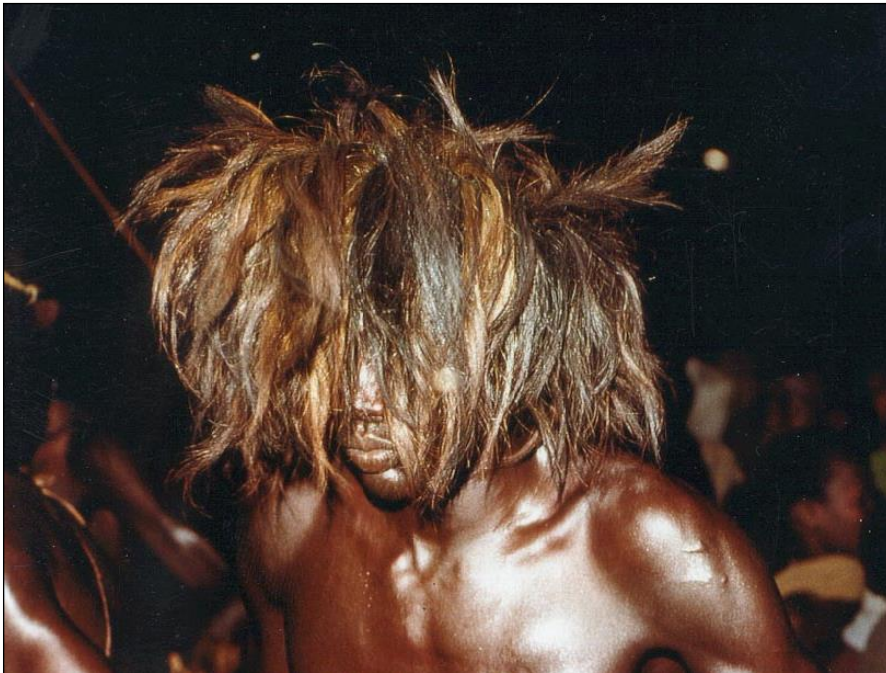
she could not find such love with her husband, she seduced the King's beautiful young brother Key. Soon, Ogol was pregnant. Odol realised it with amazement and blank horror. Well knowing that the child's father could not be the late King Adhiedhi, he immediately suspected his handsome young brother of adultery. He got possessed by rage, jalousie and anger. He could not tolerate that Key had succeeded where he always would fail. Odol decided to seek revenge for his lost honour and to go and kill his brother.

But the young Key managed to escape. Fleeing from village to village, he was followed everywhere by his enraged brother, the King. A wild manhunt had started.

On his search for his brother Key, Odol finally reached the remote region of Ojwa and entered the sleepy, peaceful village of chief Gak. He enquired about the whereabouts of his brother, but Gak pretended not to know. Odol felt instinctively that Gak was hiding the truth. So he took the little son of chief Gak by his hand and led him to the byre; there, he lifted with one single hand the roof of the byre and threw Gak's son from high up into the byre. Then he destroyed the entire byre with a single, violent kick: all the people who were inside the byre were killed by the wood which was flying through the air, and all of them were buried under the debris.

Odol's blind anger wasn't appeased yet. As soon as all the cries had faded and when the place was overcome by a ghostlike silence, Odol went to the byre and put fire on it. Immediately, there was a huge conflagration, and, driven by a violent wind, the flames took possession of all huts, destroying the entire village.

Now, as everything was reduced to ashes and the whole sky was glowing of heat, Odol left the smoking village. But on his way back home he thought about the fate of his brother Key, and suddenly he started to doubt... So he decided to return and to check once more. When he had returned, he could see that really, everything was well and entirely burnt, that there was really nothing left except black rubble and white ashes. Now certain of his success, Odol's eyes started to glisten: a tremendous feeling of deep joy had overcome him. He rubbed his naked body with the white ashes of the dead people's bones and started to dance in wild triumph.



He danced during the whole night, periodically shouting his ox-name into the scaring silence of the place. Sweat was running over his his huge body which was shining copper-red in the hollow light of the moon.

Odol left the place at the first signs of dawn and returned to his village. Here he intended to complete his revenge: now even Ogol should get her punishment. Odol went to Ogol's hut, decided to kill his unfaithful wife together with the yet unborn child. Ogol knew what would happen to her, but she decided not to defend herself. When the King

lifted his heavy, sharp spear and was about to plunge the spear into her breast, something unexpected happened: the child inside Ogol's stomach suddenly sneezed aloud!! Odol startled and stopped. He did not know what happened to

him, but it was as if he had heard a voice within himself. All at a sudden, all his anger had disappeared, and all his desire of taking revenge had just vanished. Suddenly, his big heart got filled up with feelings of pity and tenderness. Odol was totally unsettled. By miracle he had regained his senses! Now he was absolutely unable to execute his former plans and to kill the child. He decided to leave mother and child unharmed.

