

**OPERATION LIFE-LINE SUDAN**

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*ON BEHALF OF FOREIGN RELIEF-WORKERS  
IN THE SUDAN:*

**INTRODUCTORY NOTES AND REMARKS  
ON THE SOUTHERN SUDAN AND ITS PEOPLE**

*BY  
CONRADIN PERNER*

WITH AN OUTLINE OF  
GEOGRAPHICAL, CLIMATIC AND ECONOMIC  
CONDITIONS IN THE SOUTHERN SUDAN,  
A CHRONOLOGY OF SUDANESE HISTORY,  
MAPS AND A SUMMARY PRESENTATION OF  
A FEW NILOTIC TRIBES.

[Summaries from *Per Sjöholm*:  
"The River Lake Nilotes", Uppsala 1973]

Lokichokio, September 1993

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## Preliminary note:

The following notes are not meant to be of any scientific significance. They are nothing but remarks on different aspects of Nilotic thinking and behaviour, meant to introduce a foreign reader to the general *sphere* of existence in Southern

Sudan, to provide him with some information of a more personal type and to help him to find his own keys to a sometimes strange but always fascinating universe. The fact that my knowledge mainly stems from the Anyuak and generally the Nilotic population of Southern Sudan (while they are numerous other, equally important and interesting tribes) is not really important as I would simply like to open some spheres of general interest which can be found amongst other people as well. If foreigners want to be successful in their work, they have to acquire a minimum of knowledge about the people who are concerned by their presence; but one should be conscious of the fact that any knowledge of the other increases the knowledge of ourselves, and that by becoming aware of different types of behaviour, ways of thinking and means of survival we reach a better and more human understanding of ourselves: by helping people in need, we also help ourselves. Any *exchange* of human values will finally profit all people concerned.

### Introduction

*"A country so wide and vast that there seems to be no horizon, in a sky so near and so deep that there seems to be no beginning and no end: there, you feel that you are "living on earth in the sky", you can walk for days and weeks through empty land, aiming at the shadow of a tree which will never be; you can rest and look around to discover that the place where you are is the one where you have been for days or weeks ago. There is no space where to hide, no place where to disappear, to look back or to hope to reach further. Wherever you go, you are in the middle of nowhere, in the centre of your own existence, carrying the physical part of your shadow, immersed by water, dried by the sun. Time does not exist here, it does not count, it stays in the air, transgresses with the immobile rows of the clouds, moves with the sun and disappears with the brilliant constellations in the nightly sky. A river transports the light from morning to evening, dries up in one season, spills all over the place at other times, crocodiles waiting for darkness with open mouths. The dry season leaves you naked amongst the deep cracks in the soil, alone with your bundle full of thoughts and hopes; hyenas welcome your dreams with laughter. In the rainy season you are caught amongst 4 m tall walls of grass, surrounded by buffaloes and roaring lions, breathing the sticky air of wilderness. Snakes are your silent company. There is no issue, no way to escape, neither in the empty Savannah nor in the intensively green dense vegetation of the muddy swamps which cover the earth after the heavy rains of June and July. Only the thorns in your skin remind you that you are walking alive, that this is your blood and your sweat, that all this is reality and that you are in its centre. Your eyes are burning, fired.*

*But then, after long journeys of empty self-reflection you see the prey-birds moving in circles in the blue, and soon you enter a neat, narrow path which crosses large, proud durra-fields, you hear the noise of boys chasing birds from the crops, meet women carrying big shining waterpots on their head, tall men with spears on their shoulder. With dismay you look at the intense blue-ness of their slim bodies and discover the bright, soft light which emanates out of their skins and which transforms everything in you into a feeling of sensual pleasure and sudden consciousness of freedom. Peace takes possession of your mind, changing your heavy tiredness, you follow the smell of fire and finally reach those trees and their shades over there. You find people sitting on skins of antelopes, twisting ropes, smoking pipes. After a while, a girl offers you clean, cold water, then a few strings of strong tobacco. She brings you a neatly decorated waterpipe, puts a glowing peace of fire on its mouth. Now you are sure again of yourself, feel that you have reached your humanity, that you are in the middle of beautiful civilization. "How is your body?"*

*they say. But they don't ask you more questions. After a while, a young dog comes to smell on you. If you now spit on his head, he will understand that you want to be a friend."...*

Such could be an impression from wanderings through certain parts of Southern Sudan. Many strong memories hide behind words. When people ask me to tell them about Southern Sudan, I usually don't know what to answer. It seems so difficult to explain this country and their fascinating people. Yet, everybody who has ever walked some distance through Southern Sudan would be able to share such vague though strong intimate impressions which are more informative than any purely intellectual understanding.". This is because the Sudan in general and its Southern part in particular is not a country to be described let alone be understood *merely* through objective enumeration of geographical, ecological, social, political or historical "facts"; it is a *sphere of existence* which captures one's mind in a brutal, almost physical manner and which fills it with a sensual desire of sometimes metaphysical dimensions. It is a world full of contradictions, a country which leaves nobody indifferent. Some hate it, some love it, and many of those who say to hate it love it in fact so intensively that they always return... "*Whoever has tasted the water of the Nile shall always return*", a saying from the Northern Sudan predicts, suggesting that there is always a great part of unconsciousness and instinctive force in our decision-making.

