

# INTRODUCTION TO TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO SICKNESS AND HEALING IN THE SOUTHERN SUDAN

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## INTRODUCTION

*"Our people must come to understand that the modern trend is to differentiate sickness...!!"*

*(Nyon Darok, Ganyliel)*

*"The nature of sickness is the whole system of existential forces and the events of the physical world which are not controlled by man"*

*(Milkidre Ulum Amis, Lafon)*

*"They do not recognize organic causes for sickness."*

*(Dr. Riek Gai)*

*"To someone with faith nothing can happen, to someone without faith, everything can happen"*

*(Nuer)*

Any approach to the sphere of sickness and healing, traditional or modern, has to take into account the *spiritual* dimensions of a process which affects both the physical and psychological well-being of a person: sickness is one of the moments in existence where normal life gets suddenly and brutally interrupted, where the human being discovers his vulnerability and his existential loneliness and where he gets aware of his very own mortality.

Modern medicine has reduced many if not most of the diseases to a purely medical problem which can be solved if only the appropriate medicines or the necessary technical equipment are available. Modern knowledge of sickness and disease of course does not ignore the more metaphysical aspects of sickness and death but it has decided to restrict itself to the purely physical (occasionally psychological) sphere of a health-problem and keep away from the metaphysical sphere which is considered to belong to religion rather than to medicine.

The main-difference between traditional and modern approaches to sickness and healing lies in the *definition* of a health-problem: *modern medicine concentrates on the human body while traditional medicine rather concentrates on forces outside of the human person which came to disturb his physical well-being.*

To get a deep and unbiased understanding of traditional approaches to sickness and healing, it is less important to look at the different "methods" of healing than to learn about the people's conception of the origin and the causes of a disease. Without such "background-information", one can easily be misled in one's conclusions. How could one possibly understand, for example, a treatment in which a patient is tied up and severely slashed until he loses consciousness if one does not know that the people in fact are not slashing the patient but are beating the sickness out of the body, as if it was a foreign matter, a kind of virus to be killed...

When looking and analyzing different traditional ways of medical treatment, one can easily get confused, and the many explanations about spirits, Gods, ancestors, sorcerers or curses as cause to a health-problem can only increase the feeling of being in a magical sphere rather than in a medical field.

I may give the impression of diverting into spheres which precisely have nothing to do with medical matters, but I think it may facilitate our understanding of traditional approaches to sickness and healing when first looking at fundamental *similarities* before considering existing differences.

*Similarities in the understanding of sickness between modern and traditional approaches*

are found in the *metaphysical sphere*, in the sphere of uncertainties, ignorance and speculations, the sphere of fear, anxieties and, possibly, hope. This sphere is not human or at least not physical, belongs to death rather than to earthly existence. But while death is a definite interruption of normal life, sickness is - in any case - a temporary one: sickness is an interruption of normal life exactly as it is death on another, more definite level, and it primarily leads to similar questions, questions which are not merely of a physical but more essentially of a spiritual nature. Death can be the consequence of a known illness, a disease or an accident, but because it is in any case the final passage of a human being from an earthly existence to a purely spiritual form of life, exclusively physical explanations are not really convincing anybody; what people want to know are the real, spiritual reasons behind the merely superficial, physical changes in health and visible appearance. It is a vital part in human nature to ask for the reasons of a happening and to inquire about the future.

The following stages in the discernment of sickness and death are probably part of all human nature, though changes may occur during periods of "scientific enlightenment":

1) First of all, we find that *the world is in order*. We are well, we are not sick and we are not (conscious of) dying. *To be in good health is the state of normality*. In consequence, to fall sick let alone to die is *not* normal.

This basic belief in of the "essential goodness of the world" is one of the main-keys to the understanding of the Sudanese concept of existence. Indeed, for the Sudanese *God has created the world perfect* and there can't be anything wrong in it. Everything bad must come from somewhere else (not from God) and roots in humanity, i.e. in the relationship between the humans themselves, between the dead and the living ones, between the humans and malicious people or spirits, between the humans and nature, etc. *"All diseases are man-made"*, a Sudanese explains, and so is death. There is only one "good" death which is to die "young and in fighting" - because such death is well-known and can be revenged. Old people are of course expected to die because they have somehow already grown into the sphere of spirituality (and are feared because of this), but all other death is treacherous, coward and brutal, killing even innocent children and good people without any consideration of guilt or merits. Disease and death interrupt the normal, traditional harmony on earth, they are consequences of "mistakes" or "misconduct" of the people: such a belief is explained by many myths all over the world where one is told that *Death was introduced at a later stage*, after creation, and usually because of a "mistake" committed by the humans.

What is relevant for the perception of the origin and the nature of diseases by the Sudanese is this mentioned original goodness of the whole sphere of the earth, including *water* which is naturally *pure* and thus *of course* free of any badness.

2) It happens that the initial, happy state of health is interrupted or even ended: somebody falls sick, someone dies. What was normal is not there anymore... "Something" must have happened, "something" must have come to interrupt the harmonious relationship between the people and their physical or spiritual environment. What? From where did it come? *"Our people do not know from where the diseases*

*come from*", a Sudanese explains, "*they realize sickness only once it has come*". Such an attitude is characteristic not only for the Sudanese but probably for all human beings: nobody wants to imagine that happiness, good health and indeed life could come to a painful end.

3) As soon as one realizes one's failing health, one starts to think, to ask questions and to complain about one's fate. "What has happened?", "From where does this sickness come?" or "Why is it my child to suffer?" may be the questions... If the disease is a common and familiar one, a remedy known to be efficacious may be at hand; otherwise one may have to go and see a doctor to seek medical advice. This medical advice will vary according to the doctor's medical capacities and his practical experience, but his analysis and prescriptions will in any case - like everywhere! - depend entirely on the availability of drugs and medical equipment.

4) There is perhaps not much sense in comparing modern medicine to traditional ways of healing. However, before condemning traditional ways of healing, we may keep in mind two things: one is that not only the Sudanese are *deeply worried* (and sometimes angered) when they fall ill or approach death but that people living in developed areas share the same fear of the unknown and wonder about the inner causes to illness (hence the psychological importance of *locating and naming* a disease); the other is *the importance of beliefs* even in modern societies where the availability of medicines and hospital-services did not replace "traditional beliefs" (or "superstition") but merely pushed them back into the private sphere of the individuals; the great number of "new" religions or the return to rigid fundamental values in the second half of this century reflects this need of a "life-assurance" which is not of a scientific nature.

4) *Modern medicine* has the scientific means to analyze a specific disease, to prescribe the appropriate treatment and to take measures to prevent certain types of illness from arising or from returning. Though modern medicine is extremely successful in many regards, it is yet still in progress, looking for new insights in the nature of the different old and new diseases. Modern medicine is constantly reminded of its limits (cancer or aids are examples for desperate and still unsuccessful research-work) and remains aware of the fact that it can only push the limits ahead without ever abolishing them.

Like modern medicine, *traditional medicine* is also trying to get a deep insight in an illness, to find appropriate means to cure it and to take measure to prevent the disease from coming, from proceeding or from returning. But *unlike* modern medicine, traditional medicine has not the technical and material means to fight diseases and is left on its own: it is therefore to treat medical cases by purely local means and to give emphasis to the psychological needs of patients who are excluded from any access to the facilities offered by modern medicine and who in consequence are in desperate need of hope and *any* kind of help.

Because of ecological circumstances (isolation) and lack of development, the traditional approaches to sickness and healing must be *elementary*. Though many of the treatments prescribed by the local doctors may not correspond to scientific medical knowledge and though the necessary awareness of sources to illness and disease is often lacking (and therefore part of the problem), there are other precautions taken by the Sudanese which are forgotten and neglected by modern medicine which is more concerned by physical problems than by the psychological comfort of the people.