The following day, Odol went to see his sister Nyiajuak and informed her about his decision to leave the village forever; his decision was to appoint Ogol's child as his successor, but up to the child's maturity, he wanted her to reign in his place and to take care of the child's education.

Odol left and was never seen again. The people reported that "he had returned to the river", an old formula by which the Anyuak explain that the King has passed away: for kings are spiritual beings who do disappear but who never die.

The child of Ogol was born and grew up to a very beautiful boy. He was called Nyigwo.

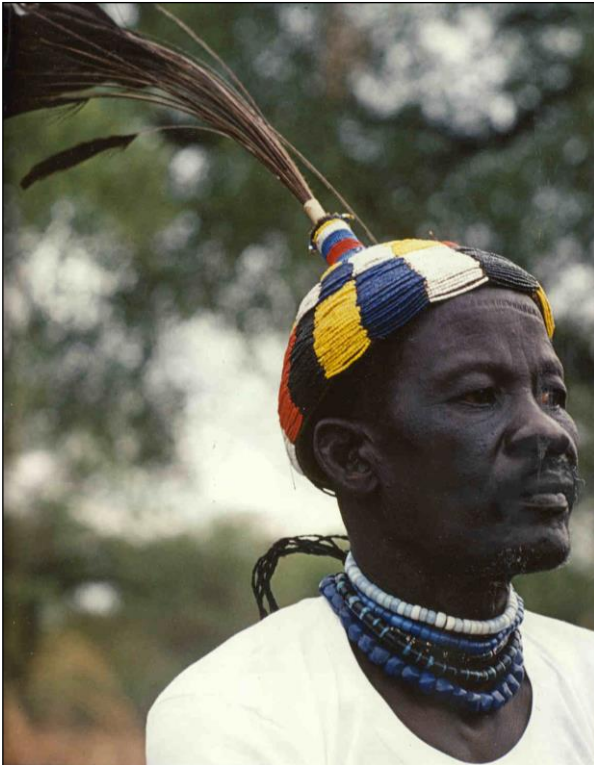
Nyiajuak was the caretaker of Nyigwo's throne. Being a woman, she had a difficult task to govern all those arrogant men who lacked the respect due to the royal office. One day she was fed up of the men's scorn and decided to give them a lesson. She dressed the still very young future king with the cloth of a woman and told him to sit under a tree near the river. When the men saw the unknown "girl", they were laughing aloud and sarcastically asked Nyiajuak what kind of beauty she had brought with her. The answer reached them faster than an arrow: with a sudden push the presumed "girl" dashed up, left her loin-cloth fall to the ground and rushed towards the men, brandishing a stiff, big penis like a long, shining spear at them... The men got scared to death and ran away in great panic.

From that time onwards, Nyiajuak was feared and much respected. The boy was now called "Googo" what means "*to scare someone and to put people to flight*"; but history remembers him also as "Rwanhe", a name referring to "*something which moves terribly fast*".

Googo became one of the great Anyuak kings. But even he had problems to conceive children. That's why it was not in the normal way he conceived his son and successor Cam. Indeed, Cam's mother, Aweti, had received artificial insemination... It was said that King Adhiedhi, Aweti's impotent husband, in his desperate search for a son of his own, had asked a magician to prepare a mixture of durra and beads and let his wife drink the magic potion.

However, another version of the same story states that it was actually a commoner, Odi Oburi, who had prepared this magic potion for his wife Aweti, and that Aweti after Odi Oburi's death had become the wife of King Googo; Cam, the future King, was born when his mother was already the wife of King Googo.

"Cam", by the way, means "Food", this in reference to the special procedure by which the mother of King Cam "war Aweti" got conceived.





## *Obstacles on the way to eternal life by begetting children*

To get “only” daughters...

*“My paternal uncle had got only daughters”, an Acholi friend relates, “and he was very unhappy. He felt to be a failure.”* The problem of getting both boys and girls is a universal problem, but of course it gets existential dimensions if even the present life is affected by it.

