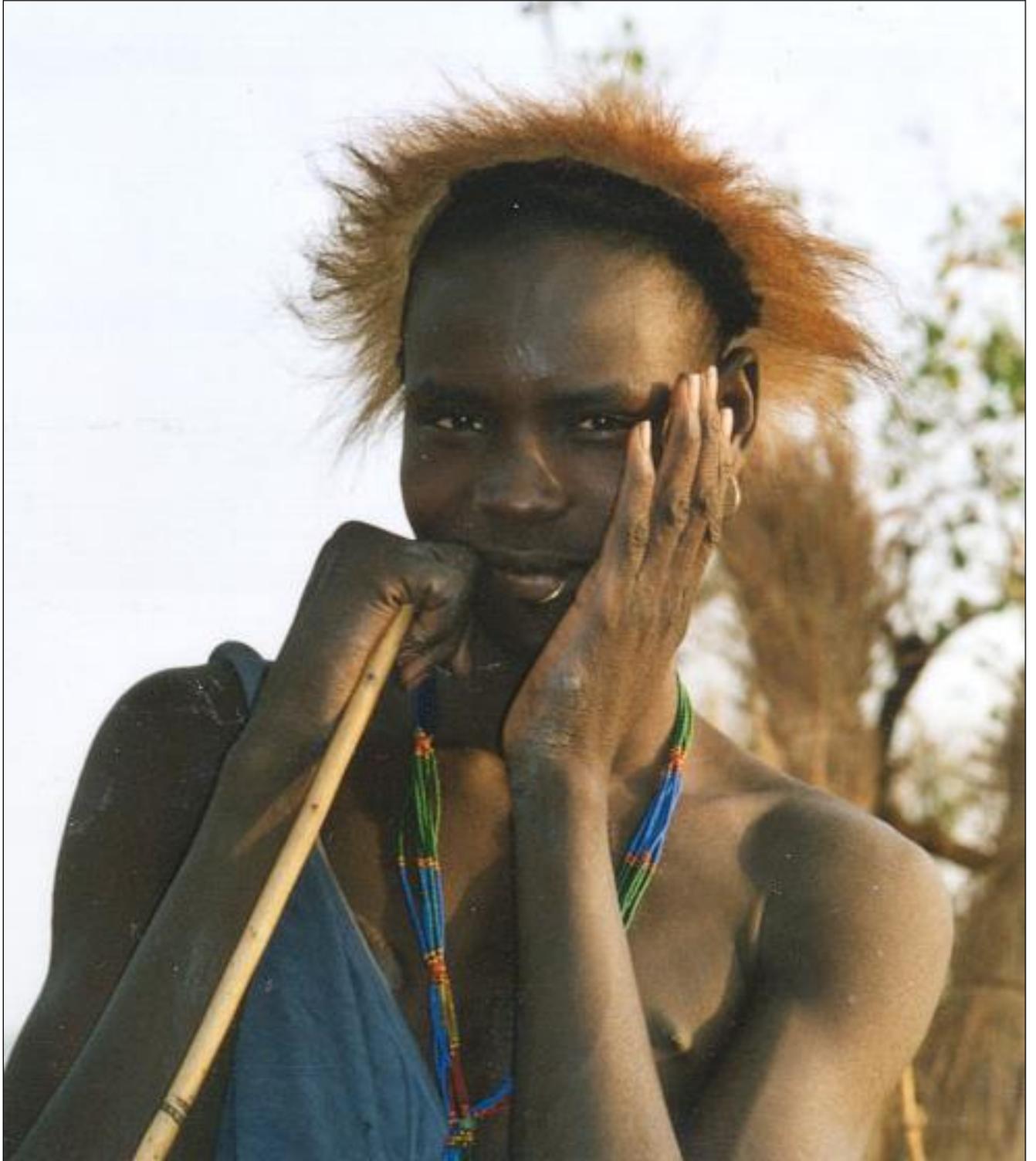


Change in sexual Behaviour

*Today, our old men shake their heads
and groan at our ways...*

(AZANDE)



Before and after the independence from the British colonial power, the Southern Sudan was a so-called 'closed area', accessible to foreigners only with a special permit given by the British or the Khartoum government. The isolation of the Southern part of the Sudan from the rest of the country was done under the pretext of preserving the people's cultural identity; this policy of a 'separate development' had been initiated by the British for their own reasons and was maintained by the different governments which came to rule the country after independence. The policy had many terrible consequences for the people in the South who hardly enjoyed any support: lack of infrastructure (roads, schools, medical facilities) made any development practically impossible and kept all economic activities in the Northern part of the country. Economic activities in the South were limited to bigger agglomerations and consisted in the running (by Northerners, Greeks etc.) of tiny shops. The Southern Sudan gained in economic importance only during the last quarter of the past century, when petrol was discovered and when the Jonglei-channel was expected to bring much wealth (water) to the North. It is worthwhile noticing that since the discovery of petrol, the idea of the South becoming "the food-basket of the whole world" has been completely forgotten.

