



N° 19

Juin 1989

AVENUE DE LA PAIX

DOSSIER:
**LES RISQUES
DU MÉTIER**
(deuxième partie)

Nouvelle rubrique
LES BONNES FEUILLES





LES BONNES

Il y a rapport et rapport. Si d'aucuns, confidentiels, ne se frayeront jamais un passage dans ces colonnes, et si beaucoup d'autres ne présentent pas un intérêt général, il en est par contre de passionnants et instructifs, dont certains passages méritent une diffusion "tous publics CICR". Le Comité de rédaction d'AVENUE DE LA PAIX a donc décidé d'ouvrir une nouvelle rubrique, "Les bonnes feuilles", dans laquelle seront reproduits des extraits de tels rapports.

La rédaction espère que les lecteurs lui signaleront à l'avenir les éventuels documents de cette sorte qui tomberaient sous leurs yeux.

Pour ce numéro, nous avons sélectionné de larges extraits des pages 5 à 16 d'un rapport rédigé par Conradin Perner à la demande des délégations de Nairobi/Sud-Soudan et de Lokichokio. Ce rapport, en anglais, s'intitule **"Personal report concerning the recent activities of the ICRC in the Southern Sudan (in particular at Yirol); with general remarks about a possibly more psychological approach to the people and the problems in the 'field'"**, et il est daté du 20 mars 1989 - ceci pour les références. Il va sans dire que nous avons porté notre choix sur l'aspect "approche psychologique des populations nilotiques".

Quelques précisions sur l'auteur: **Conradin Perner** est docteur ès lettres, et a effectué plusieurs missions pour le CICR (Bangladesh, Inde et Vietnam) entre 1972 et 1974; il a enseigné aux universités de Kisangani (Zaïre) et Khartoum (Soudan), et a vécu près de huit ans dans ce dernier pays, dont cinq dans les parties reculées de la province du Haut-Nil. Du 13 janvier au 31 mars 1989, Conradin a rejoint les rangs des délégués du CICR, à Lokichokio tout d'abord, puis à Yirol.

Of course, the very basic condition to any approach of a foreign culture is deep and sincere respect as well as a natural modesty, two qualities which are not only to be expressed by physical behaviour but - most important - also by the cautious use of language. One does well in always keeping in mind that it is the delegates who are the guests and that the Nilotes are in their own place, that it is them who know how to behave there... (1). Even if the delegates are invested with the power to decide about "actual needs" i.e. food distributions or medical assistance, they should not use this artificial though real power for imposing their own ways of behaviour on other and perhaps defenseless people: we are the foreigners who should adapt!

In the following, I shall try to enumerate very shortly some of the basic characteristics of the Nilotes (i.e. Dinkas, Nuers, Shilluks, Luos or Anyuaks), rudimentary informations which hopefully may facilitate

a new delegate's first approach and his general understanding of the Nilotes' particular way of behaving.

No Beggars

The Nilotes are really used to endure hardship and this may even be the reason why they have an extremely positive philosophy regarding their own human existence: they would never blame nature for the harsh conditions of life but are, on the contrary, very grateful for everything which is given to them. If the word "thank you" does not exist in any of the Nilotic languages, it is because in their world, nothing is ever given freely and everything has to be struggled for. Even gifts are an element of human exchange and generosity will not only be remembered but is to be given back one day, in one form or another. But the Nilotes are no beggars, well on the contrary, they are the ones who decide if they want to accept a gift or an invitation or not: they would rather die than share the food of a bad person (2). On the other side, the Nilotes have no scruples to take gifts from a rich person (unless there is fear of possible negative consequences), for in their ideology, it is the person making a gift who should be grateful and even feel honoured, for it is indeed he who gets all the prestige from the fact that he is in a position to make gifts. What could a rich man hope for if nobody wants to accept his gifts?

It is often said that the Nilotes are arrogant people, and if one understands "arrogant" in the sense of "fearless", this remark can even hold true (3). Nilotes are never afraid to demonstrate their feelings and they never feel inferior: they are extremely self-conscious and proud of their own human identity. This essentially positive attitude makes foreigners often upset, a delegate expecting starving and poor people rather humble and grateful than aggressive and proud. Personally, I think that a delegate should be glad to see that he does not need to disqualify the people he is assisting as submissive beggars and that he can serve people who are decided to keep their human dignity in spite of all hardship, people who can make the

difference between physical and spiritual poverty and misery. But on the other hand, a delegate should be careful and not get trapped by this attitude: the needs of the people are real and serious, even if people don't crouch on the ground for demonstrating these needs.

On arrogance

When talking about "arrogance", one should also be a little bit self-critical and ask if the behaviour and material appearance of the delegates couldn't as well be understood as a kind of arrogant and aggressive attitude, if it is not our own aggressivity which is the cause of our partners' arrogant attitude. For if it is true that the Nilotes are extremely self-conscious and of a delicate approach, it is also true that they are very kind people, pleasant and very positive-minded. They are very social and adore to laugh. Being usually lonely, they enjoy the moments of company and praise those whose home is open for discussions, playing and feasts. Exactly as the rich man should be grateful that people accept his gifts, a person whose home is always full of people should feel happy that he is so popular. For "Nobody goes to see a bad man", as the Nilotes say.

An important aspect of Nilotic behaviour is the sphere of food as well as the whole sphere of human language, both being a concrete expression of interhuman (material or spiritual) relationship. The sharing of food or the refusal to accept to share the food offered by somebody is highly significant, and a delegate eating or drinking alone should be aware that he may commit a serious mistake. The Nilotes observe carefully each detail in a person's behaviour, and then draw their own conclusions.

Loss of face

Very delicate and actually difficult is the use of language because it is most probably here where the greatest differences lie between a European and a Nilote. For the Nilotes, language (including silence and physical communication) has great spiritual importance: it is a powerful weapon of a very dangerous use. To avoid misunderstandings merely due to differences in the use of language and which are not easy forgotten, the delegate should use a language which strictly follows the rules of respect and which is always under control, both in what concerns the contents as in what concerns the loudness: a shouting person has lost his face before even having said something, one doesn't need to listen to him... Losing one's temper is a sad happening indeed because it expresses the loss of one's self-consciousness, self-respect and human dignity, but if it is sometimes hard to control oneself (at least for a European), one should never, but absolutely never insult or offend another person or at least be aware of the consequences! A single expression (like "Are you crazy?") can change a whole relationship within seconds. It must be said here that it is sometimes hard to know what can offend a Nilote and to define the border-limit between joke and insult, and this is why a delegate does well in expressing himself in a respectful and at least polite manner. The Nilotes themselves talk often in an allusive, indirect way, and the use of silence is an active part of their "language". By observing the Nilotes' careful hand-

ling of language, the delegate will find the key to his own behaviour, thereby finding an easy access to the Nilotes' mentality.

Respect for the elders

I have repeatedly insisted on the capital importance of respect as the basic condition to human relationship. Respect is required at all instances, but it is absolutely essential when approaching or addressing elderly persons: age is, for the Nilotes, of great spiritual significance, a person's consciousness getting its dimensions mainly in the course of time, thus becoming powerful with advancing age. Elderly people therefore need a particularly delicate and kind approach, and if people of a higher age or otherwise of importance are not met with the due respect, they may simply disappear: absence is - like silence - a significant part of Nilotic behaviour. The delegates being generally younger than at least some of their partners, they have to be aware of the Nilotes' great sensibility in what concerns age and respect. Note that it is often not just the older person who feels abused when respect is lacking but that even younger persons may feel insulted when an elderly person is not respected: when addressing the uncountable old people asking for food or a blanket, the delegate should not think that he is not observed and that he is therefore permitted to rebuke these deprived old people.

Stress an impediment

The Nilotes do things slowly and carefully, a behaviour which can upset a delegate who of course wants to do things quickly. Patience will be required, for if the Nilotes do not hurry it is not because they are lazy but because they always want to keep their human dignity. Thus, the Nilotes f.e. hardly ever ran but "stalk", thereby advancing astonishingly fast and moreover for a long time (when the running European would already have lost his energy - not to talk about his dignity!). Things which are done quickly are usually not well done, are done without love and moreover make people unnecessarily nervous. Consciousness of time is very acute in Nilotic psychology, and if one wants to go a long way with these people one should never hurry but move slowly - though steadily. It will take some time, but finally the delegate will understand that stress (stressing himself as well as the others) does not speed up let alone facilitate his work, that there must remain some space for himself within the whole action: the comfort a delegate needs in the field is not so much of a material but of a psychological nature. The delegates therefore should take the time to enjoy what they are doing instead of getting despaired because of all the unsolved problems.

On cleanliness

The Nilotes are very clean people (4). If they do not appear clean in the present conditions, it is simply because they are not in a position to take well care of their body; lack of water (and of course of soap), displacement and difficult living conditions have changed their traditionally so proud and beautiful physical appearance. For the Nilotes, the human person's physical appearance is the reflexion of his inner personality: is this a clean or a dirty person? Considering this sensibility of the Nilotes to a person's physical appearance (which, after all, is

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shared by the Europeans), it may be useful to know that the Nilotes do not like beards or rather that beards are a sign of aggressivity (typical in times of war): "a beard reflects a person's "mentality", - as a wounded soldier in Lokichoggio explained it. If a delegate wants to make a favourable impression when first approaching his partners in the field, it

may be good for him to have no beard (no dirty face)... However, the Nilotes are not so superficial that they would not be able to change their initial impressions, if they get good reasons for doing so... In any case, the fact that a delegate is a foreigner and thus follows different customs is a good excuse, even in the eyes of the Nilotes."



Photo: Thierry Gassmann

- (1) I have to confess that it took me - when in Anyuak country - several months until I discovered that the only person who did not know how to behave was me... In the beginning, I had of course thought the contrary!
- (2) The Dinkas always repeat how exceptional the present circumstances are and how shameful they feel when asking for help: "our greatest misery is the fact that we have to ask", they say....
- (3) An Anyuak King f.e. is not praised because of his kindness etc. but because he is "arrogant, brutal, pitiless" etc., only these qualities making the people feel secure.
- (4) Note that the ashes with which the Nilotes often cover their body are always extremely clean - not "dirty" at all.