*“If a man has got only daughters”, a member of the Lango-people explains candidly, “well, then all of them will have to marry...”. A Murle-man agrees: “Yes, the father would feel very rich... But yet he would still think of having someone, a son, to take care of all that wealth...”. But the problem is not always simple, as this was experienced by an Acholi-priest: he got only daughters from his first wife, so he married another wife, - but only to get more daughters... It was only the fourth woman who eventually gave birth to a boy... While the Moruba seem to resign, saying “It is not of such an importance, as the Christian belief wants us to accept whatever has come from God...”, the Ingessana would – like so many others – still look for an alternative, even if their statement sounds rather pessimistic: “There is nothing to be done. It is God’s wish, so they will stay with the family as a source of wealth. The man will look for another woman, in the hope that she will bear him a child-boy. But if she fails, the man will remain like that only.”*

In most ethnic groups, the psychological problem of failing to get a male heir can only be solved by marrying a second wife. However, some ethnic groups (such as the Azande, the Murle or the Toposa) never give up and find other means to get a son; as the procedures are the same as the ones used in case of impotence or sterility, they will be described here below.

### Sterility and Impotence

What misfortunes have befallen me  
O Abyor  
People of my father  
Do not blame me  
Is it not for a ‘baby’ born  
That a woman keeps her home?  
(DINKA)<sup>3</sup>

For people who make their own survival depending on the existence of children, it is naturally a terrible and indeed a terrifying experience to see that all efforts to get children are in vain. The anecdote taken out of Anyuak royal history is an excellent illustration of the great emotions which can result out of sexual incapacity. If the story about King Odol essentially is not only a human tragedy but more essentially a drama of political significance, the lack of sexual power is for the more common people a truly existential catastrophe which deprives a person not only of his hopes for a life on earth after death but affects also – and on a more practical level – his self-pride and his social status: for once the people are aware of his problems they will not fail to scorn the person in public...

All people in the Sudan share anxieties related to impotence or sterility, and all of them look for ways to recover or to get children by other means.

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<sup>3</sup> The song by an infertile woman is from Francis Mading Deng’s book on “The Dinka and their Songs”, p.23

Men would always think that the fact not to get children is due to his wife's sterility. In such a case, he would opt for the solution of marrying another wife. The wife who could not bear children would normally *not be divorced*, except if there are other reasons for divorce (such as bad temper, stealing or neglecting her husband).

If a man, in spite of new wives, continues to fail to produce children, he will understand that the problem lies with himself rather than with his wife. In case of impotence (where the problem is obvious both for the man and the woman) there may be some medical or magical means to bring about a change; but impotence is, at least for young people, often only a temporary phenomena.

The following *examples* are to show how people originating from very different parts of the Southern Sudan understand the causes to the problem and how they try to solve it. To be underlined is the fact that sexual diseases are, in the mind of the people, not linked to impotence or sterility.

- an *Acholi* woman who does not get children feels like *cursed*. But she will not be divorce.

In exceptional cases, she can go and try someone else. If the husband is aware of his problem, he can ask one of his brothers to take the necessary steps for him.

- if an *Anyuak* man suffers from a lack of sexual potency, it is generally explained by the action of some sorcerer (*ci-jwòk*) who is believed to have spoiled the man's sleeping-skin by rubbing it softly. The man can recover by drinking a mixture of water and ashes one day after its preparation. This remedy should also help if the man's impotence is due to intercourse with a menstruating girl. Potency can also be regained by urinating into the flames of a fire. When women understand that their husbands will remain impotent forever while they themselves are still fertile, they usually will leave their husbands and look for a new lover.

In the case of a woman's sterility, the *Anyuak* magician is asked for help: she (almost all *Anyuak* doctors are of a female sex) will analyse the problem and conclude that this was the malicious action of an evil-eyed sorcerer (*ci-jwòk*) or the result of a curse (*acièni*); the magician will bring back the woman's fertility by chasing away the evil.

- If a *Päri* man is sterile, his wife will "*go around in a secret way*" and get children from someone else. If it is the woman who is barren, her husband will take another wife.

- Even an impotent *Nuer* will send his wife to some other man; if the problem of infecundity is with the wife, he will normally not divorce but marry another woman and get children from her.

-A *Balanda* man seeks the help of a healer who may solve his problems by magical means, but in case of a woman's sterility she will tie a rope (called "*fobo*") around her neck; the rope is understood to be a blessing and is a gift from the woman's father or mother. A *Balanda* woman remains with her husband even if she does not get children.

- the *Murle*, who are known to have serious problems of fertility, call sterility "*nykuluket*" and impotence "*langarezhen*"; they believe that it has been caused by God or more precisely comes from the River-God. Men treat their problems by drinking butter and eating a lot of fat; similarly, a barren woman will hope to become fecund by "*getting very strong*" by drinking the fat of cooked meat while not leaving the hut for some days. If it is obvious that it is the woman who is not fertile, a young girl will be married to the husband *in the name of* the deprived woman. But if it is the husband who cannot get children, his wife will be sent to other tribes in order to get pregnant there; once pregnant, the woman will return home. The *Murle* are also known to try to "solve" some of their existential problems by (forcibly) "adopting" children from other tribes, thereby hitting the enemy at their most sensitive part and causing, in consequence, much hatred; however, the victims of this "method" are aware that their kidnapped children will be treated in the kindest possible way: for the *Murle* love children more than anybody else.