Looking back on a century of frustrations, suffering and anger, one has to blame both the British and the Northern government for not having brought any kind of development to the South. But in reality, *the people of the North-Sudan became equally victims of this policy of separation*, because they had been made to believe that the people in the South were of an essentially different and inferior human kind, unwilling to and unable for any development. This physical and mental separation deprived the Northerners of any practical possibility to understand and to know the people of the South – and to understand their own African origins! Where interest, sympathy and pride would have been the most natural attitudes, complacent disdain and unfair arrogance came to govern the behaviour at least of those Northern politicians who assumed control over the economic and military power. The chance to understand the own cultural identity was thus badly missed. Instead of progress, wealth, beauty and the triumph of strong common human values, a series of uprisings and civil wars came to disrupt the potential harmony between the many cultures of the Sudan.¹ Bloody military and emotional encounters eventually broke the country in general and old cultural values in particular literally into pieces.

The people in the Sudan are used to move on foot. Means of transport have always been very rare, good roads almost not existing; and of course, there was practically no traffic in the air either (Wau, Malakal and Juba excepted). The more affordable transport by river-boat on the Nile (and occasionally on the Sobat) was used by small traders and people living in Khartoum travelling home. The Southern Sudan was thus not only politically a 'closed area' but even physically of a difficult, at different times of the year (during the rainy season) even of an impossible access: it was therefore not really amazing that nobody would show any interest for visiting a country which once was described by travellers as a "*God-accursed wilderness, an empty limbo of torment for ever and ever*"², "*a desolation of desolations, an infernal region, a howling waste of weed, mosquitoes, flies and fever*"³. If there were thus hardly any movements from outside into the Sudan (governmental centres excepted), the inhabitants of the regions in the South nevertheless often crossed the borderlines which separated them from other tribes, from the

¹ The civil war between the North and the South makes people forget that 'the North' is itself only a 'unity' in what concerns religion, not in an ethnic sense.

² G.W.Steevens, a war-correspondent of General Kitchener

³ Ewart Grogan, the first man who walked from Cairo to the Cap.

North and even from other countries (such as Ethiopia, Libya, the Congo, Uganda and Kenya); while some of these people were traders, transporting goods from one place to another, many were searching education and employment in the North. Of course, all these people would return home and would carry with them – besides of radios, broken sunglasses and audio-recorders - foreign cultural values and new habits. Such movements would not really break the isolation of the people living in the remote areas of the South, they would not bring any development and therefore could not be a threat to traditional values, and yet they would – unconsciously - transport cultural messages and thus indirectly have some impact on the people's mind. Of course, there was no 'cultural revolution' possible and not even desired, and yet especially young people would start to dream of a better and more independent life: 'education' became soon the magic word which was to capture the mind of all young Southerners, who would now accept any type of suffering and humiliation for reaching this goal. If most of our interlocutors had to complete their information on the traditional cultural set-up by the remark "*nowadays things have changed*", it is mainly due to the consequences of education and the extensive travelling related to it.

The wars broke up the inner boundaries of the country, constantly forcing people to move from one place to another: soldiers, wounded combatants, refugees, displaced people or persons trying to escape to more peaceful places in the world, they all came to make completely new personal experiences and to intermingle with foreign people. Cultural identities got shaken up, interrupted or broken down, and a good number of cultural values got lost on the way through unknown territories: forced by circumstances or voluntarily accepted because of unawareness, people started to adopt new types of behaviour, often forgetting about their former education. In particular the *people staying in big agglomerations such as towns or refugee-camps* gained a kind of moral independence, especially where close relatives are absent and when the young people are out of their families' control; lack of money⁴ may force people to accept certain kinds of behaviour which they perhaps do not really approve themselves. *Soldiers* are, last but not least because of their uniform and guns, always inclined to believe that they live in a sphere of their own where old social rules would not apply anymore. Enjoying their apparent superiority to the civic population, they get easily tempted to reach their aims by using their military authority or even physical force. The discipline required during military activities, the physical and mental stress related to fighting, feelings of loneliness and physical hardship all call for compensation whenever there is an occasion: alcohol, occasional contacts with prostitutes and possibly other sexual diversions are often the only moments where young people away from their family can find some moments of pleasure and relief.