In the following, I shall concentrate

- a) on the general approaches to sickness and healing
- b) on the causes of disease
- c) on prevention
- d) on traditional doctors, and
- e) on the treatment of diseases (with examples from the sphere of "water borne diseases")

## I. GENERAL APPROACHES TO SICKNESS AND HEALING

The many people of the Southern Sudan differ in origin, language and culture. But "when it comes to sickness", a Sudanese explains, "there are not so many differences in approach". Indeed, most parts of the Southern Sudan are very remote from the few centres and did not benefit from any educational or medical development; basically, they were left alone with their problems of survival, and the few contacts with foreigners or "compatriots" from the North were of a hostile nature. At places where health-care and medical services were introduced, lack of medicines, lack of trained personal and lack of medical information made it hard for the concerned people to "believe" in the usefulness of modern medicine. Because a nurse or a doctor without medicines or tools is quite useless, the services offered by local healers continued to be popular, often presenting the only means to recover - at least spiritually - from a disease. The fact that modern medicine has been introduced without having the practical/technical, personal and material means remains one of the greatest hinder for convincing people that "modern medicine is right" while traditional beliefs are wrong.

The attitudes of the Sudanese towards all existential forces is, as already mentioned, fundamentally positive. "There is nothing bad on earth", people believe, and they praise the Creator for having given the human beings all they need: water, food, shelter and protection.

*It is this faith in the generosity and essential goodness of existence which allows the Sudanese to overcome all forms of hardship, to keep their courage and their mental strength to fight for survival and to lead a life in dignity in a world which seemingly was not made for the humans.* However, if the world has been created perfect, its human population sometimes fails to respect the laws which keep existence in harmony and thus destroys the basic stability of creation. By firmly maintaining that "*all diseases are man-made*", the Sudanese try to limit all existential problems to the sphere of the humans, thereby preserving their faith in the fundamental goodness of the world as well as their confidence that the perfect order of creation, if interrupted or broken by misfortune, disease or death, can be restored, if only appropriate measures are taken against the trouble-makers and peace is made with the hostile forces.

The beliefs of the Sudanese are complicated in appearance: there is one supreme spiritual entity which is above the earth (in the sky) and above good and evil, so far away from earthly existence that it cannot be approached by the human beings except *through mediators*, spiritual forces of all kind which can help the living creatures but which also can harass or punish them. The confusion between the "supreme Spirit" (God) and these "lower spirits" (minor Gods) arises because people normally use the same term for both forms (God), and, especially, because the Sudanese, when

addressing "God", talk in negative and often aggressive terms and thus give the impression that they are blaming the "supreme God" for mischief. It is rare that people praise God (though they sometimes may acknowledge a happy surprise by saying "I was helped by God" or simply "God exists"), and this quite logically because peace and happiness are supposed to be, as explained above, the state of normality which of course does not need special attention. When people talk to the highest spiritual Being (God), they do not even ask it for help: they simply ask it to restore the broken order and to re-establish the original harmony.

The Supreme Spiritual Being (God) is very distant and naturally not of a human essence. Somehow one could say that it is above the problems on earth, appearing there only in its continuous activity as Creator.

But people, quite naturally, are less concerned by that very distant Supreme Being which is known to put all its positive energy into existence than by the problems which are more concrete (though not always directly discernible either) and which affect them on earth on an almost daily level. We shall see that these problems may have very different roots, but generally we can say that all problems are considered to be of a spiritual rather than of a physical nature. As it will be seen later on, there is a differentiation of the possible spiritual causes of a happening, but there is no differentiation on the physical level: whatever happens to a person is due not to an organic failure but to a violation of the commonly accepted code of conduct, to a rupture of relationship or more simply to malicious interference from known or unknown matters. This attitude (which does not seem to be "scientific") must be explained by the multitude of events which strike a people being completely self-reliant not only in their economical means of subsistence but especially in the ecological and medical field: diseases of the most mysterious kind, epidemics ravaging a whole village and pests decimating the cattle-herds could possibly find medical explanations, but how to explain the constant killing of small, innocent children, accidents, on land or on water, drought or floods, conflagrations and death striking "out of the blue", sometimes concentrating on specific families only? In a world which is supposed to have been created perfect, there is much room left for speculations about the possible causes to happenings which are not easily understandable to the human mind. The traditional doctors are able to find the deep causes to these misfortunes and to prescribe measures for solving the problem where the more scientific knowledge remains helpless and has to refer to religious beliefs.

*To fully understand the traditional approaches to sickness and all other problems striking the human person, one must therefore always keep in mind that the root of any conflict, physical or spiritual, lies in a broken or damaged relationship between people (including their ancestors) and between the people and other forms of living creatures (including the sphere of the earth with its rivers, lakes, mountains and animals).*

To restore a broken relationship, it is of course not sufficient to treat the affected human body "superficially" i.e. by medical means; to get full recovery, however, one has also to eliminate the deeper, existential causes to the problem. A sickness thus has got both physical and spiritual dimensions: this is why the treatment of a disease (for example) by a prescription of roots, barks or medicinal herbs usually has to be completed by an act of spiritual purification through which not only the body but also the mind of the patient can recover and find peace.

## II. BELIEFS REGARDING THE DIFFERENT CAUSES OF A DISEASE.

Because the Sudanese "do not recognize organic causes to sickness" but believe that diseases (and even accidents) have got *spiritual roots*, they have to look for the deep causes to an illness, death-case or misfortune in the immaterial sphere of spiritual matters. This sphere is not simple because comprising many different elements which, because of their immaterial nature, are difficult to see let alone to understand: it includes transcendental forces like spirits or God, ancestors, devils, evil forces working through human beings or spiritual matters of normal human life such as guilt, bad consciousness or anger.

In any discussion about traditional approaches to sickness and healing it is necessary to remain conscious of the extreme complexity of that whole sphere of illness and death: traditional healing is not simplifying medical questions and presenting stereotype answers to physical problems but is carefully analyzing and differentiating a disease, a death-case or any other type of misfortune.

While traditional medicine may not always have the appropriate medicine at hand, its emphasis of the psychological aspect of any successful medical treatment should not be undervalued.

The people in the Southern Sudan differ in details rather than in the general approach. Some tribes seem to be more concerned by witchcraft than by the interference in life by ancestors, other people fear more than anything the effects of a curse and some people link sickness more generally to the sphere of transparency.

The following enumeration of possible causes to disease is therefore not necessarily reflecting the pre-eminence of a particular "reason" for a disease.

1) Most people suspect a concrete reason behind the outbreak of a disease, the happening of an accident etc., and this probably because only a concrete indication allows to take precise counter-measures. Nevertheless, *the mere sphere of transparency*, i.e. the *sky*, can also be the source of disease, and especially of epidemics which cannot be explained by the effects of a curse. The sky with its winds and weathers, with lightening and thunders is a sphere of instability and uncertainty, - and it is definitely not human: one better covers oneself with a more earthly matter, such as a roof, a wig, feathers, or one surrounds oneself with colours (beads), products from the wilderness (ivory-rings, skins), with human sound (songs) and marks important objects with the signs of humanity (scarification, tools, pots etc.). *Birds* are perfect indicators for "what is going on in the sphere of the invisible" and can therefore indicate if there is a "virus" (a "carrier of disease") in the air or what else is to happen in the future. Birds thus are helping the (Anyuak) doctor to analyze a problem and can also foretell the future, especially in times of fighting or other troubles. When certain birds are in the air, a mother would quickly call her small children into the house (the Bateleur bird for example bringing tetanus). The birds are not bad but merely signs of what is "in the air" (a little bit like in Europe the sudden appearance of certain birds indicates snow, swallows rain etc.); only a few animals (such as the Owl or the African Hoopoe) are considered to be bad because thought to be bewitching people by night.

2) When the Nilotes "pray", they call on an Entity which is called "*Jwok*" (Luo) or "*Jok*" (Dinka), blaming it to have broken an originally created world-order and forcing it to leave the human body which it has taken in possession and to return to the place where it belongs to... The aggressiveness of speech when addressing "the highest spiritual Being" (God) may give the impression that people do not fully appreciate the role of the Creator, but - as already mentioned - this is not really true as the Nilotes at least associate bad things only indirectly to God, - through his many representatives which mediate between the humans and the highest spiritual Being. When talking about "God", we therefore have to keep in mind that the "God" people speak to in times of sorrow and anger is not the God "which has created a great number of local Gods and Spirits (one for the Christians, one for the Muslims, some for the Indians and the Asians etc.)" but just one of its manifestations on earth and which are not above everything as the supreme Being but have a direct impact on the happenings on earth and which are experienced by the people in human terms as "bad" or - exceptionally - as "harmless".