- the *Didinga* try to treat their sexual problems with medicinal herbs, but in case of the husband's sterility, the wife will try to get children from a brother of her husband – or from anybody else.
- A *Toposa* man would, first of all, marry another wife and try out his “luck” there. If he fails another time, he is likely to be scorned in public by his age-group and will be obliged to send his wife to get a child from someone else. If the sterility is with a *Toposa* woman, *the father will buy a boy or a girl from anywhere* , paying about fifteen cows for a boy (in the opposite case, that is if a man cannot get a daughter, he may also purchase a girl for not less than twenty heads of cattle, but this happens more rarely than the purchase of a boy). What happens then to this boy (aged between three and fifteen) is most interesting indeed: he will be put into a hut together with his new “mother”, and *all happens as if she was actually giving birth...* The boy will have to stay three days in a hut (until his navel has dried up...); when brought out, all the usual ceremonies for a new-born child will be performed - – exactly as if this had been a real birth...
- The *Atuot* marry on behalf of women and men who cannot get children because of infertility. In case of a woman this is done by members of the family, though normally not by their brothers but by other relatives. “*The children will be the woman's children*”, we are told, “*and she has authority over the wife who married in her name. For politeness, the children will call her grandmother or sometimes older mother. These kind of women are often very rich and even own servants who do the cultivation and who look after the cows of her family*”. “*In case of a man's sterility*”, our informant continues, “*his wife will go to the house of one of his relatives and she will only come back when she is pregnant. But those relatives who conceived the children for him are not allowed to sleep in the house when the infertile man is present.*” The *Dinka* do this in secrecy and do not want anybody to know it. There is a saying “*only those who do not give birth are always very fat*” which refers to people who have no other mouth to feed and therefore eat everything by themselves.
- Even the *Lango* will send the wife of a sterile man to get children from elsewhere, but in case of a barren wife the husband is to marry another woman.
- In *Baka* society, the elders of the family will discuss the matter. An animal will be slaughtered as a sacrifice. But while a sterile man will not (not!) look for someone else to produce, a barren *Baka* woman will choose one of her sisters and ask her to get a child for her (this service will have to be remunerated).
- The *Jur-Bel* consider sterility as an extremely bad omen; a man who has become “*functionless*” is not to marry again nor does he know other ways of procuring children.
- Like the *Moruba* who believe that it is the woman who is responsible for not getting children, the *Avukaya* are convinced that “*a man can always get children*”, - if not from his wife then surely from another woman that he will marry. However, in case of impotence, an *Avukaya* will ask a healer for help: the treatment (with medicinal herbs) is known to be effective.
- The *Ndogo-Sere* – when trying to get children – will do like the *Azande* who borrow the waist-ropes of a man or a woman and wear it for some time. If a healer is consulted, he will analyse the case and come to the conclusion that the person has been cursed; he will help to identify the person responsible for the curse. A barren woman will remain with her husband who, however, will marry another woman.
- A *Zande* man would marry again, but his first wife would also try to change her condition: she would visit a mother of a boy and ask her if she could borrow her “*bagadi*”-belt; this belt is made out of bark and worn by all *Azande* women. By using that woman's belt, the man's wife hopes to give birth to a boy. If a woman has stayed about five years without having given birth, the members of the family and elders gather in order to discuss the problem. Someone may suggest “*maybe the grandmother or the grandfather who died a long, long time ago has been offended and caused a curse...?*”. The people would then move to the grave, prepare beer and food and

proceed to prayers and blessings: all would put their hands on the lady...; people will then take a piece of the “oyo”-tree, twist a rope out of it and put it around the woman’s neck; they pour beer and throw food on the grave, eventually start drinking and dancing...: after two months, the formerly barren woman will be pregnant!

The *Azande*, it seems, are thinking of the man’s impotence a long time before it actually happens: they do not want a boy to sit on any seat used by girls, because this would – they believe - cause the boy’s impotence, take away his strength or make him feel very cold.

## Persons who do not marry

Persons who do not marry are exceptional, even though they do exist. Such people are, in *Murle* society, “*boys with mental disorders or poor men to whom nobody will offer a girl free of charge*”... “...*as for the girls, there are some who are not married but they produce children*”.