If the civil war has forced many people to run for their life, to take refuge in camps or to move to different places outside of the Southern Sudan, there were also – and this for the very first time in history – a great number of movements *into* the Sudan. There are different reasons for this rapid change in the field of communication:

- the war requires a good infrastructure with roads allowing rapid transport of soldiers and weapons: rapid *improvement of existing and opening of new roads* were the response to these needs. These roads are of course also used by traders and individual travellers. The *train* reaching the regions of Northern Bahr-el-Ghazal from the North is equally transporting soldiers and civilians from other parts of the country into the South.

⁴ Probably also loneliness and social isolation, as an individual or as a group.

- the new *oil-fields* in the South caused the influx of a great number of people coming from the North, Sudanese nationals, soldiers as well as many foreign workers (Canadians, Malaysians, Swedes, Chinese etc.).

These roads (from Southern Kordofan) and river-ways (through the Nile-corridor) are also used by the civilian population.

- the war brought in a great number of *relief-workers* who reached practically all parts of the Southern Sudan, including the most remote areas. To this category of persons belong *foreigners* in charge of the relief-operations, journalists and pilots but also a lot of Africans (from Uganda, Kenya and elsewhere) who work as drivers or help the foreigners in the implementation of their programs. Many Sudanese assist the foreigners and travel with them in and out of the country.

While all these people would carry along their own cultural messages, the aid-agencies would have a very direct impact on the people's attitudes, taking influence even on more practical aspects of life.

Naturally, all these people may also bring in their own habits and perhaps their own diseases, they may have their own understanding of moral values and may even offend the people's sensitivities. The risk that sexually transmitted diseases in general and the HIV/Aids virus in particular are imported from outside (from outside the country, from outside the own region or from outside the own village) is very high indeed. Considering the common people's unawareness of the risk of infection, considering their negative attitudes towards the use of condoms and, last but not least, considering the fact that the relief-workers reach even the most remote, hidden and isolated places in the Sudan, this intercultural exchange in sexual matters may well have disastrous consequences.

If many of the new patterns of behaviour are directly linked to the extraordinary circumstances of war with very particular living conditions for almost everybody may disappear again and give way to former criteria of social conduct, the very experience of a different kind of life will remain and have a lasting impact on the people: the formerly so strong and almost absolute values which used to hold a community together will be questioned and confronted with new ideas: it will not be possible for the people to forget the experiences made during the war nor the knowledge acquired when on he move and abroad, and it will be impossible to impose old constraint on people who had enjoyed their liberties, especially the liberty concerning sexual contacts. The war has lasted too long for being ever forgotten, it has produced fundamental changes in the conduct of the people and has indeed shaken up both the people's self-understanding and their conception of the world. The Southern Sudan has enjoyed, since independence, only ten years of a fragile peace, the present war itself lasting already for twenty years: there is a whole generation of war which has learned its lessons of social and moral conduct both at home and abroad and which - once back home - will not be willing to obey ancient rules. In one way or another, all children in the Sudan are war-children, if grown up in refugee-camps, as child-soldiers or if still living at home: it is a generation brought up in a world full of guns and unrest, in a world where pleasures are rare; even though the war may have spared certain places and villages, the absence of young people has badly affected social life in general and cultural activities in particular. One can wonder how the 'children', once returning home and starting their own family life, will fit into old structures and what kind of values they will transmit to their own children.

Change in cultural values and in social conduct is of course not necessarily a bad thing, well on the contrary, it can open the way to development and allow people to adapt to the conditions of

‘modern’ life⁵. Change, however, should not mean disruption and destruction but continuation towards a world of new dimensions, it should happen under conditions of social control and individual self-control.⁶ When asked about the most important feature of *Atuot* culture, one of my interlocutors replied significantly: “*Compliance with cultural values!*”. One can only wish that the new generation in the Southern Sudan will be able to adapt to the new conditions of life while still preserving these fundamental cultural values. While it can be assumed that, in what regards sexuality, the door to more freedom of choice has definitively been opened, it is to be hoped that the new ‘liberties’ acquired by young men and girls will not remain restricted to the sexual domain only but make the people conscious of their new responsibilities.