Most of the foreigners who stayed for some time in the Sudan were deeply impressed by the climate and the landscape. General Gordon noted that "*No-one who has ever lived in the Sudan can escape the reflection what a useless possession is this land. Few men also can stand its fearful monotony and its deadly climate*". A war-correspondent of General Kitchener's army, G.W. Steevens, described the same feelings in more details: "*Nothing grows green*", he says about the dry season, "*For beasts it has tarantulas and scorpions and serpents, devouring white ants, and every loathsome bug that flies or crawls.... Overhead the pitiless furnace of the sun, under foot the never-easing treadmill of the sand, dust in the throat, tuneless singing in the ears, searing flame in the eye - the Sudan is a God-accursed wilderness, an empty limbo of torment for ever and ever...*". Ewart Grogan, the first man who walked from Cairo to the Cape, wrote about his time in the Southern Sudan: "*For God-forsaken, dry-sucked, fly-blown wilderness commend me to the Upper Nile; a desolation of desolation's, an infernal region, a howling waste of weed, mosquitoes, flies and fever... I have passed through it, and now have no fear of the here-after!*"...

But the 21 years old Sicilian *D'Antonio de Terranuova*, an agent of a slave- and ivory-dealer, went even further in his despair. In a long letter to his uncle in Sicily he described in details all the miseries he had seen and all the adventures he had survived while traveling along the Sobat up to Adongo-region (east of Pibor); at the end of his exhaustive letter, we can read the following sad sentence: "*Every evening, I pray to God to put my life to an end!*"...

Such descriptions of almost surrealistic scenarios, physical depression and real despair probably reflect the impressions and experiences of all foreigners. But then, why are the Nilotes pretending to "live in a paradise" and why many foreigners get so attracted and eventually even "obsessed" by this country? Definitely, there must be a secret power which captures the spirits of visitors and never allows them to escape its hidden attraction.

Personally, I sometimes wonder if the Sudan can really be described with some exactitude except in metaphysical or at least in poetical terms. Personally I have the feeling that the permanent tensions between the different forces of nature which exist everywhere and in particular inside the human being (such as the tension between life and death, society and loneliness, peace and war, light and shadow, the sky and the earth, density and emptiness, flooding and dryness, fertility and sterility, childhood and high age,

animals and humans, wilderness and civilization, human consciousness and the unfathomable forces of supernatural powers etc.) are getting in the Sudan a particularly strong and very human expression which makes us feel personally concerned and which forces us to think about our own meaning and own existence. Such feelings are an intolerable pressure on the spirits of some people while others take it as a challenge and a temptation to discover the self in others.

The fascination exercised by the Sudan on people, travelers or scientists, is reflected in a large number of books, some of which are of great scientific or photographic interest. My own understanding of the Sudan stems from the time I worked at the University of Khartoum, from my anthropological field-studies amongst the *Anyuak* (a relatively small Nilotic tribe living in the Southern Sudan and in Southwestern Ethiopia) and from my experiences as a delegate of the International Committee of the Red Cross (1989-1993) in Yirol, Ler and elsewhere. I do not pretend to "know" the Anyuak let alone their brothers the Dinka, Nuer or Shilluk, and I have never lived with the many non-Nilotic tribes living in Western Equatoria. Moreover, I always feel uneasy when asked to talk about other people; I have the impression that there is always a lot of pretension in comments on or "explanations" of other persons. I prefer to start with admitting my *ignorance* and by acknowledging that the few observations I could make do *of course* not hold true everywhere and for everybody. I shall not try to *explain* the people, their country or their history but shall more simply *introduce* different aspects and features of Nilotic culture to foreigners wishing to know more about the people they meet inside the Southern Sudan. It is my wish that the following remarks and comments may help these foreigners to get a more immediate and easy access to the country of Southern Sudan and to *enjoy* their stay in spite of all the horrors caused by the war or others, more natural calamities.

The following considerations are thus meant to facilitate the work of foreigners in the Southern Sudan and to help them to avoid those common conflicts which are mainly due to misunderstandings or even ignorance. Most of the foreigners have come to the Sudan in order to bring relief to people suffering of the direct or indirect consequences of an apparently endless civil war. Naturally, their situation is not the same as the one of travelers or anthropologists who normally do not *bring* anything and who therefore are almost obliged to have a different, more humble approach. Though the problematic of any foreign presence let alone any relief-work must be discussed and considered, it is not my aim to enter here the (necessary!) discussions about the good or the bad types of assistance or to deprive foreigners from making their personal discoveries; moreover, I shall try to refrain from idolizing people or of moralizing about various patterns of behaviour. I would simply like to present some of the considerations my past experiences in the Southern Sudan have brought to my mind.

### ***...on the human person...***

Whenever I talk about the Southern Sudan as an existential *sphere* of endless space or of complete isolation due to water and giant grass, I am in fact introducing to the human person which here, in this world of emptiness and wilderness, has to create his own world and his own civilization.

The natural environment is everywhere one of the keys which open the way to the understanding of different cultures. It is natural isolation in space and in time and practical experiences with the sphere of the above (spirituality) and the one of the below (the earth) which have led the Nilotes to concentrate very much on the human being. Without much friendly communication with the outside, they have been left with themselves, making up their own values and rules.

It is impossible to describe the Nilotic concept of the Human person in a few words. What is most important to know is the Nilotes' extreme concern by the *identity* of

the human person, its physical appearance, its behaviour, its spiritual qualities and its "existential purity" within the two spheres of creation, the sky and the earth. A human person is *neither purely spiritual nor purely earthly*, he is living "on earth in the sky", able to maintain this difficult existential position because of his *human consciousness*. It is this consciousness of the nature and the value of the human person which allows the human being to live and to survive (even after the moment of individual death) in these two alien spheres, to maintain his identity in spite of pressures and threats from all sides and to create his own, clearly defined sphere of existence (which is humanity). Human existence depends completely on human *consciousness*: this is why, if one wants to survive, a person has to keep his consciousness always alert and to mark the human territory (which is the sphere of civilization) with clear symbols for his existence. One can observe and discover such signs of the Nilotes awareness of their humanity everywhere, for *nothing is done without giving evidence to the human self-consciousness*: the construction of houses, the decoration of utensils and tools, the care for cattle, the quality of any work and indeed the great attention given to the human body and mind in all circumstances witness of it. There is this conscious handling of language as the significant carrier of human mind, there is this cautious approach to matters of spirituality, the ones of transparency as well as the ones animating the earth, and finally there is this knowledge of the importance of the physical aspects of the human person which, for example, is expressed in the patient way people use to clean (and in fact polish) their body, in their way of walking or in their way of "decorating" parts of their face or/and body. *Self pride and dignity* are also important aspects of such consciousness, lack of respect consequently being understood as a rude attack not only on a person's mind but on its very human essence. The really wonderful *cleanliness* of the human body and all his surroundings is a perfect reflection of the people's mentality, and it is a pity that the introduction of clothes and lack of money came to cover and to hide this existential attitude. The art of appearing perfectly well-dressed in spite of lack of much decent clothing often amazes foreigners (and give them wrong ideas about the material situation of these people).