To these "*local spirits*" belong Gods residing in rivers, near lakes, in mountains, around huge trees or at any other prominent place. They are best avoided or have to be met with respect and generosity. If this basic rule is not followed, people may drown in the water, fall from a tree, get lost or be punished in any other dramatic way. Accidents and death-cases often are explained by the anger expressed by these spirits when disturbed without reason and without respect.

Spirits also reside in the earth, in trees, the water or in animals.

Many people (clans, village) acknowledge a particular, personal relationship with certain animals, do not kill, harm or eat them and do not need to fear them. Lions, giraffes, scorpions, snakes, certain fishes or even birds belong to these categories of animals. The Giraffe is a more generally respected animal, believed (because of its vicinity to the sky) by some people as being possessed by spiritual powers - somebody who has killed a giraffe can die a sudden death "without any reason". Certain people (like the Anyuak king or a Dinka clan) turn after their human life into animals or snakes.

The people of Southern Sudan understand that all elements in the world are animated matters: the river, the earth and the sky are all of a spiritual essence which need, like all living things, care, love and respectful consideration. Such a belief results in what we now would call "ecological awareness", a particularly conscious type of relationship with nature. Nothing and nobody should be disturbed without a very good reason: no big tree should be cut without special permission, no forest should be used for collecting firewood without first "clearing" it from possible danger and the earth should not be used for exploitation without its prior consent.

If the human person fails to acknowledge respect for the whole sphere of life, he will encounter problems of all kinds, there may drought or floods, accidents or devastation because of war, etc.: "*Piny rac*", "the earth (world) is bad" will be the result of a sober analysis of events due to lack of good relationship, either with people or with nature.

3) Spirits of a particular kind are the *ancestors*. They are particularly important for many Nilotes people who believe that a person continues to exist after his death - though not in a speculative paradise but on earth... Ancestors therefore accompany the living ones and can influence their well-being in many ways. The relationship between



the living and their ancestors is double: on one side, the living can be punished by angry ancestors because of a mistake (though more usually they are protected and helped by them) or people can fall sick because of a mistake formerly committed by an ancestor.

4) Many diseases are caused by *witchcraft*. "Though the Zande may be aware of the fact that malaria is transmitted by mosquitoes", we are explained, "the fundamental question will remain: Who is the one who has sent the mosquito?!" Witches are said to be simply jealous people wishing to harm or even to kill other people for no other reason than their pleasure. Some people (like the Anyuak) associate witches with *Jwok* and call them "*ci-jwok*" (wife of God), implying that human beings can do the dirty jobs of evil spirits. The Anyuak pretend to be able to identify witches by their uncompleted (circumcised) sexual organs but would refrain to take any action against such persons. Other tribes seem to be more ignorant about the physical appearance of witches, but everybody in the Southern Sudan knows the existence of witchcraft and fears it a lot.

Sorcerers normally perform through their eye (called accordingly "evil eye") but make also use of different methods (poisoning of water or food, rubbing people's back, robbing of hair etc.) for bringing sickness, impotence or other unpleasant physical problems to the people they dislike.

5) *Cursing* is an extremely widespread activity in the Southern Sudan, to such an extent that one should really speak of a "disease". A curse is a very delicate and complicated matter: consisting out of (secret) language, it is purely spiritual, and being animated by a strong desire of justice, it is extremely powerful. Most Sudanese believe that "most people are killed through cursing", well aware of the link between a mistake, the feeling of guilt and the punishment to be expected. Curse is basically a moral disease because it is the direct consequence of some unsettled wrongdoing. Whoever has no practical or legal means to gain justice will recur to cursing, his or her only way of coming to peace. Because a curse works in the field of inter-human relationship, it is practically endless: whoever feels cursed asks himself about the possible origin of the curse, and as he is conscious of his own wrongdoing he will easily discover the source and retaliate by cursing it. Curses strike not only individuals but whole families, clans, villages, dogs or live-stock, and it continues to work after the cursing person's death, out of his grave.

6) *Sexual relationship* can also cause different types of diseases, but the diseases (such as the spindle-bone-disease, diarrhoea etc.) do not affect the responsible person but his/her infant, cattle, crops etc. There exist a number of rules for pregnant women and mother's, the most general of them being the interdiction of having sexual intercourse while still weaning a child (what is supposed to be done during two years). Adultery can also be found to be the cause of an illness.

7) *Dreams* can also bring misfortune if no measures are taken. There are "bad dreams" (for example about having eaten food which is thought to be unfit for human consumption, as the one of man-eating animals) and there are dreams about Spirits who visit a person to rob him/her of a beloved person/child. The consequences of such bad dreams can be prevented by certain herbs, certain beads of a particular color, etc.

### III. PRECAUTIONARY AND PREVENTIVE MEASURES

Having a long experience with all sickness and death, people have come to understand the many possible causes to sickness and death. Naturally, they try to protect themselves from the contact with spiritual matters, to avoid problems of relationship with human beings, animals and nature and to prevent carrier of diseases from coming or from proceeding. The following list of precautionary measures to be taken clearly shows the people's highly developed consciousness of the linkage between an illness, an accident and any other misfortune or catastrophe (including warfare) and a cause or a "reason" which lies outside of a person's physical body - and which consequently could be avoided or prevented from coming: *the Sudanese are not ignorant about cause and effect, and they are eager to eliminate the causes as to avoid their effects.*

One may distinguish preventive measures in the sphere of pure spirituality (Gods and spirits), in the sphere of nature/animals and in the more human/social sphere.

#### 1) *Protection of the Human Person*

Most people want to make sure that their child is a "real" human being and not infected at birth by some spiritual matter. New born babies are therefore thoroughly checked by relatives, circumcised babies or twins (and the child born after them) sometimes (all according to tribal customs) getting special "treatment".

As the protection of growing life (which is not yet completely human) is crucial, a baby or infant is given utmost care. Certain people may not be allowed to come near (for example pregnant women), talking loud near a newborn is strictly forbidden, crying children are immediately consoled, weaning mothers are not supposed to have sexual intercourse, etc. Often, mothers had dreams some time before giving birth, the dreams informing her about possible dangers (claims on the child by certain spirits etc.), or she had sad experiences with previous children: in such - very frequent - cases, the child is getting special spiritual protection, perhaps by getting a particular name (the one of the Spirit claiming the child) or/and by wearing charms out of wood, beads etc.

It is not very clear if the extraction of the six lower teeth by the Nilotes has anything to do with the prevention of disease, but it is doubtless a (conscious) mark of these people: people who do not have their teeth extracted are, in any case, considered to be "no real human beings" (what amounts to say that they are probably not "normal" and perhaps evil-doers).

The human body and mind are protected by

- *charms* (which may also help to cure an already affected person.
- *beads, colours, rings, metals, bangles, headgear etc.* which surround a person and/ or work through radiation (colours) to the outside and if necessary to the inside (beads of different colours work in case of headache, swollen limbs etc.)
- *by keeping it clean...* Especially ghosts or small devils are thought to be dirty and disgusting. Cleanliness of body is said to reflect one's mentality, and bad things are

believed to enter more easily in dirty bodies (and minds!). This cleanliness is also observed within the homestead, with utensils etc.

## 2) *Isolation*

For the Sudanese, sickness is basically a state of impurity which is the consequence of a negative contact with the outside world. Because most of the diseases are the result of a personal (spoiled) relationship, sick people are normally not isolated. However, patients who are considered to be very weak and infected with a particularly dangerous "virus", may be brought to a place outside of the village. Some people also isolate newborn children for the time before the navel has dried up. People with leprosy are also isolated together with their family outside of the village.