This paper has been conceived as a compilation of information obtained from a number of Sudanese interlocutors, and we are lucky to be in possession of some reflections regarding the change in sexual behaviour of the *Azande*. When appreciating *Dr. David Sahatini’s* analyse, we should keep in mind that he speaks of a culture which is of a very easy access to other countries and thus a centre of many different cultural values and that its present capital, Yambio, is a crowded place where many cultures intermingle and where, for strategic reasons, the army plays a significant role. The conclusions may therefore not be of a general value but are probably holding true for all popular places where many cultures intermingle, refugee-camps or towns (“*Narus is a big sex-market*”, as our *Toposa* friend had told us). In such places, it is also possible to watch *video*-films, some of them showing very obscene scenes in sometimes surrealistic details: as nobody in the Southern Sudan could ever have dreamed of seeing such amazing things, this type of videos seem to be of great interest to the young (and perhaps even the older!) people; if they really have an impact of the people’s sexual behaviour is of course not sure, even though some may want to try out what they never knew it could be done...⁷

Like some of the comments uttered by other Sudanese friends (namely our *Toposa* informant who notices, in what regards his people, “*a total loss of cultural values*” etc.), this statement may reflect the view of someone who is rooted in his own culture for decenniums and may notices all changes – especially those in the sexual domain – with suspicion and fear for the worst. His observations and remarks are nevertheless of great pertinence and circumspection⁸.

⁵ Changes which have occurred concern the acceptance of, for example, boreholes, vaccination of children and cattle or school-education (at least for boys); boys and girls can nowadays more openly mixed than it was previously the case. Some of the changes had to occur on pressure from outside and are, because they concern the people’s understanding of their cultural identity, not yet accepted everywhere: such ‘identification-marks’ are, for example, the ‘tribal markings’, the removal of the lower teeth, the mouth-plates of the *Suri* etc. People are also forced to wear cloth and generally do not move naked in public anymore: this change of habit has not contributed to an improvement of personal hygiene. Some people’s habit of raiding is difficult to change...

⁶ This paper did not refer to influences exercised by foreign cultures and by the people from North Sudan: the custom of circumcision in Western Ekuatoria or in the Northern Bhar-el-Ghazal was, for example, the result of such foreign influence. *Adwok Nyaba:18* stresses that, for the Shilluk people “*the sharp increase in cases of incest and marriages to blood relative, hitherto a taboo in the Chollo society, reported in towns and villages in the north, is a manifestation of social disintegration. This comes as a result of aculturation to the European and Arab social and religious norms and values*”.

⁷ The existence of these video-films caused some problems when I enquired about sexual habits of the people: both in Yambio and in the refugee-camp at Kakuma I was told by people that though they did themselves not practise ‘it’ they knew that ‘other people’ would do ‘this’ and ‘that’... Eventually I came to believe that they were actually talking about what they had seen in those films, not in real life.

⁸ Paper by Dr. David Sahatini from Yambio, distributed at the Cultural workshop in Lokichokio in 1993: “A Sex Revolution in Zande Culture?”; we quote from the section entitled “Indicators of Sex Revolution in Zande Culture”, (p.4) and “Decay and/or Growth?” (p.5).

“Love-making is a major Zande interest, from one point of view or another, almost an obsession it may appear to some. That in part is the product of increasing freedom. Today recreational sex, whether inside or outside marriage, is the rule rather than the exception. ‘Swinging’ or free sex has become a somewhat popular pastime for many single, divorced, widowed and married people. It has become particularly a popular sport among the young. The emergence of women in all walks of life and culture has made more numerous contacts between men and women a part and parcel of daily activity. Zande mania for new ways, which they embrace immediately⁹, has brought their morals very low.

Today our old men shake their heads and groan at our ways. The old authority of the elder over his family and the obligations towards the clan and in-laws are no longer what they were. From the age of fifteen onwards a boy can marry and build a home of his own. He can earn money for himself and does not have to depend on parents for things. Beyond mere advice a parent has no influence over his son’s marriage. He chooses his girl(s) and only informs his parents for courtesy of his choice. The parents of daughters have a tottering authority over the choice of husbands for their girls. A strong-willed girl will marry whomsoever she likes. The decision now rests with the young girl and boy. When they have an understanding between them the law backs them and parents must accept their decision with good grace. The unmarried youth suffers and misses little. He can fend for himself. The girls may stay with their parents until they are married, and today a girl must have as many as five husbands before she finally settles with the sixth, if ever she does settle.