Regarding the really very important aspect of cleanliness (of mind and body), I remember one ICRC-delegate who had quite an impressive beard. He asked me if the Nilotes would dislike it, and I replied with "Yes. But if they know you well and like you, there will be no problem". When I went with him to the hospital at Lopiding, he immediately went to ask one Dinka patient: "Can it really be true that you don't like beards?", he asked. "Nooo!!!", the Dinka answered "who told you this? No, no..."; and after a moment he added "No, no, for this we cannot kill you!!" I then felt the need to defend myself and replied that he should not pretend that the Nilotes like beards. Finally, he consented, saying "Yes, it is true, somehow... But the fact is that we just think that it reflects a person's mentality!"... (The way of dressing but even more the way of shaving, cutting or not-cutting one's hair or beard is always an indication of one's mood or even existential state: in times of war, one does not shave in order to show one's aggressiveness, if one dies one shaves all the hair in sorrow, if one's wife has run away one may just leave a part of one's hair on the head, in the shape of an ax... etc.).

Nilotes know exactly "what a human person is supposed to be, how it should look like and how it should behave", and they are quick to declare all those they dislike as "non-persons" or, in the case of white people, "jwok" (what means in fact "God" and thus is understood - by the white people - as a compliment; in fact it rather means "something you should fear, mistrust and approach with care, if at all..."). Thus, short, mad or dirty people are said to be "non-persons".

To the definition of the human being (at least amongst *the Anyuak*) belong two physical aspects, one physical, the other one artificial: the Nilotes abhor circumcised

people, complete sexual parts proving that the people are "normal" (and not like God who is pro-creating by metaphysical means), extraction of the six (or some) lower teeth showing that they are different from beasts and other animals (cattle have no upper front-teeth). Note that sections of the Ngok-Dinka have adopted circumcision which would be an exception to the general attitude of the Nilotes in what regards circumcision (which of course also could be explained as an interference of the human mind into divine creation).

As there is no spiritual life after death except the one carried on by one's descendants on earth, questions of religious significance do not arise. On the question about the *human soul*, people would reply that it is "in the breathe", that it is "air", the impersonal substance of *Jwok* (God) "which goes in and out and disappears after death for ever"; such a "soul" has little or nothing to do with the human person's identity. If there is a transparent substance of the human being it is in its *shadow*. Indeed, a person's shadow is intimately linked to its body, reflects its transparency. At a same time, it is usually seen spread on the earth, the spiritual home of the people: they are not material and yet not transparent, full of life and yet not physical, the projection of human spirituality. No wonder that some people do not like others to step on their shadow.

In an empty landscape full of light, shadows are more prominent, sharper and more concise than elsewhere: they have, so to say, "more light" and "more weight". And in a country filled up with light, shadows also have a practical function: they give shelter from the sun's heat, allow human body and mind to rest. One of the real curses in Southern Sudan is that it is full of thorny trees which do not give much (if any!) shade, a real problem for people who are obliged to walk during the hot hours of the day.

When explaining reasons for the separation of different tribes, Nilotic mythology always looks for the best i.e. socially the most significant reasons: such a reason is the quarreling about the shadow of a tree in which one part of society is occupying while it belonged to the other one... People usually sit indeed always under a same tree or rather in the shade of a same tree, imaging in that dark light as if they were a part of it.

The shadow is of greatest importance also in another context: the Anyuak doctor needs it for analyzing his patients... Indeed, he uses the shadow of the birds as indicators for the nature of the carriers of disease; the birds themselves do not know much about it, but as they are moving through the sphere of *Jwok* (sickness, God), they give evidence of the different movements existing there. Because the Anyuak doctor depends on the information provided by birds, they can only work in the mornings and late afternoons (when birds are in the air); during the time around noon she cannot see anything. When a mother observes certain types of birds (for example the Bateleur bird) turning in the sky, they call their children inside the house to find there protection from the invisible threatening movements in the sky.

When one has to decide where the (Anyuak) "soul" really can be traced, one has to look at the soles of the foot or more precisely at a person's *footprints*. Indeed, they are the shadow of a person at each step he makes, independent of the sunlight and precisely in between the person and the earth (in fact most of the time already a little bit inside the earth). Empty and yet full of gone existence, they witness of the humans' passage on earth and the strong support they get from it (shelter, food and water). When a person's soles of the foot are burning, they have to go and see the doctor who will analyze the case and decide that "your soul has been stolen". A specialist for such cases is able to bring back the lost soul (with the help of fire).

The Nilotes (like most civilized people) do not like to be taken by cameras, and in no case they want to be photographed without knowledge (it is true that the present situation of war does not allow them to refuse). Their refusal suggests that one is stealing

something from them, something they don't want to give away without consent. One may understand this reaction if one knows that the term used for "picture" is identical with the one for "shadow", a reproduction of the human person on another surface. Before taking a picture of people who may not like it, foreigners would do well in giving some consideration to such spiritual implications of their actions. Respect of the other is certainly a good guideline, even in this regard.