## 3) *Blessings*

Language can hurt and even kill, but it can also protect. Speeches before a departure for a long journey or before a war are meant to protect a beloved person ("Nothing will happen on your way, nothing, nothing, nothing, you will be safe and healthy..." etc.).

Spittle is also a means of protection: it is the extension of one's most intimate personality on another person and known to give him/her strength, courage and luck.

## 4) *Rules of conduct*

Bad behaviour has consequences. That is why people are particularly careful when in contact with elderly persons and young vulnerable children.

Stinginess is inviting for troubles. At least certain things should never be refused (such as water and tobacco). Food is a strong symbol for relationship, reason why people (the Nilotes, in any case) always drop some quantity of food, water or beer to the ground as a gift to their ancestors or as a reference to certain local spirits when in their territory.

Food is a delicate because possibly poisonous matter: one should avoid to eat "bad" food - and even if different tribes, clans or villages have very different ideas of what is edible or not. The expected consequences of the breaking of such a taboo are equally bad.

The rules regarding the time of pregnancy and a weaning mother's sexual activities have been mentioned above; by following these moral and social prescriptions (which in fact are meant to protect the infant), a mother prevents from being accused of having brought sickness to her child.

## 5) *Avoidance*

Most people in the Southern Sudan are suspicious when it comes to foreign matters or persons and are very cautious when they have to meet with unknown beings or when asked to reveal their identity: they prefer to remain incognito and to avoid troubles by giving wrong names (or calling themselves simply "human being") and by keeping some prudent distance. This attitude holds true for all people (in-laws), animals and place to be known as potentially dangerous.

Contact with people who have suffered of disease or other bad events is also avoided in certain cases. the fear of getting infected from people affected by leprosy seems to be a universal, almost instinctive fear; more interesting is the habit of the Nilotes to avoid stepping on the footprints of persons who are sick, starving (!) or who just had a miscarriage.

#### 6) *Protection of the living sphere (of people and cattle)*

A homestead and a cattle-byre are centres of life and therefore in special and permanent need of protection. This is achieved through demarcation (vertically and horizontally) of the whole sphere by surrounding it by very elaborate fences and beautiful wooden posts. Often, a tree or a special wooden post is erected in order to signal human awareness to undesired visitors and to chase them away. Some people (such as the Toposa) stop such evil spirits on their way by tying a rope (cut out of the skin of a goat which has been sacrificed for this purpose) across the path.

People strongly believe that nature helps its inhabitants if only it is given the necessary care and respect. *People therefore feel protected, strong and healthy in their places.* When traveling to other regions, they feel less secure and are consequently even more cautious than normally. When an Anyuak has to settle in a new place, he carries along some quantity of soil from his original homeland, mixes it with water and then drinks it every day for his protection; progressively he then adds some soil of the new place until - after some months - the proportion slowly changes and finally only new soil is left: this is the moment when a person has been absorbed by the new place and can feel as safe, protected and "at home" as before.

A good relationship with nature is, as described earlier, vital for the existence of the humans. If people want to live in peace and enjoy the gifts of nature, they have to cooperate and to consider *the existential rights of all living creatures* and things. Respect of nature is therefore an important means of avoiding misfortunes in the village.

#### **IV. TRADITIONAL SPECIALISTS IN ANALYZING SICKNESS AND IN HEALING ("WITCH-DOCTORS", MAGICIANS ETC.)**

A traditional doctor is healing rather than curing (though one does not always exclude the other!). The consequences of accidents or fighting are not brought to the "witch-doctor" but to some more common people who simply "know" how, for example, to immobilize broken limbs, to heal wounds etc. As accidents happen quite frequently (head-wounds are common), there are quite a number of experienced people everywhere having a good knowledge in helping the victims to recover.

Not all diseases require the advice or the intervention of a "doctor". Minor diseases are often neglected (knowing that they are not killing) or treated in private, either by conjuring talk, group-"therapy", by consuming generally known medicinal herbs or by various other means known to be successful (such as blood-letting, drinking/not drinking of liquids, eating/not eating certain food, etc.). Sometimes, simple "spiritual leaders" (head of a clan, a village etc.) can perform a ceremony in presence of his people and find the cause to the illness through *confession*: when the people's talk is accepted by God, a bull (standing nearby) will urinate... (if it doesn't even after a very lengthy talk, the meeting will be postponed and repeated). Other people use a small animal or a hen as indicator of the "cause" of an illness striking a member of a group: when killed and falling (or, in the case of the hen, running), it will "show" the "guilty" person who will then make confessions and promise to compensate for his mistake (by making a sacrifice to the ancestors or the Gods).

When talking about traditional doctors, the term of "witch-doctor" or "magician" is usually used. It is misleading in the sense that it implies a professional disqualification of the person what is only sometimes correct. There are good and bad doctors everywhere, and not all of them have the same knowledge, the same experience and the same interest in the recovery of a patient. It is certainly true that native doctors work in their own interest (they normally have to be given something - such as a hen, a goat etc. - by the patients), but their existence is absolutely vital for people who have no other (more purely medical) means of getting a treatment. For a patient, it is not so important what kind of treatment he or she is getting (patients in the modern world do not know more about the medicines they are given, they just have to *believe* in their efficiency), the most important thing is that they *are* getting a treatment and that they have their own good reasons to believe that the treatment will help them to recover. Before destroying the magical part in traditional healing by more modern/scientific arguments, one should first make sure that there are the medical means for giving the patients a proper and "medically correct" treatment!

There is always the underlying suspicion that "witch-doctors" are merely charlatans and quacks who are deceiving the people. This is to underestimate the intelligence of the people and is certainly not correct: to become a "witch-doctor", a lot of qualities are required, qualities which consist partly out of (medical, psychological) knowledge and partly out of experience, sensibility and intuition; not everybody can become a doctor, and normally the status (and knowledge) of a doctor is passed over from one generation to another.

The social position of the doctors is modest and rather undifferentiated from common people, though this varies from tribe to tribe (this remark doesn't concern the "spiritual leaders" or "prophets" of the Nuer-tribe who sometimes have a very considerable power on their people).

There are not just "witch-doctors" able to treat any kind of disease, but there are different degrees of competence and skill, and there exist specialists for different types of disease. The people know who is able to perform what "operation" and are sometimes walking very far distances to see the doctor who has the reputation to be successful in his analyses and his treatment. This is why the introduction of modern medicine (and clinics or hospitals) would encounter no objection from any side, provided only they are able to convince the people (by showing results!) that modern medicine is better than the traditional one.

Amongst the "witch-doctors", there are "generalists" having a lot of experience in many fields. In many cases, they prepare potions made out of *medicinal herbs, roots, barks, leaves, fruits and other natural products (such as tobacco)*, usually completing the treatment by prescribing more purely spiritual medicines (such as charms etc.). Other doctors are at home in the spiritual sphere (where for example a curse or a witch is active) and prescribe in consequence a more exclusively magical treatment (using trees, charms, ropes etc.). There are doctors who "operate" a patient and extract (through suction) foreign objects out of the body, thereby convincing the patient that the cause to his pains has been removed. It is this doctor who is considered to be "cheating" and who has a bad reputation amongst modern Sudanese doctors. However, one should notice that these "operations" are completely harmless (while the consumption of bitter barks or roots are often not!) and in any case a relief to a patient looking desperately for help. Once a proper medical treatment will be possible, these types of doctors may disappear by themselves, but at the moment and in present "hopeless" circumstances, their contribution to the psychological well-being of the people should not be undervalued. Finally, there are a number of people known to be "good" in dealing with certain problems (such as snake-bites, burning the soles of the feet etc.).

The "witch-doctors" have their own ways to discover the nature and the cause of a disease. Shaking gourds full of seeds is one amongst many methods. Interesting is the Anyuak doctor (a woman, like most doctors) who is casting tiny leather-sandals to "discover" and to find out the nature of a disease; her analysis can only be done in the morning and the evening, when birds (the "shadows" of the movements existing in the sphere of spirituality) are in the air: at noon when the sky is empty, she can't see anything...