Lack of wealth, or rather the lack of any sister, is surely one of the major reasons when persons who are not handicapped fail to marry: as an *Acholi* explains: “*Some don’t marry because they don’t have the needed wealth. In our society, money for paying the bride-wealth cannot be borrowed, it has to be provided by the husband only*”; however, such persons may be getting a wife in heritage from a father or a brother. “*When one’s family is at large*”, a *Lango*-boy (who is

presently living in a refugee-camp in Kenya) notes, “*it may also be impossible to find the bride-wealth. But also disabled people and persons known to be wizard may not find a wife. But if you do not marry, you will be despised by society and you will not even be allowed to carry a baby.*”

In *Toposa*-society, the number of handicapped persons is very limited, “*but even crippled women get married*”. Similarly, almost all people get married

amongst the *Jur-Bel* where “*There are no boys or girls who do not marry, except if they have been cursed by, for example, the grandfather or the grandmother.*” Even the *Ingessana* share the belief that people who have not married must have been cursed, thus implying that all unmarried persons of a certain age have been victims of a curse.

They *Azande* qualify girls who do not wish to marry as ‘*mopatapai*’”, a term referring to people who lack reproductive organs. But the old *Zande* man is to regret that, in any case, “*nowadays, the girls do what they want!*”.



## Getting children after Death

*“Someone without children is considered to be an outcast. A grass is laid on his grave in order to stop that curse.”*

(ACHOLI)

*“For a man, to die without having got children is considered to be the end of his existence as nobody will continue his life”, a Pāri states, adding that “for a woman it does not play any role”. The belief that children are the only means to extend personal existence beyond death is shared by all people in the world, but for many Sudanese children are so crucial that a person who has*



no children is considered to be dead while still alive. *“To die without children is a very unfortunate case.....and if he has no relative who could act on his behalf, there is nothing to be done...”*, one of my Murle interlocutors answers on my question on human procreation, indirectly suggesting that there may perhaps exist ways to defeat the curse of having no children.

Indeed, if one considers the wives left by a man after his death as belonging to him forever, one could consider the children which the women get after their husband's death (from other men) as being his own descendants. And this is exactly what happens: the children of women who were taken up by the husband's relatives (in some cultures even women who stay with other men without having been divorced) will all carry the late husband's name and thus be considered to be *his* children. If sometimes only the first child will be named after the mother's late husband (as this is for example the case with the *Balanda*) or if all the children will carry his name does not matter, what is important is the principle of allowing a person to

'get' children even after he has passed away. In many cases, of course, a late husband will already have had own children and in such a case the children conceived after his death are of course not of a same existential significance; but in other, more exceptional cases, a husband who



had no own children will find in this indirect way the possibility to survive his personal death: *“all the children produced by the widows and distributed amongst the husband’s relatives are considered to be still ‘belonging’ to the late husband and will therefore carry his name”*, a *Didinga* explains, and the *Toposa* (where a widow will not be inherited by the late husband’s brother but rather by relatives or sons) share this custom with most of the ethnic communities of the Sudan: *“all the children will be born in the name of the dead husband (it is only if the late husband had not paid yet the dowries that his wife could marry another man)”*..

While this type of procreation beyond death – the so-called ‘levirate’ - is a common feature of most cultures, the custom of marrying *all* persons (including infants) who died before they could marry or conceive children is not so widespread. A *Murle* explains: *“if the dead person (man or woman) was not married yet, the relatives can arrange a marriage in his or in her name, or they offer him or her one child who has been abducted and marry him or her in the name of the dead man or the dead woman: these people would then produce children for him or her.”* Such marriages *on behalf of someone who has died* – also called ‘ghost-marriage’ – happen also in the places inhabited by

the *Atuot*, the *Nuer* or the *Dinka*: *“If a man died before he could marry”*, a *Dinka* woman tells, *“one of his brother’s will marry in his name, and all the children from that wife will be considered to be the dead man’s offspring. This happens frequently.”*

Interesting is the *Atuot* custom of marrying a wife on behalf of a spirit... The children of that woman will be given a name related to him. People believe that such a spirit will then protect the whole family as the spirit itself has become a member of the family. This, however, does not happen often; normally, only a goat or perhaps a cow is kept in the name of that spirit.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Anyuak spirits visit a pregnant mother during her dreams, claiming the child; to protect such a “visited” child from any evil done by such a spirit, it will be symbolically handed over to it by carrying its name (such as *Dingur*, *Lwal*, *Nyikango*, *Lero*, *Bey* ect.) and by wearing specific types of charms related to the spirit.