For the Anyuak, their "soul" seems to be mainly of a *practical* significance, when one one wants to extend or rather to transcend one's essence on others. This is required whenever one wants to give a blessing to a departing person (or to cure a sick relative): the means of transport of such human essence is the *spittle* which of course has both physical and spiritual qualities (physical because without spittle one cannot survive and spiritual because the human spittle is carrying language and thus the human mind) and which therefore is the perfect carrier of the human soul.

### *...on Nilotic character...*

Almost all foreigners who have stayed some time with the Nilotes find their character "difficult", and many have run into serious problems. It is true that during the last five years, the Nilotes have made great progress in learning the characters and moods of the white people and are now able to control their own temper; this holds especially true for all those directly engaged in relief-activities and who are nowadays especially selected because of their capacities to adapt to the sometimes very special behaviour of strangers.

In modern times, writers are more reluctant to express their negative feelings when it comes to describe foreigners, - but the feelings of course have not changed much.

When going through the few existing documents on the Anyuak tribe, I found a good number of attempts to comment on Nilotic character, the ones made by the British traveler Savage Landor being repeated by many others: "*These barbarians were capricious to no small degree... with an extraordinary habit of nagging*", he wrote in 1907, "*sulky at intervals, and suspicious all the time... Grasping by nature, they are quite unpleasant if they are not at once satisfied in their fancies... The Anyuak are quarrelsome, unreliable and sneaky, unscrupulous scoundrels... ..and extremely vain* (a quality which he found to be "*universal among negroes*"). And to show "*how low these people are in the human scale*", the British traveler added that these people, "*were absolutely savage*" and "*although giants in stature, possess as much brain, or possibly less, than an average three-year old child of any European country...*". "*They are an idle and unenterprising lot of people with few thoughts higher or deeper than drink and women*", a District Commissioner at Akobo added 50 years later as if he wanted to confirm the previous reports on the Anyuak (and indeed other Nilotic tribes). More surprising is that even the well-known British anthropologist Evans-Pritchard showed little hesitation to use similar terms for describing people whom he knew, after all, only superficially. He noted that the Anyuak "*have a reputation for thieving and their lack of discipline..., they are quite boyish and full of fun..., ...often impolite, even impertinent...*", qualities he compared not to the British but to the Nuer, though significantly in similar terms, stating that "*among the Nuer even a child has quite some dignity... To sum up these contrasting temperaments I can only suggest the well-known simile and picture of dignity and impudence*"...

The only conclusion one can draw out of such statements is that these travelers had not much more than a superficial contact with the people and that were unable to change their own behaviour, thought to be the only "right" one; personally, it took me a long time until I discovered, when in Anyuakland, that the only person who did not know how to



behave was me, while before I had *of course* been convinced that *I* was educated enough to know how to behave!

It is always a delicate and difficult enterprise to describe people; our approach is bound to be individual and to come from outside; it depends on circumstances, time and even mood. And then, people are not always and under all circumstances the same: I once complained (to the Anyuak king) about a particularly troublesome fellow; "oh yes", the King answered, "I know, I know. But you should see this man in the wilderness, or when there is fighting... Not many have such a courage and so much skill...". Indeed, the Nilotic character gets all its qualities from the environment, the difficult living conditions with the complete self-reliance forced upon the people by the remoteness of their country and the lack of any development. The Nilotes are courageous, brave and - like all hunters and nomads- self-conscious and very proud. History and nature have learned them to be cautious and reasonably suspicious when approaching foreign matters, places or people, but their often solitary existence makes them enjoy social life to a very high degree. Sometimes, they take indeed an arrogant and defiant attitude, show a fighting spirit which then causes human and social problems. In general, however, the Nilotes are a pleasant, helpful and extremely reliable company, full of qualities which are vital when one moves through wilderness. They are also very *kind* people, with a tremendous affection for small children. If nature would not force them to be strong-minded and hard-headed most of the time, one could imagine them to be weak: their great sensibility and susceptibility suggest strong inner emotions.

In private, the Nilotes can be very melancholic and are often - and for many good reasons - full of sadness, their great intelligence being deeply concerned by thoughts about life, death and the evident lack of justice in the world.

The Nilotic character can best be observed in the high quality of their work, in their respectful, prudent and yet self-conscious behaviour and in the great courage and proud dignity with which they encounter all difficulties and which helps them to preserve their identity of a "pure" human being.

### ***...on women and their position in society...***

This is a sensitive subject because it easily leads to misunderstandings. Seen from outside, the position of women is weak: they are given in marriage by their parents in exchange of the so-called "marriage-price" and seem to have no other function than to serve their husbands, to produce children and to do all the household-duties such as to fetch water several times a day from sometimes distant places, to bring firewood from the forest, to transport the grains from the fields, to pound and to sieve it, to prepare delicious meals twice a day, to brew from time to time beer for the men and of course to look after the children. In comparison, the duties of the men are easy: they prepare the fields, look after the cattle, they hunt and fish, make some handicrafts and pass the rest of the time with discussing and occasionally with fighting. Even for someone who has spent a lot of time amongst the Nilotes, the work of the women seems to be much harder and, in any case, more boring than the one of the men; the fact that the women officially are excluded from political life and decision-making strengthens this impression of the social inferiority of women even further. When people have made prisoners, they consider them to be "their wives", thus clearly referring to the various services expected from a woman. All this leads to the conclusion of the inferiority of the woman's position in Nilotic society.

In one sense, I would tend to agree with such a conclusion, being aware, however, that this is a Western and feminist viewpoint and thus not necessarily corresponding to the socio-cultural reality which is not only to uphold traditional structures but also the consequence of various practical (mainly ecological) conditions. Western critics of the women's heavy workload should rather concentrate on means how to ease it, - for example

by promoting the overdue aid in development (first of all in the field of water-resources but then also in what concerns medical and educational facilities).

Instead of discussing the problem of "exploitation" of the female sex by the male part of society, we perhaps better look at the more concrete aspects of the problem, and to forget the popular "myth of the inferiority of the African woman".

Women often complain about their workload and more frequently about the uselessness of the men. But if the women had to decide, they would change the men's individual characters and their ways of behaviour rather than their social and private status: for the women *want* the men to be "superior", fearless and strong, and, to some extent, even to be arrogant and defiant: they are quite happy not to have to play the role of the men which is to defend and support their families on all levels, to be constantly successful in all his doings (in the wilderness as well as inside society), to be hardworking, intelligent, brave, courageous, enduring and to earn respect because of his many deeds and great cleverness. One would argue that the women were simply brought up to appreciate such qualities, and even if this holds true, one must emphasize the fact that the mentioned "male" qualities are really vital in a social and ecological context where people are completely self-sufficient and have to rely on their own abilities; the sharing of the heavy workload becomes here a practical necessity. Also, one has to admit that many of the tasks required by a man are almost universally considered to be "male": herding of animals, hunting, fishing and fighting... - and that these duties almost automatically make the men to become the public representatives of their families. If the women are not part of the purely political body, it is not only because they are usually not actively involved in the problems (if they are, they do participate) but also because a woman is normally from a different village and as such not a "citizen" of the place; her link to her home-village will always remain strong. When the head of a family has died and nobody else can replace him, the dead husband's wife can take his place, become the formal head of family and participate in public debates like any male person. It has happened many times that a woman became chief of a village.

A husband should be a *respected* personality, inside and outside of the family: the relationship between a father and his sons is fundamentally one of respect (which is the formal side of fear) while the one between a mother and a son is one of love. It is allowed to insult somebody by his mother's name, but any insult in the father's name would lead to quarrel.

Natural living-conditions in which each individual has to assume a great number of individual responsibilities do not only have influence on men; the women are equally "brought up" to resist hardship and pressures of all kind. In fact, they are defending themselves extremely well and exercise a strong power on their men as well as on society as a whole.

I was once asked by the Anyuak King what kind of women I would like to have as my companion. When I answered that I would prefer a calm, soft, peaceful and generally pleasant woman, the King exclaimed pitiful: "Oi-oi-oi! In that case, you came to the completely wrong place! Here, all the women are arrogant and defiant!"... The same King commented once on the strong Murle women, almost making it a compliment: "Can you imagine, *if the Murle women were men!!!* It would just be *terrible!!!*" The statement suggests that the (Murle) women are even more defiant than (Murle) men, and that one should be grateful that they do not have the fighting-duties of the men...

Women live a very independent life, assuming a lot of responsibilities. The men are conscious of this and generally appreciate the tedious work of the wives. They approach and address them with great respect and honor them in many different ways. Because the relationship between a man and his wife is considered to be a strictly *intimate* affair, it is generally not noticed by foreign observers, - except when there is a quarrel (in which the women defend themselves very well indeed!). *Privately*, the women are given

much affection, tenderness and loving care, a husband trying to satisfy his wife's many expectations as much as only possible. The fact that the women normally are absent in *public* deliberations seems to suggest that they have "nothing to say" and would be locked out from political debates; this is very wrong indeed as the various questions are much discussed at home, the men giving sincere considerations to the arguments of their women. On the judicial level, women can appear as plaintiff, as accused or as witness, but normally they do not participate in public hearings; most cases concern the payment of the marriage-price

where a wife's parents quarrel with her husband about their rights on dowries.

On the social level, the grown-up girls are organized in age-groups, occasionally perform certain duties on behalf of the community and play the basic part in public dancing. Only marriage - when the women leave for their husband's village - disrupts the girls' social union. The women's solidarity remains strong even in more occasional contexts, especially when it comes to accuse the men of their uselessness...

*Within the private sphere*, a woman has an extremely strong position and is very conscious of her powers. The Anyuak woman at least goes from time to time *on strike*, refusing to cook for a husband she blames for neglecting her: "You don't see that I am tired?" she may say, "I fetch water and fire for you, I look after the children, I pound and prepare food, - but you don't give me any satisfaction in reward... Why should I get tired *for nothing?!"* Whenever feeling neglected, the women can have very strong arguments and use harsh words. Elderly men often complain about their wives' desire "to get something" in exchange for their labor, "something" of course meaning affection and sexual attention. The frequent absence of men and his many duties as husband of several wives naturally makes many women easily frustrated and sometimes they just don't see any meaning in their doings and simply refuse to prepare any food... The men are used to such behaviour and sometimes (when work has been plentiful) even understand it; because they are eating in groups, they can hope to get their share in the food prepared by other women. It is only once a woman refuses to cook for a long time that the husband's eating-group may tell him to go and solve his domestic problems.

If the men are pitiless with women who are not producing children, the women are equally pitiless with a man unable to give her sexual satisfaction; in both cases, divorce will be the result.

The *marriage-price* (paid in heads of cattle, beads, spears and other items) is cause to much misunderstandings by foreigners: indeed, it would be completely misleading to suggest that a man can *buy* a woman, with goods or money or whatsoever. Nilotic women are *not for sale*, but they can be allowed to enter sexual union with other, *non-related* people, provided these people are able to acknowledge in material terms the priceless value of the girl. The dowries are nothing but a *symbol* for this union, for the new ties created between the family of the woman and the one of the future husband. The dowries are not paid at one time, not only because it is usually difficult to do so but because it would amount to the selling of a daughter; whenever the dowries are "complete", new demands are made by the in-laws which are to remember the husband that he is still not "possessing" but just borrowing the daughter of somebody else. Because the dowries are to be handed over during a considerably long period of time, the relationship between one family and the other is maintained (what wouldn't be the case if all was paid at once) and progressively made more "human", the tensions which existed in the beginning gradually decreasing and finally disappearing. But a daughter still "belongs" to her own family, she is just borrowed for a while by the husband; once she is old, she may return to her own relatives and finally stay with one of her sons.

In conclusion, one has to stress the fact that the women have their own, *strong social role* to play; even if they are considered to be inferior in the political context, they

are yet *dominating* their men in many regards and very conscious of their power; in any case, they are only seemingly submissive but fearless when it comes to defend their rights and their personal human dignity.

**... on children...**

Children are everywhere understood as a particularly vulnerable and defenseless category of human beings which needs and merits special attention. Not everywhere, however, the love for children is of such a general and existential kind as in the Sudan where children (and especially infants) receive a lot of affection and enjoy a particular protection, and this not only from the parents or close relatives but also from other, unrelated people. If one looks for an explanation for such a loving attitude, it is not merely because children represent - like everywhere - a high sentimental value but because they are extremely breakable and in constant, great danger of passing away before having grown up; children are also the assurance of one's (individual and collective) survival after death, the *continuity of existence* on earth, and thus of a spiritual, almost religious importance. The *names* of children use to reflect the circumstances ("born during war", "...during starvation", "while people were running" etc.) of or the appearance at birth ("a black one", "a meager one" etc.) and they often refer to the family-history ("born after all his brothers died", "born to die" etc.). Special rules govern the time of birth and the time following it, and different tribes have different traditions. The Anyuak women, for example, when giving birth in the home of their parents (especially the first time) cut the umbilical cord by a piece of sharp grass and not by a piece of metal, in order to be sure that the newborn child is safely kept within the earthly sphere of existence. Birth takes place in the open, another, possibly experienced woman helping the mother when she is delivering in a sitting position. For one month, the newborn baby is kept inside a hut, well protected not only from the sky (with all its unsecured movements) but also from society (especially pregnant women and their husbands) by a number of preventive measures. While still under the special care of the first period (until the umbilical cord has completely dried), it is vital not to scare the baby; shouting or even loud talk is strictly prohibited, people fearing that any disturbance of natural growth could change the human nature of the child. The "human nature" of the newborn is checked thoroughly, the sexual organs being of crucial significance: if they are not "normal" (for example if the child is born circumcised), it is concluded that the child is of a more spiritual than human nature - and in consequence should be thrown away. *Twins* are of course also extraordinary in their own way; the Anyuak check their human nature by letting them spend one night at the riverside, and they protect them (as well as the child born after them) by beads of a special type and color. During the first weeks which follow the birth, the women is given special food, but she is resuming her work already after a few days (her stomach being kept by a long rope).

Once the period of seclusion has ended, the child immediately enters social life, first by getting attached to the mother (even while working), then by moving around with its small sisters or brothers. Infants get milk from her mother's breast during two years and consequently look healthy (at least under normal circumstances). During these two years, a mother is not supposed to have sexual intercourse with her husband, and if she gets pregnant "by miracle", it is concluded that this child was "conceived by God".

A child's *education* is basically a social process, the child growing successively into society by passively participating in all events. Already at a very young age (five years), the girls will help their mothers and the boys will move with the cattle, assist their fathers in the fields or go with their elder brothers for hunting, fishing or playing. Because the boys use to hunt with dogs, they are usually more successful than the adult hunters who are too proud to kill animals by any other than their own skills. Whenever there are

cattle (in the village or in the cattle-camp), food-problems rarely arise, but as not everybody has got milking cows, some children may yet be forced to find their food in the wilderness.

From an early age onwards, the boys move and eat with related coevals, but the girls usually stay and eat with their mother. Every mother cares a lot about her own children but is less devoted to the children of her husband's other wives. While a mother has small children, she will always cook good food, while a woman without children gets easily "tired" when her husband fails to give her the expected amount of love.

Sometimes it happens that a mother is too weak to feed her infant child or simply has no or not enough milk (nor milking cows). In such a situation, other women may feed the child in the mother's place. Honey is sometimes used for supplementing the milk.

*Orphans* are rare in normal times, because a family is not restricted to the genitor and his wives (or the person who is the official father). If there is no father's brother to take care of a child, the home of the maternal uncle will always welcome the child. Even if no relative is alive or ready to take the child, society will take care of it. More problematic is to obtain the dowries necessary for marriage, and a young man without relatives will have to attach himself to an important person's homestead (chief, king) and hope to be rewarded for his services.

For two years ago, one of my best Sudanese friends informed me about the starvation in his village; at the same time, he told me about three orphans he had adopted. "What are you doing?" I asked him, "already you have nothing to feed your eight children, and now you are adopting three more?!". "You know", he answered, "I had no choice, I found these children all alone without any relatives. And by the way: *If you have no food for your own children, you can adopt any number of orphans! Children can find their food in the forest, but love they cannot get there!*" (Terribly sad to say that now *all* his children have become orphans!).

### **...on work and laziness...**

The question of the "laziness" of the Nilotes, roaming aimlessly with their cattle or resting immobile on one leg (if they are not "dancing all day and night"...) is not worthwhile any serious discussion. For those interested in the subject, I can refer to an article (which appeared in an early volume of *Sudan Notes and Records*) written by a missionary: its title was "One day in the life of an *idle* Shilluk"... By relating the daily routine of a normal Shilluk he completely destroyed the myth of the laziness of the Nilotes, giving evidence to the extraordinary workload of both men, women and even children. If there is an opportunity, one should try to follow such a daily routine and to get a somewhat physical idea of the practical implications of "being a Nilotic".

People who have always been self-sufficient and independent of any foreign market of course have difficulties to imagine that one could work "for money". Work is a *service* one renders to another person, and even if one expects a kind of reward as a normal way of inter human behaviour, one always considers the work as *help*. This is an important point to remember for foreigners who are used to pay people for doing a certain job and who do not understand why they should not only pay but moreover be grateful... Because one is hiring the services of a person, one should not expect that person to do the things according to the own criteria's; money gives power, but there are limits, and for the Nilotes these limits are drawn by respect and dignity. If one orders a servant (this does not exist anyway amongst the Nilotes) to bring a cup of tea, he may remain seated in the shadow of the tree and not react; after a while, you may repeat the demand, but again there may be no reaction; ten minutes later you may already lose patience and talk more loudly; and if there is again no reaction, you may shout... Now you will get your reaction: "Why are you shouting at me!", the servant will tell you, "You think I did not hear you?" And

again, he will not move. Only after some time, when *he* has decided, he will go up and bring you the tea. This lesson on the dignity of the human person probably does not need any comment.

***...on generosity and thanksgiving...***

The Nilotes do not like to receive things freely and any gift makes them highly suspicious.

For them, human relationship should build up on reciprocity and exchange, not on donations; debt is considered to be a burden but at a same time it is understood to strengthen social ties, even if it often leads to quarrel. Some of the debts (especially those concerning marriage) may be several generations old and still be remembered by both parties involved. When paying the dowries, one should never try to pay the whole marriage-price at one time; this would amount to a simple purchasing of one's daughter and naturally not be acceptable. It would be considered as an insult! In fact, it is quite impossible to pay everything at one time, for each time the dowries would be "complete" new claims and demands would be made by the in-laws. The permanent struggle for getting the dowries is in fact a lasting struggle for getting a woman and a continuous reminder of the fact that a woman is not a property but simply a loan. The fear a man has of his in-laws disappears only after a few years (a few children), but the basic attitude of fearful respect prevails even after a certain "familiarity" has been established, especially in what regards one's father-in-law.

Nilotes help each other in the fields, when making a canoe, building a hut etc., but any helper can expect a reward, even if this can take a long time. Nobody likes to work for money, and if he does, he still considers his work as mere help given freely. Though I paid my helpers with material values or even money, I was always reminded how lucky I was to get their "help". And indeed, what would I have done if nobody had accepted to "help" me?

It is probably due to bad experience that the Nilotes have adopted a different attitude towards foreigners: if they are asked to do some work (or to carry some load etc.), they want to be paid in advance! There is much logic in such a demand, for work which is done cannot be made undone, while a price paid in advance can always be paid back. The Nilotes stick to any agreement and would never disappear with the paid "salary".

Perhaps because there is no free gift, there is no proper term for "Thank you!" either. This uses to upset foreigners who want to be generous but who expect at least some gratitude.

In 1975 I traveled in company of a Nuer friend by steamer on the River Sobat from Malakal to Nasr and Akobo. On the way, my Nuer friend came with another young Nuer man who asked me to help him with some medicines. I gave him some of the antibiotics I had carried with me, and he went back to his place without showing any reaction. Speaking to my friend, I commented on the apparent lack of gratitude from the side of that sick Nuer, arguing "at least he could have said 'Thank you'". After a while, that man came back. *"What do you mean", he said, "your friend told me that you complained about me. You want me to thank you. Well, if it is only this, I can do it, can say 'Thank you very much indeed'. But one thing you should know: if I thank you now, this thing will be settled forever and I shall forget it; it will be a concluded affair. But if I don't thank you now, well, then I will always carry this memory in my heart, I shall not forget you, and one day, I am sure, one day I will be able to do something good for you, something small, or something big...."* I understood and appreciated the lesson. And it is true: the Nilotes do not forget the help they are given, they always remember...

Another lesson I learned is the one concerning *generosity*. I admit that it was not always easy to accept it, even though it is also rather convincing: for the Nilotes, begging is a shame and not acceptable. Therefore, somebody in need should not ask but *claim*, and this in the most direct tune: instead of saying "Could you kindly give me a cigarette, please" they would rather say "give me a cigarette!!" or simply "cigarette!!". Indeed, "please" does not exist in Nilotic language... And instead of expressing one's gratefulness, one should simply take it. If there is a comment from the claimants, it is just "good" but more normally a critical one, like "this is too little", "why don't you give more" , "Next time you will be gmore generous" etc.

In the mind of the Nilotes *it is the person who is giving who should be grateful*, more in any case than the one who is receiving... For indeed, what could a rich person do if nobody would accept his gifts? Being able to give, being able to invite and to entertain is true richness: it gives a lot of pleasure and prestige to the donor, while it is rather humiliating and depressing for those being forced to ask... This view holds only true when people are ready to refuse in spite of any needs, if they are in a position to teach a rich or a stingy man this lesson of true generosity.

It is this a lesson some relief-workers have understood. During a farewell-drink, one African nurse working at Lopiding said to the staff of the ICRC: "Be grateful for every day you are allowed to help the people, be grateful for doing such a work"... Indeed, foreigners are privileged to be able to help, it is them to be grateful!

### **...on food and hospitality...**

Food is one of the strongest symbols of human relationship. It is more than just a necessity for physical survival but has truly spiritual values: it does not only nourish the body but also strengthens the mind.

*Sharing the food* is a deep sign of an intimate relationship, between kindred persons or friends. *Eating food in company* is a simple but strong act of *communication*, an indirect demonstration of a common spirit and a common body. It is of truly existential significance.

One is careful about the food itself, for certain food should not be eaten, - not because of the food's quality but because it may stem from animals which are not meant for humans (different tribes follow different rules) or which represent particular values (of a religious or historical type, different clans or even individual families "respecting" different animals). Even for tribes which are not so careful about the preparation of food, the *cleanliness* of food is importance, *white* flour being understood as a sign of the purity of human consciousness. For food is an act of *transformation* of an earthly, physical substance into a spiritual matter, of a solid "object" into physical strength and spiritual energy. This is perhaps why the whole sphere surrounding the moment of *eating* is of an almost sacred essence: even the most impatient and arrogant people would respect a person who is eating and wait patiently until he has finished.

Even in times of extreme hardship, the Nilotes would refuse to get food from let alone to eat together with a person they dislike or don't trust: "this is *bad* food", they would say and abstain, even if it is the sweetest of all food (beer!) which is offered.

Food plays an important role in many social aspects as the force which brings people together and unites them; festivities at court, meetings of age-groups, the closure of a death-case, honoring guests etc. receive their significance through the symbol of food-sharing and of eating-together. The best example for the importance of food is perhaps the Anyuak custom of *peace-making* after a murder-case: a cow is slaughtered, cut lengthwise into two identical halves and then cooked and eaten *together but separately* (that means at a same place but not out of the same pot).

In Nilotic history, one version explaining the reason for the separation of the Nilotic tribes states that it was because of a soup made out of the Oribi-Gazelle: while one section was still hunting, the other one, instead of waiting, started to eat... This was enough for a permanent rupture of their relationship!

Nilotic history is full of examples for the importance of the act of *swallowing* and *digestion*, oral literature providing even the human excrement (when still warm) a spiritual power. Obviously, food in all its forms has got more important functions than just nourishing the people's physical body.

Except for negative almost technical comments ("this food is dirty, not well-prepared, it is tasteless" etc.), the Anyuak and indeed the Sudanese don't like to talk *about* food, as if too much of talk could destroy the essence of food (which is spiritual). However, the Anyuak make a clear distinction between "kac" and "cong": "kac" refers to hunger and starvation, "cong" to the absence of fish or meat. Normal food, "cam", consists out of both parts, grains and something more spicy.

Since markets have appeared in the Sudan, the tedious preparation of *salt* out of certain plants has been restricted to penniless poor old women, leaving most people without salt; this is just one example how new dependencies can destroy traditional knowledge and bring fresh, formerly unknown miseries with all their consequences on the people's health.

Food is both of a social and sexual significance, women, men and children eating at different places. It is a great honor for a young man to be invited to eat in company of older adults, but usually the so honored young man will refuse or just sit there without eating much.

The fact that several related families join in sharing their food is also a way of securing food at times when a wife may be absent, sick or just "on strike" (what at least the easily frustrated young Anyuak women frequently are!).

The almost existential obligation to share food with relatives needs consideration when relief-agencies are distributing food for a certain period of time. I remember to have given once a great quantity of flour to a woman for feeding her under-nourished child; she was supposed to take that food to her remoted village, but the next day she came already back and asked again for food, explaining that she had to share the quantity we gave her with other people... In general, foreigners do well in not interfering in this tradition of food-sharing which in fact is the people's "life-insurance"; if the people are not allowed to share their food with others, they may be remembered as selfish and stingy and find themselves excluded from any assistance once the of the foreigners have left.

If sharing food is of crucial spiritual importance, *refusing* food is understood as an equally strong act of mind and well understood as an expression of hostility. In the dark forest at Akobo, I happened once to upset by night an apparently completely drunk Nuer because of my shining torch light: "I can kill you, I shall kill you!", he shouted, wildly gesticulating with his long spear; wondering what he meant, he repeated "I can kill you, kill you, *kill you!*", but then adding suddenly and almost candidly: "...unless you come and eat with me!!". I had no choice and went to eat with him and his drunk friends: though I felt somehow ill at ease, it became a very enjoyable and certainly memorable evening! Refusing food will always be understood as an act of aggression, and one should think twice before pretending that one has already eaten... (what usually is known to be untrue!). Many people may invite foreigners just to hear that they refuse, and then draw their own conclusions...

When living in my small village in Southern Sudan, I was occasionally fed up by all these people coming to visit me from early morning up to late night. When complaining, the King replied: "Isn't it marvelous! You are so popular, everybody comes to see you! Nobody goes to see a bad man, don't think that people visit you because of your



clean water and your tobacco!" I withdrew my complaints and henceforth began to enjoy my apparently great "popularity"...

*Hospitality* is traditionally reserved by the Nilotes to relatives, in-laws and special friends, unknown visitors staying with the persons who are in charge of the village. When people are moving, they plan their itinerary according to the relatives they have along their way. But any visitor will be received by first getting a place where to sit (a skin), then a pot of water and finally (and if available) a small quantity of tobacco. If this is not given, one can clearly understand that one is not welcome, - and better leaves.

It would be wrong to understand this limited and apparently not very "African" type of hospitality as a kind of stinginess. The contrary holds true, for it is indeed a big shame not to share his food with people: such a person is called "a dog" and it is a great sorrow to see such a person in his isolation. To boycott a person is the best way to show him his behaviour and to change his character. *The Nilotes would never eat the food of "bad" people.*

The explanation of the apparently limited Nilotic hospitality lies simply in the fact that unknown visitors are very exceptional and moreover do not come to see other people than those responsible for the place; it is also true of course that food is too scarce to be offered to a bunch of travelers or even to individuals over a prolonged period of time. Beer on the contrary, when it is available, is always offered; though it is also considered to be "food", it is not surrounded by silence and respect but a source of talk, songs and happiness (or quarrel).

### *...on justice...*

If the Nilotes are often considered to be "quarrelsome" people, it is because they have a very strong *sense of justice*. The conviction that there *must* be justice if society and indeed the world in general wants to survive, the structures supporting it must be kept at their places, strengthened and, if necessary, reinforced or restored. The whole Nilotic history consists out of the narration of tensions, quarrels and explanations for the consequences resulting out of them, the aim always being the justification for this or that action. The Nilotes feel easily offended, and if they keep their gratitude in their heart until they get an opportunity to express it, they react immediately to an offense if they consider it to be of no greater significance; normally, they remain silent and wait until the time for revenge has come. *Cursing* is one of their most sure means of spiritual revenge. