

*“But you know...
...Darkness is a big thing...!”*



*“A background-report on family-attitudes and sexual behaviour
in the Southern Sudan as a basis for HIV/Aids awareness”*

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*compiled for
Unicef (Operation Life-Line Sudan)*

*by
© Conradin Perner (Kwacakworo)
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Introduction

Little is known about the number of people affected by the HIV/Aids-disease in the Sudan. Even though a very few NGO have started to enlighten the population on the new illness threatening their existence, the great majority of the Sudanese still ignore HIV/Aids and do not have the necessary knowledge how to adapt their behaviour to the needed changes. It is certainly understandable that, in times of war, aid-agencies must have other priorities than to concentrate on preventive measures and other long-term activities; yet it is urgent to make the people aware of the deadly consequences of the sexually transmitted disease and to help them to protect themselves before it is too late .

The following paper is part of the strategy adopted by UNICEF in its forthcoming information-campaign on HIV/Aids: *its practical aim is to help foreign aid-workers and medical personnel to learn more about the cultural background and in particular about the sexual behaviour of the people living in the Southern Sudan*. The understanding is that any arguments for a change in behaviour are only acceptable if they are based on the respect of social rules and are not offending the people's cultural values, their self-pride and dignity.

True, the challenge of presenting a broad picture of the sexual behaviour of the people living in the Southern Sudan "in relevant details" within a few weeks appears to be quite an impossible task, even if one was to concentrate on the "major tribes" only: any really relevant description of the people's sexual behaviour would have to take into account the spiritual, social, economic and political dimensions of the people's existence: *sexual practices and attitudes depend not only on the individual behaviour of a person but more essentially on the cultural context*, on the social and economical living-conditions of the people, on moral constraints, on ecological factors as much as on traditions and beliefs, in particular on the understanding of the deeper causes to sickness and disease. This general paper can impossibly describe the complexity of each culture but is bound to remain on the surface of appearances, thereby remaining superficial in the approach and relatively poor in detailed explanations. To all evidence, knowledge gathered by one person alone during a very few weeks cannot be of much scientific value.

If the mentioned "impossible" challenge had to become acceptable in spite of all intellectual scruples and the all too obvious lack of time for conducting rigorous research, it was partly because of the importance and the urgency of the matter (the planned UNICEF-campaign against the HIV/Aids "killer-disease" should not be delayed any further) and partly because of the insight that superficiality would not *necessarily* imply a lack of understanding and could indeed become an acceptable method of information on the people's behaviour, - provided only that one would remain conscious of its lack of purely scientific relevance. One has to keep in mind that the purpose of this paper is not only to provide abstract information but that it is supposed to be *a tool of a practical use*: it has to make sure that the information is reaching up to the people concerned, or, in other terms, it should render the reading interesting and enjoyable enough to capture the attention of those aid-workers who will have to lead the campaign on HIV/Aids-awareness and who may not necessarily be interested in anthropological details: the songs, tales, anecdotes, discussions, riddles, children's games etc. which are "illustrating" the different topics should allow the reader to share the people's feelings of sorrow and joy and to take personally part in their emotions and experiences.

Even though the prevention of HIV/Aids is the basic reason for this piece of information on sexual behaviour and family-life, the paper does *not directly* deal with HIV/Aids but simply concentrates on presently existing patterns of behaviour, on beliefs, habits, on social constraint and individual freedom. It describes, in the most general way and without any scientific pretension, the different aspects of a person's private and family-life, touching on issues like *gender, family-relationship, sexual behaviour* as well as on the various *beliefs regarding illness and disease*, here including the traditional means of *avoiding infection, of preventing or fighting sickness* and all other *existential misfortunes*: between the borderlines of a person's private existence, *birth and death*, the focus will be put on *premarital sexuality, pubertal initiation and sex education, age of marriage, bride-wealth, forms of marriage, adultery, incest* and on *constraints or punishment for transgressing against cultural codes of conduct*; attention will moreover be put on social attitudes towards specific people, as for example *handicapped or abnormal persons, twins, circumcised men* or *persons affected by different transmissible diseases*. Eventually, the paper's conclusion is to reflect upon practical ways of spreading information on sexual diseases without offending private or social sensitivities.

Sources of information

The Southern Sudan is not only fortunate to be exceptionally rich in cultures but also lucky to be rich in *monographs* and *ethnographic papers* of all kind: indeed, all major ethnic groups have been the subject of profound analysis and detailed descriptions, studies which usually focus on single people and on particular topics (such as kinship, religion, magic etc.). This paper has used some of these publications as a complementary source of information.

A second, more personal source of information were the papers presented at the so-called "*Cultural workshop*" which is periodically organised by Unicef in Lokichokio as an initiation of aid-workers to the cultures of the Southern Sudan. The papers presented there have the advantage to be written by Sudanese of various origins and to be of great practical significance.

The third and least "objective" source of information were *interviews with individual persons* who could be met with during the time of fieldwork (January/February 2001). Considering the existing considerable amount of information on the dominant Southern Sudanese "nationalities", *efforts were made to obtain information from minor or less known ethnic groups*. The idea of concentrating on regions close to international borders (the potential HIV/Aids-roads) could only be partially realised, the Ugandan border being at the time of a difficult access.

Under time-pressure, it was impossible to meet with people from all ethnic groups, but at least there were discussion with members of practically all linguistic groups found in the Southern Sudan. It was not always possible either to interview several persons of a same ethnic group, and the large majority of the informants were, unfortunately, of a male sex. Such private information was gathered from members of the following ethnic groups: the *Azande*, the *Ndого* and the *Sere*, the *Baka* and the *Jur-Bel*, the *Bari*, the *Hill-Murle*, the *Didinga*, the *Suri* and the *Plain-Murle*, the *Moru* and the *Avokaya*, the *Lango*, the *Lotuho* and the *Lopit*, the *Ingessana*, the *Toposa* and the *Jiye*, the *Baka* and the *Shilluk*, the *Acholi*, the *Balanda-Boor*, the *Anyuak* and the *Pari*, as well as the *Nuer*, the *Atuot* and the *Dinka*; information on the *Lokoya* were obtained from Philip Lomodong's book while our knowledge of the *Nyangatom*'s behavioural attitudes stems from the French ethnographer Prof. Serge *Lokorinyang* Tornay.

The informants

It is of course impossible to be sure of the truthfulness of the different statements. Indeed, the main-problem when looking for accurate information on sexual behaviour is *the extreme sensitivity of the subject*: while everybody would be ready to talk about general cultural settings, most informants would prefer not to talk about the more intimate aspects of their family-relationship or their personal sexual life. While I don't think that the informants deliberately wanted to distort reality, I am sure that at least some of them (such as, for example, "the big chairman of Zande culture" met in Yambio) would deny certain practices merely because they are not in line with their present own (Christian) beliefs.

It is to be regretted that there was no woman to assist me; sexual matters (and especially those considered to be shameful) are best discussed between members of a same sex, and this of course explains why most of my informants had to be men; their age was between 30 and 40, but there were also a number of younger and older men amongst them; all according to the age of the informants, certain questions were (of course) not asked.

The discussions with the interlocutors were informal and as personal as only possible. There were no questionnaires, and even though I tried to touch on all aspects linked to sexual behaviour, the answers usually guided the conversation themselves, leading to new questions and sometimes to new answers. I did not insist whenever I had the feeling that a person would not like to be questioned further and thus allowed the informants to feel free to tell me what they wanted me to know. I am aware that this "friendly approach" did not give me the answers to all my questions and that the information on the frequency of certain practices (as for example rape) or events (as for example divorce) would remain unsatisfactorily vague; however, as the number of informants had to be limited to one, two or three persons, quantitative information would in any case have to be considered as the product of merely individual views or even as private "opinions".

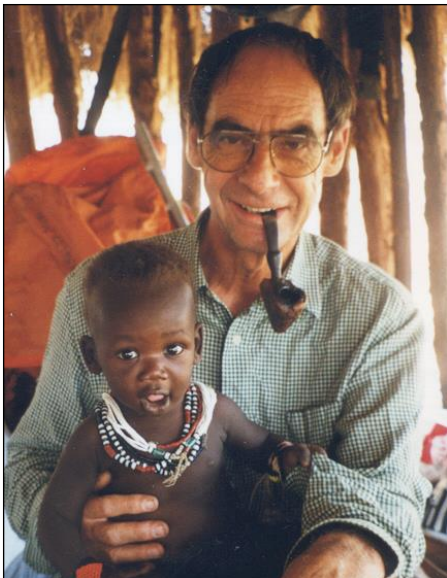
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The paper on family-attitudes and sexual behaviour of the people in the Southern Sudan is due to the initiatives taken by Dr. *Umit Kartoglu* and Mr. *Martin Dawes*, heads of the UNICEF departments of health and communication respectively: their perception of the cultural significance of any activity undertaken in a specific context shows remarkable sensitivity to the interests of the people concerned and gives proof of their understanding that activities by foreign aid-organisations can only have long-lasting effects if they are aware and *respectful* of existing traditions and beliefs. Such a serious and conscious approach being – unfortunately – still very exceptional, it certainly merits to be highlighted and to be acknowledged here in the first place.

In a sense, this paper should be considered to be a collective production to which many people have contributed: ethnographers, friends, informants, members of the different aid-agencies working in the Sudan as well as persons specialised in the prevention of HIV/Aids. I would like to thank the humanitarian agencies of AAH (Dr. Csaba Hethalmi), MEDAIR (Mme. Alice Onsarigo and Mr. Kees), WORLD-RELIEF, the INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS (M. David Bol Gatluak and M. Felipe Donoso), UNHCR (Mrs. Francesca Nzau, Sub-Office Kakuma) and UNICEF (Mme. Janepher Odenyo in Yambio, Mr. Girma Tefari in Nyal, John Derrick Owen, Mmes. Rose Njagi, Rebecca Ewoi and Sarah Loyanai in Lokichokio) for their assistance and hospitality in the field.

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Kwacakworo!

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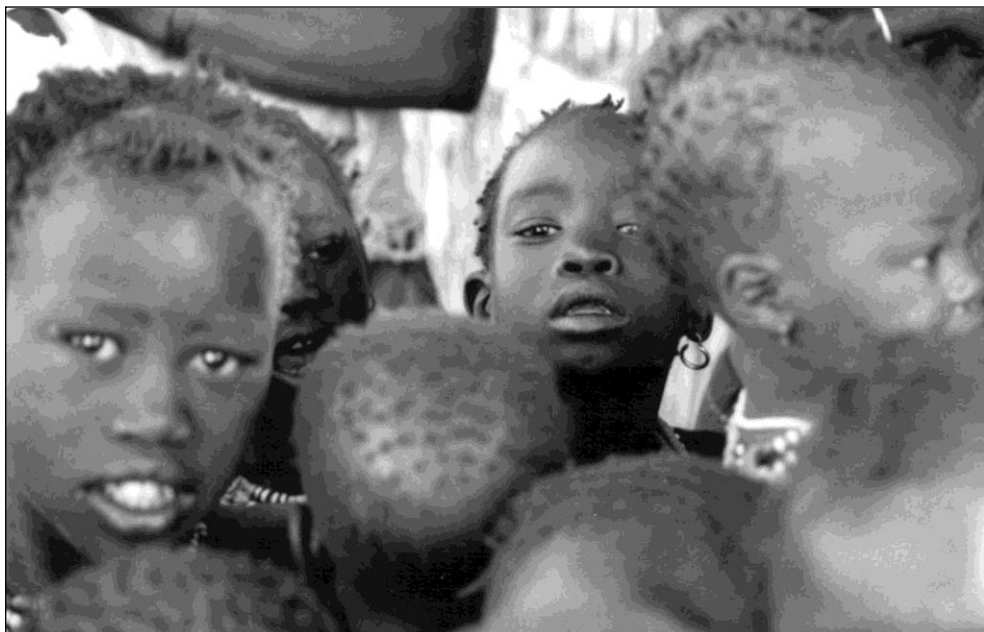
II.



Studies relating to HIV/Aids

UNAIDS: http://www.who.int/emc-hiv/fact_sheets/pdfs/sudan.pdf
http://www.unaids.org/epidemic_update/report/Epi_report.htm
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