Parents may extract exorbitant fines in the courts from lusty young men if they catch them with their daughters but young people seem to be able to outwit their parents these days. Exorbitant fines have not served as effective deterrents. Other alternatives are to be studied. The rigid rules, the custom and the punishments that were a check on both boys and girls have given way to apathy and easy-going. The young men who stay in the villages have a growing difficulty in securing wives for themselves; the girls’ drift to the towns to seek better means of living either by marrying employees of all sorts or living loosely.

Unfaithfulness is rife as the old forms of punishment for it have been replaced by ‘progressive’ ones meted out only for men. Division of bride-wealth among brothers is not so important now that a young man can earn money and does not have to depend on his sister’s bride-wealth for his marriage. Besides marriages break up more often than before. So nobody is enthusiastic about money which you spend today and is demanded back tomorrow.

Decay and/or growth?

To many, perhaps to most Azande, these developments can only be described as revolutionary. Many do not know just what to do about these latest developments. The younger suffer too much of the confusing signals. Increasing numbers of adults as well, who apparently had accepted the responsibilities of marriage and family, are deflected from lives of purpose and commitment.

.....

In the traditional Zande society primary sex functioned, as it were, under a double bind: economy and production. The family served as the basic unit of economic ownership and production. Sexual behaviour was closely regulated. These functional realities anchored sexual behaviour deeply in the wider moral fabric of the society. Today, the productive economy for the most part has been extracted from the family system, and the necessary link between sex act and reproduction has been separated. Sex and sexuality have become self-validating ends. Sex for its own sake, divorced from its moral and social matrix, is not new, as witness “the world’ oldest profession”, prostitution. But prostitution always remained in some degree quarantined from sexuality otherwise. What appears to be new in Zande society is the alarming and pervasive pursuit of sex activity for its own sake by the very young, the young and the middle and the old without interpersonal commitment. The emergence of sex for its own sake in all ages in Zande society has serious adverse implications on marriage as institution and marital relationships.

⁹ Statement which could be compared to my remarks concerning video-films...

Today marriage among the Azande may be described as mere sum of two partners, a partnership that may be disbanded when it no longer serves the egoistic and hedonistic ends.”

In his conclusion, *Dr. Sahatini* admits that “*given the sensational nature of many new phenomena and the attention they receive, our perceptions may well be distorted. We know too little about the ways in which ‘conventional’ norms not only persist but are being renewed or reconstituted in succeeding generations. It may look as though older norms have collapsed more rapidly than new ones have grown, but the real sexual revolution still lies in the future.*”

As mentioned above, such severe views on the ‘new’ attitudes and morals of young people may not be appreciated by the younger age-groups. It must be stressed, however, that David Sahatini’s observations of the sexual behaviour in bigger agglomerations are actually shared by all our informants, including those belonging to the youngest generation.

If the situation described above is not only a personal perception but a reality, it would be a real worry only for those who want old marriage-systems last forever: if the present situation seems to be chaotic rather than revolutionary, it will not survive the present times of unrest and absence of social control of the individuals. People will have to return to their community, find their place within the existing social structures and assume their responsibilities as husbands, fathers and members of society: there is no other way than to change the present behaviour with a more conscious and possibly more moral approach to sexuality. What is certain, however, is a development towards more individual rights in what regards marriage and towards more respect for women as bearing elements of a communities’ public life.

If, in our opinion, we do need to be afraid of future cultural change in marriage-habits, we must worry very much about the possible consequences of the people’s (young but also older ones!) *present* behaviour which is - in the context of sexual diseases and infections like HIV/Aids - obviously a *behaviour involving great risks*. Information on the terrible consequences of certain types of behaviour rather than purely moral considerations may contribute to greater circumspection in what concerns the people’s sexual activities.

We should not conclude this chapter without reminding that the social structures of other communities are not yet as disrupted as they are apparently in *Zande* (and *Toposa*) culture, even though sexual freedom is in most regions increasing (while the parents’ power – at least in what concerns marriage – is waning). However, remoteness does not prevent HIV/Aids to reach, and because less attention will probably be given to these far-distant places, the people living there may even be even more at risk than those who are in town and who are at least somehow aware of the danger. Any campaign on HIV/Aids should therefore reach up to even minor villages of remote areas where people are still ignorant of the threat on their life.