The following example from the *Toposa* tribe (where the doctors are, like amongst the Anyuak, almost exclusively of a female sex) may illustrate just one method: When there is a sickness, the witch doctor will use leaves of trees for catching the disease (such as diarrhoea). Once she got the disease she will bury it underground. While doing this, nobody should see or touch her, otherwise the disease she had buried will enter the body of the person who watched her while she was performing her work. Then, the doctor will order a ram from the sick person and slaughter it. Thereafter, she will take the waste products from the animal's stomach and smear them all over the patient's body. The sick person will then be given some herbs (for example the root of the Nyeronyit-Nyejim-trees) which have to be soaked in water and taken with some light porridge after filtering (not boiling)...

## V. TREATMENT

While there are very little differences in the general understanding of sickness and its spiritual causes, there are different methods of healing the human body (and mind). Naturally, this depends first of all on the disease and the findings of the doctor, but then also on the cultural habits of the particular tribes: a people without or with only few cattle would of course attach less importance to these animals but make use of the more important symbols of their way of living.

The following list of various methods used for chasing an illness is in no way exhaustive. One should keep in mind that in case of a more serious illness) two methods (a physical one and a spiritual one) are combined.

Patients are cured

1) By **conjuring** the sickness, i.e. by simple **powerful talk** (also called prayers): it is a kind of "beating the sickness out of the body by language": "How can you dare to enter this body?!! Get out of here, out, out, out!!!"... Language can also force the truth to come out of a person and make him confess the mistake which has caused the troubles.

2) By **physical force**: slashing the disease until it leaves the body in peace. This treatment is generally used for mad persons: they are tied up and given 50 lashes a day (Note that it is the disease which is beaten, not the patient.), pepper is put in their eyes etc.

3) By **killing a deadly matter** (*curse*) by throwing it into the fire (which is understood as a form of absolute spirituality, annihilating everything).

*Existential curses* (fire, crocodiles, accidental killing of another person etc.) can also be eliminated in this way, though curses are usually too powerful to be killed by anything.

4) By a **public revolt** and *the collective chasing of the evil* (in case of big epidemics), often at the sight of the new moon) through noise, physical force etc. New fires are to be made in the traditional way for protecting homesteads.

5) By **spiritual means** such as

- a) the sacrifices of animals
- b) keeping animals (of a certain colour) on behalf of a God.
- c) blessing
- d) healing with ancestral water (beads in water)
- e) erection of trees, tying ropes, digging down things etc.
- f) ropes, colours (around legs) or charms

6) By **pseudo-medical/magical means**

- a) such as the extraction of foreign objects out of the body through an "operation" (suction)
- b) extraction of snake-poison etc.
- c) by stopping the actions of a disease (preventing it from proceeding)

7) By **practical knowledge of medicinal herbs etc. or skill** such as

- a) by splinting (with sticks, barks etc.)
- b) by blood-letting (by cutting the skin, with a horn etc.)

- c) in case of head-injuries (by blood-letting)
- d) with herbs
- e) with roots
- f) withgrasses
- g) with barks of trees

#### 8) By *private treatment*

in case of lighter and well-known health-problems such as headache (bloodletting), fever, eye-pains (leaves of the lemon-tree), guinea-worm (removal by rolling it on a piece of straw), paining limbs (beads or ropes) etc. Women are also well aware of the spiritual needs of children and know which spiritual power can be appeased in which manner.

#### 9) *Treatment in hospitals.*

There are only very few hospitals in the Southern Sudan, and even where they exist they are not properly equipped and lack just about everything.

Poor health-services reinforce traditional beliefs. It is therefore not amazing that many people do not think that they can be treated there, and experience unfortunately confirms this too often. Nevertheless, people do try to be cured in hospitals and start to trust modern medicine. Eli Magok, an Agar Dinka, says that "Traditional healers (herbalists, witches, wizards and *spiritual leaders* (called *banybiith*) are still consulted although this is scaling down every year. Modern doctors are taking the upper hand in consultancy nowadays, as a result of education, modernization and *religionization* (!!!)"

Nevertheless, people still differentiate between "hospital-diseases" and "Non-hospital-diseases", the latter being those who cannot be cured by mere physical means but need spiritual attention. Success or failure of medical treatment in the hospitals decides about the people's future attitude (one big obstacle being the people's traditional expectation that a patient can be cured *at once* or at least within a few days). There is need for the promotion of hygiene (especially in camps), of health-education and for the training of local medical staff; the integration of traditional healers (especially of the herbalists amongst them) would certainly help to combine modern medicine with local, traditional knowledge and beliefs.

#### 10) *Just as an example: The understanding and the treatment of some water borne diseases*

The following description of traditional approaches to sickness and healing by the many peoples of the Southern Sudan is meant to illustrate the different medical approaches on one side and to show the striking similarities in the understanding (or not-understanding) of the physical (hygienic, sanitary) causes of these diseases.

If I mention only the local names of plants, roots, trees etc. without giving the proper translation, it is simply because I do not know the proper botanic term (nor would my informants) and wouldn't dare to give wrong ones... As this paper does not



really wants to provide specifically medical information but rather intends to discuss the understanding, this lacunae is not really significant. Nevertheless, I regret to disappoint all those who would like to get more precise and more detailed information about the type of the plants and the effects of the treatment.

***Examples for the traditional understanding and treatment of certain  
WATER BORNE DISEASES  
amongst some peoples of the Southern Sudan.***

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collected by Kwacakworo<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>INFORMANTS were the Dinka Dr. Kuol Deng Kuol from Aweil (S.Kordofan), people of Paguer (Gok, Bor-Dinka , the *Rek-Dinka* sub-section Awan at Akon (10 women), the *Agar- Section of Aliamtoc*, Mr. Eli Magok Manyol of Pacong-Village, Mr.Yol Mayardit from the Abiem-sect.ion/Liangkarol-sub-section. (Thiet), Mr. Elijah Magot Anyang from the Bor-Dinka of Yom-Chiir), the Nuer Dr. Riek Gai from Akobo, Mr. Simon Luk Tem from, Waat, from Gon and Mour sections and from the Gajok (Jikany), patients from the Nuer Lou -section (Dak), the Anyuak Mr. Anade Othow from Akobo, the Päre Mr. Milkidre Ulum Amis, Mr.Anthony Ubur Gwidio, Mr.Darious Ukech Kayo, the Bari Dr. Pius Subek and Mr. Francis Yuggu Loro Suwak, the Didinga Mr.Philip Lokonyen Agustino (Kapoeta), the Latuho Mr.Simon Salvalore Odua (student) and Mr.Salva Oler, the Lopit Mr.James Odihe Philip, the Lokoya Mr.Severino Lahure Akileo Lado and the Toposa Mr.Philip Nariko (Paringa, Narus section). With thanks

from a number of Sudanese informants.  
Spring 1994

The understanding of diseases which are caused by water does not differ from the understanding of any other disease. Sometimes, people explain an illness by a specific event as for example the consumption of a certain type of "bad" food, by eating too much after a period of starvation, by worms, by too much sun etc., but other reasons (such as sexual intercourse, a quarrel about wealth or an angry snake living in the water etc.) show that in all types of diseases a human mistake (moral behaviour, lack of precaution etc.) is the deep and "real" cause to the problem. To get rid of the problem, people make use of the healing power found in roots, barks or medicinal herbs, but such "medicines" are always part of a wider, more spiritual treatment. In cases where people say that "nothing can be done" (such as in the case of typhoid fever etc.), the spiritual approach to the health-problem is at least able to give some psychological relief and new hope to the suffering patient as well as to his/her parents and relatives.

### DIARRHOEA:

Dr. Kuol Deng Kuol says that "*Diarrhoea is the big killer of the Southern Sudan: it's the AIDS of Africa*", stressing the fact that it can last over a long period of time and results in a severe state of malnutrition which is often fatal for infants and children. Particularly dangerous is the traditional belief that people with loose motion should only be given very little water to drink, - a fact which of course increases dehydration and contributes to a worsening of the patient's condition.

The *Dinka* and the *Nuer* have a similar approach, especially in their belief that diarrhoea originates in a mother's illicit sexual activities while she is still weaning her child (this period lasts 2 years).

Other explanations are

- eating too much or eating much after starvation (*Rek Dinka*)
- an infant may have suckled milk from a mother who *has been working in the sun for a long time* so that her milk has reached an unacceptable level of high temperature. *That's why mothers are advised to wash their breasts before suckling* the baby (after having worked in the heat).
- sometimes they think that some mothers have "bad" i.e. watery milk, and that's why the baby always has diarrhoea.
- Babies who have started eating solid food are - in case of diarrhoea - thought to have eaten food which has been contaminated, *especially by flies*. Flies are known to sit on dirt and shit and to move then to the food, thereby causing dysentery or diarrhoea.
- Worms are also believed to be the cause of stomach upset
- it may also be caused by an angry snake living in the water
- a curse originating in a quarrel about wealth may also be a reason for diarrhoea.

The *treatment* is done

- by traditional doctors: with *herbs and roots*
- in case of "*Weth*" (state of malnutrition): through *sacrifices*.
- While somebody has diarrhoea, he/she is *prevented from drinking too much water*, as this is thought to stimulate the motions.
- the diarrhoea diagnosed by the Nuer doctors as "*Thiang*" is cured by old ladies chewing certain herbs.

The Dinka call it "*Jac*" ("*Jany-pur*" is "watery diarrhoea").

The *Anyuak* call it "*oyo*" and believe that diarrhoea comes from eating bad food. They cure it with roots from the *Otit-*, *Opat-*, *Amatakura-* or *Puth-* trees which are washed, mixed with water and drunk after one night by the patient.

Like the *Anyuak*, the *Päri* treat it with herbs (called *Urini-muur*) and roots.

The *Bari* believe it to be a disease "inside and outside of the intestinal tract". It is treated with herbs from weedy plants and trees such as "*Ode*" or "*Diköri ti melo*" (a weedy plant with bright leaves or stem, strong smell and a better taste; both leaves and roots are used), "*Renden*" (Twiggy plant, green leaves, bitter taste; it is found in rocky places. Its roots are used for the treatment), "*Lukwöki*" (a typical tree with bright leaves, sticky liquid sap; bark or roots are used for treatment which is 'somehow better'), "*Duku-Tima*" (a typical tree with green leaves; both roots and bark are used), "*Purudi*" and "*Löngi*" (typical thorny tree with small round eatable fruits and a bitter taste; both bark and roots are used).

The *Toposa* call diarrhoea "*Nyakook*" and think it is caused by a witch or a bad person.

The *Latuho* use local medicines such as leaves, herbs, plants tree-barks and many types of special roots: for example, "*Angirit*" is a plant of a big size with large leaves, its roots being also used; "*Alukohi*" and "*Elangi*" are big trees which have a bark used as medicine, while "*Olongirit*" is a plant with small leaves with a root stopping diarrhoea. "*Ebanihi*" is recommended by another informant as "the best one": it is a plant's leaves which one chews and swallows the bitter liquid

The *Lopit* use bitter roots of trees to stop it, such as "*Ilangii*", "*Ngirik*", "*Buhoi*" etc.

### **DYSENTERY**

Generally, dysentery is not differentiated from diarrhoea though people of course observe the mucus or the blood which is found in the stool.

The *Dinka* call diarrhoea with mucus and blood "*Janje-riem*". The cause is not known.

Nevertheless, bloody diarrhoea or dysentery is considered to be *serious* and may require a sacrifice to God (called "*rawa*", mostly, or others).

The treatment is similar to the one for diarrhoea, the patients being prevented from drinking too much water and being given soft food.

The *Anyuak* associate it with *flies*. *Roots* are used for stopping the stomach from running with blood. During the treatment, people eat only light and little food.

The *Päri* treat it with certain herbs called "Adilo" and "Akatukunyang", by roots such as "Adilo" or simply by warming one's hands on the fire and putting it on the child's stomach.

The *Bari* think that this is an intestinal disease originating in a small wound in the intestines which has been caused by small worms called "kuru" which come from bad food etc. They call diarrhea and dysentery by a same name: "monyet". "Monyet ti rima" is bloody dysentery, "monyet ti Palam" mucus in dysentery. Treatment is done in the traditional way by herbs such as "Kiyir" (bitter tasting roots or bark of the Mahogany-tree), "Löngi", "Lukwöki", "Löngi" etc.

The *Toposa* call it "Nyakook ka Nyakook" and consider it be caused by bad persons who bewitch water, food or the person himself. They cure it by using herbs, or they do not do anything.

The *Latuho* think that it is transmitted by flies or *eating with an infected person*, or caused by worms and general lack of hygiene. They treat it with the bark of the "Elangi" and the "Alukohi"-trees, the roots of "Anima" and other herbs and plants. Another informant says that the Latuho believe that "it is commonly caused by roundworms" because they know how to remove roundworms from the colon..

The *Lopit* stop it with bitter plants and roots, such as from the "Lokieki", "Gogoi" or "Tagirir"-trees

### GUINEA WORM

All the people of the Southern Sudan seem to ignore the causes of Guinea-worm but know how to get "rid of it": by softly rolling the worm on a piece of straw, day after day until it is completely out.

The *Dinka* call it "*thin*". In some areas, it is very frequent, but in Abiey-area it is not found. The Dinka do not know from where it comes from nor how to treat it - though they know how to extract the worm from the body.

A Rek-Dinka explains that "it is a painful swelling at cultivation-season". The *Rek* Dinka seem to believe that "some nerves in the body have changed into worms, and that this is caused by God"...

The *Agar-Dinka* think that Guinea-worm is a "caprice of nature which breaks out once in a while..."; it is not connected to water or even Jok (Note that *scabies is considered to be of the same nature or category*).

In Anyuak-country, the Guinea-worm is not very frequent, but the *Anyuak* know how to extract it. Their relatives of Lafon, the *Päri* "encourage" the worm to come out by soaking the leg ulcers with cold water. Guinea-worm is called "Cew". It is found in the ankles, the legs and... ..the scrotum!

The *Bari* say that the worm is very common in the swampy areas; it is called "*mejeke*", the name of the worm being "*majaka*". It is treated by cold water and herbs. The herb is called "*Derkotong*" and looks like onion, of a bright green colour and with yellow bulbs: the bulb is crashed and smeared on the affected part of the body after a minor cutting. Every morning, the affected part is washed with cold water, that water being kept outside the house throughout the night for cooling. Sometimes, traditional operations are made by an expert or traditional surgeon. After the operation, some herbs are mixed with some bitter oil from "*Kuri-long*" and applied on the wound.

The *Toposa* call it "*Nyecou*" and "treat" it in the "normal" way.

The *Latuho* say that "its presence is shown by *blood coming out of the urine*" and that it is coming out of the ankles and other parts of the body. It is said to be caused by stagnant water *after rains* and water out of waterwheels. The treatment is done by soaking the legs in cold water to make it to come out quickly, to roll it on a stick etc.

### HEPATITIS

The *Dinka* call it "*toch*" and think that it comes from eating too much fat, from eating meat of the Hyena or the stomach of the Porcupine. Hepatitis and typhoid are those fatal diseases which are believed to affect people "*because the Gods are angry*".

The treatment is done with *barks and roots of trees*. Some of them are known by everybody, but other roots and barks are only given by specialists who sell the "medicine". People do not eat too much of it (which would be deadly), because the roots and barks are extremely bitter in taste; an overdoses would cause the destruction of the liver and kill the patient.

Hepatitis is a common disease amongst the *Anyuak* who call it "*ariu*". They treat it by using the roots of the "*Tuoro*"-plant which is put into a gourd full of water and left there for one night; the potion is to be drunk the next morning, the next evening and the following morning. The treatment is apparently very effective, but if it is not taken in the right dosage, it can also kill.

The *Päri* recognize the sickness by the patients yellow eyes and think it can be cured by eating the roots of Papaya. They relate that it affects often pregnant women.

The *Bari* call it "*Twanti-lo-Munyet*" but do not know any treatment except spiritual healing-methods.

The *Toposa* call it "*Lolibakonyen*". It is cured by witch doctors using herbs, animals, meat or other products, as for example Rock Rabbit ("*Nyadukai*") or "*Nyejim Nyesokon*" which are roots of trees.

The *Lopit* let the witch doctor treat it with herbs, as they think it is of a spiritual nature. Apparently, it is very frequent, "thousands and thousands of people died since the existence of our ancestors. It is believed that the main cause is oil"... (Note: it seems that our informant includes other diseases such as meningitis, cholera etc.)

The *Latuho* treat it with roots of different kinds (like "*Paulpaul*") or people "use the stomach of the rock-rabbit or the porcupine and use to drink the sitter substance". It's said that people with hepatitis should "not take sexuality with women during the illness". (Note that the informant says that hepatitis is "transmitted by mosquitoes" and develops in the liver").

### TYPHOID FEVER

Typhoid fever (and generally febrile conditions) are generally confounded with malaria and treated in a similar way.

The *Dinka* consider fever (e.g. typhoid fever and malaria) as being caused by *evil eyes* or *spirits* or *a curse by a witch*. Fever is called "*Juai*" in general, but when it comes to bewitchment it is called "*Weth*" (curse).

The *Anyuak* confound it with Malaria, and the *Päri* think that it comes from curses (because many people sick and to die at one time): witchcraft can cure it. Drinking hot liquids also helps...

The *Bari* mix it up with malaria. "*Diköri/Pode ti medlo*" and "*lega*" are herbs used for getting relief.

### MALARIA

The *Dinka* and the *Nuer* do not connect malaria with mosquitoes let alone with water but imagine "sometimes" that it is caused by cold... The *Rek Dinka* connect it to *hunger*, while the *Agar-Dinka* say it comes from the *cold and rainy conditions*.

They treat it with roots or the bark of the *Nyim*-tree.

The *Anyuak* are not aware that malaria is transmitted by mosquitoes (declaring that "*This is their home, they belong to this place, they are good*"), but they "cure" people suffering of mosquito-bites by *tying them for one night naked to a tree*, apparently using this method as a method of immunization (similar procedures are used by the Nilotes for people fearing snakes).

Unaware of its causes, the *Päri* treat malaria with traditional bitter herbs such as "*ulok*" or "*Utango*".

The *Toposa* think that malaria is caused by *God* or by *bad air*. For treatment, *the sick person is taken to a witch doctor who takes the patient to a certain tree which is bending down from the roots to the ground. She will make a fire and collect waste-products of animals and smear it all over the body of a sick person. She then will collect green leaves and put them on the fire and get a small skin from the cow; she will put the patient near to the fire and then she begins to wave the skin over the fire so that there is a lot of smoke over the sick person. After this, the sick person will be removed from near the fire. Then the doctor orders a ram or a goat to be killed and smears its waste-products over the patient, all over his body. Then the sick person is taken home...*"

The *Didinga* think that malaria is a *spiritual disease*, to be cured by the witch doctor. Typhoid is related to it as it shows similar symptoms...

### HYGIENE

There is general awareness of the importance of hygiene, but *lack of water* makes it sometimes difficult to separate "good" from "bad" waters. If only possible, people do not take their drinking water from a place where the cattle drink, bath and urinate (except of course in running rivers) - but the scarcity of water does not allow a separation of cattle and people in the dry season.

The apparent neglect of basic hygienic precautions is due to these natural living conditions rather than to a neglect or an ignorance of the importance of hygiene.

Western Equatoria excepted, pit-latrines are not known by the people and - considering the lack of sanitary equipment - perhaps not appropriate either (eminent danger of attracting flies etc.). Until better conditions are given, people could be advised to dig down their human waste-matters (what usually is not done) by simply using a hoe.

The *Dinka* wash and drink at a same place as do their cattle, but when using soap they wash outside of the river...

Water is not cooked, milk is boiled only for sick persons but otherwise taken unboiled (sour or fresh), but *the meat is always well-done (cooked)*, fresh or dried one.

"No Dinka cook or boil their water, except when it is cold or *for washing babies or old people*.

There is no purification of drinking water, no precautions are taken when bathing, people and animals wash at a same place, and flies are considered to be a "great nuisance" (*Rek Dinka* of Akon)

The *Rek Dinka* mention, nevertheless, the habit of *filtering muddy water with a piece of cloth* when drinking or leaving it in a pot for resting.

In case of well-water the water is given to the animals at a separate and somehow far away place to avoid contamination. *Flies* are known to be the cause of diarrhoea as well as of *eye-diseases*. *They are "a nuisance", and "they move around and cannot be controlled"...* Nevertheless, the Dinka like all tribes cover their food etc. as much as possible.

The *Nuer* considered themselves as very clean people with a certain sense of sanitation. They know how to clean things (the Lou Nuer say that they even know how to clean water) and generally keep their homesteads and cattle-places very clean.

The *Anyuak* are famous for their body-care and their beautiful homesteads. They are not only conscious of the general importance of cleanliness inside the homestead but also of food etc. They even "clean" the drinking water by putting certain plants into the water (what gives the water a completely transparent, pure appearance - though probably without purifying it in a scientific sense).

All the food is well cooked (and for a long time). Fresh milk is also cooked, but not the milk made sour by shaking. Drinking water is normally not cooked but kept in big earthen pots until the water has cooled down (and sediments can settle).

The Anyuak wash themselves at least once a day, except sick people who are cleaned with warm water.

There is of course *lack of soap* and the dirty clothes which replace nowadays the traditional clean nakedness are absolutely unhygienic and cause a lot of skin-diseases. Bark of trees can be used as soap, it softens the water...

The *Päri* have no awareness of the link between water and disease, though they keep things clean. "But they have no insect-killers", as one informant put it...

The *Päri* do wash at a same place as their animals.

The *Toposa* cook only meat, dried or fresh, but, as the informant put it, "they don't cook water, milk or flies..." (!)

The *Bari* drink out of the same water as their animals. They cook their meat but roast fresh meat when out of the village.

Some of the *Didinga* -informants talk about the "general cleanliness" while others acknowledge that in fact "they don't bother much". The land inhabited by the *Didinga* is high and apparently "there is no standing water". Flies are said to be few. They wash and drink at the same place as do their cattle. They cook their meat but they don't boil the milk. Meat is dried in the sun. Storage of food is said to be a problem.

The *Latuhö* and the *Lopit* do not purify drinking water, they wash and bath and drink at a same place as the cattle. Meat, dry or fresh, is cooked, but not

the milk or the water. Otherwise, the Latuho consider themselves to be very clean people.

## VI. NOTE ON TRADITIONAL HYGIENE

It is important to note that the people of the Southern Sudan in general have a very developed sense of hygiene. In the self-definition of the Nilotes, the notion of the "Human Person" is absolutely primordial (to such an extent that it is included in their tribal names!), "Human Person" suggesting an essential *purity* of being (in contrast to other, mainly the spiritual forms of existence).

In the understanding of the Sudanese, hygiene is, like everything else, fundamentally of a spiritual essence: it is not enough to be clean physically, one should also be clean in one's heart and mind: *inner, personal hygiene is crucial for remaining a true and pure Human Being*. The whole sphere of sickness is seen as an attempt to spoil the purity of the Human Person, and the procedures of healing are meant to restore this purity: to heal means to *clean* a person from a foreign body which has come to take possession of him or her (for various different reasons). This concept of linking disease with existential cleanliness (purity) is best - because publicly and in a dramatic way - expressed when a whole village (the example is from the Anyuak country) revolts against the presence of a killing disease (an epidemic) and "cleans" the air of the village by making noise (clapping hands, beating skins, shouting etc.), by extinguishing all fires and by then making new fires (in the traditional way) for a better protection: fire is the symbol of absolute purity, the only element "eating up" everything alike (including the air).

The Sudanese are strikingly clean people (though this may vary from tribe to tribe), the Nilotes arguing that a person's physical appearance reflects his mentality: dirty people and dirty food are equally disgusting! Everybody washes at least once and normally twice a day, even if long distances have to be covered to find some water. Special care is taken for old and sick people as well as for small children who may be washed with warm water. Women who have their monthly period always wash outside the river.

Whoever has lived in the Southern Sudan without being served by people (as foreigners usually are) knows how difficult it can be to maintain a daily hygiene because of lack of water; and sometimes the water available is almost too dirty to clean anything...

It is easy to criticize people for not following certain obvious rules of hygiene, it is more difficult (and in what concerns clean water presently almost impossible) to show them more *realistic* ways of preventing diseases caused by lack of hygiene. Considering the general lack of soap and other sanitary facilities, the extreme cleanliness of people, clothes, pots, eating-utensils, huts and homesteads is amazing and a strong indication for the people's consciousness of the importance of hygiene; one can believe that people - if encouraged - would easily accept changes in behaviour (for example to separate the drinking-places of the cattle from the bathing-sites of the people) if only this was practically possible.

The fact that people use to release themselves outside of the village (some people describe it as "to go for *nature's* call") may not be very hygienic, even though people go quite far distances; nevertheless, the making of "real" latrines may not everywhere be a more hygienic solution as badly made pit-latrines use to attract a lot of flies etc.



## VII. THE BEARING OF PAIN

Approaches to sickness differ not only from place to place, from people to people but even from individual to individual: there are people who easily give up their spirits and surrender to their disease without much resistance and there are people who fight the disease as if it was nothing but a physical aggressor, pushing it back or even defeating it; some people thus let their mind get filled up with thoughts about their failing health, always fearing the worst, while different people try to ignore or to neglect the disease and chase it away as if it was a foreign body. Such differences in attitudes towards sickness can be observed everywhere and are, to all appearance, not changing with education and knowledge.

There is no means of measuring pains, its intensity and its truthfulness, and it is difficult to make out where exactly it starts and where it ends. Pain takes place in the secrecy of a person, and what we learn about pain is only the interpretation of pain given by a person and not the crude physical reaction to a painful happening. To reveal pain is always to reveal one's ideology and the attitudes taken by society. One basic distinction in the Sudanese society is the distinction between members of the male and the female sex, particularly when it comes to expressing one's sorrow after a death-case: men have to bear pain in silence and with an obligatory courage, they should neither cry nor moan but suffer without showing any sign of emotion, - not even heroism! The woman, on the other hand, should consume her pain theatrically, has to translate her suffering into cries and moaning and to stun her pain by tears. In the drama of existence, the female's part is to express the mainly physical aspect while the male's part is apparently to concentrate on more "philosophical" aspects: women express sadness, the men show anger.

In the bearing of a pain caused by sickness or wounds, the difference between men and women is less striking, though the men show great self-control when it comes to major wounds but are much less heroic when they have only minor injuries (where the need of self-control seems to get forgotten). The suffering inflicted to young children (extraction of teeth, the cutting of tribal marks on the forehead or the more simple scarifications) may - amongst other things - also be meant to introduce children to the suffering of pain and especially to teach them self-control and courage. It is difficult to understand how the Sudanese manage to overcome their sometimes tremendous physical pain (caused by a disease, an accident, because of a fight etc.) and one wonders from where they are getting the mental force to resist such suffering. The answer is difficult to find, but one could guess that it is the great familiarity with treacherous diseases and cruel death, with deep sorrow and overwhelming pain as well as the general harsh living conditions which have made the people so resistant to smart and grief: if one wants to keep one's human dignity and survive in difficult, almost inhuman circumstances, one has probably no other choice than to be courageous and brave. Pain is an assault to a person's physical and spiritual integrity, and if one allows the pain to take possession of one's body and mind, one will lose all one's human qualities - and perhaps one's life.

Greater medical awareness (in the modern sense) can help to locate a disease and limit the suffering to a purely physical problem while medical ignorance rather seems to increase mental stress; however, this holds only true when there are means to

control or to defeat the disease but gets reversed when it is scientifically established that the treatment of a disease is hopeless. It may be that because Sudanese traditional approaches to sickness and death are fundamentally of a spiritual kind and not limited to the presence or the knowledge of a doctor (and the availability of medicines, operation-theaters etc.) their hope for recovery is not limited either: hope has no definite limits, unless one stops it by "scientific analysis"... And there is no bigger suffering and greater loss than to be left without hope.

## VIII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Sudanese believe that God has created the world *perfect*: in consequence, they cannot accept sickness and death as a "normal" interruption of human existence but explain it by the intervention of alien spiritual forces, dangerous virus', human mistakes, jealousy and thirst of revenge. Disease is generally considered to be the consequence of a broken relationship, with spiritual beings, ancestors or living human beings, with animals and the whole environment (earth, rivers, trees etc.). The only "good" because understandable death is the one occurring during fight, when the cause is known and the loss of life can be revenged by retaliating human force or legal means.

The Sudanese do not see any organic causes to sickness or death but explain them by the impact of spiritual forces. Local Spirits (Gods) and ancestors are the medium between the Human person and the Supreme Being ("God"), able to cause misfortune but if appeased, also ready to leave the body of the sick. Human evil forces are also carriers of sickness and death: they are witches or curses, the former acting out of jealousy and with a sadistic pleasure, the latter working in the legal field and seeking for ultimate revenge after having suffered (physically or spiritually) from another person's action.

Because sickness and death root in the spiritual, immaterial field, the only appropriate medical treatment is of a spiritual kind. Medicinal herbs etc. are generally used to enforce the treatment.

The Sudanese first look for the cause of misfortune (including accidents), then try to establish the relationship between the person and the cause and eventually search for the appropriate counter-measures. They are not only aware that sickness can be cured but also that sickness and death can be avoided if only appropriate *precautions* are taken. They have also an idea of *immunization* as children and adults can be shielded against certain diseases through special protective measures. The Sudanese are careful not to be *infected* by people having been affected by a diseases: by isolating weak or sick people, they both protect them and other people. Newborn babies, chronic patients or people affected by leprosy are isolated in this way. The avoiding of footsteps (of hungry, sick or unfortunate people) is one of the many precautionary measures taken by the people.

The Sudanese have a strong sense of *hygiene* which does not only apply to the physical sphere but also to the inner, spiritual part of existence. Environmental conditions (lack of clean water) make the keeping of hygiene difficult. The positive idea that "there is nothing bad in water" (or the earth in general) helps the people to endure and even to accept living conditions which often are far from being hygienic.

The Sudanese (and amongst them, especially the women) know to help themselves in a good number of current illnesses. There are also people experienced in fixing broken limbs or helping in case of other fractures.

The traditional doctors use to prescribe medicines found in nature (such as roots, leaves, medicinal herbs etc.) and have a considerable knowledge in the medical powers of plants, a knowledge which is only exceptionally shared with "non-professionals" i.e. common people. Medicines, like sacrifices, charms, beads, wooden posts etc. are part of a treatment which is essentially spiritual because expected to eliminate the invisible, spiritual causes of a disease. *All traditional "medical" treatment is a kind of peace-making, a protection and a cure at a same time.*

There are "witch-doctors" everywhere, but not all of them have the same knowledge nor reputation, and there are specialists for different problems. The "surgeons" amongst the witch doctors may be cunning artists rather than medical doctors, but yet they help a patient to overcome anxieties and stress. The help witch doctors provide in the purely *psychological* and *mental* field is significant and of vital importance for people who otherwise are helpless. Before serious researches are carried out, it is impossible to say how efficient or how dangerous medicinal herbs, barks etc. are; on the psychological level, they are in any case working because of the *bitterness* which seems to be a necessary common quality of all these natural medicines. When introducing modern medical knowledge into traditional societies, one is well advised to take profit of the knowledge of the native doctors, to share with them the achievements of modern medicine and to involve them in the projects of development: people may have more confidence in the doctors they know than in foreign magicians, and it may therefore be wise to make them cooperate in fighting a common enemy: disease, sickness and premature death.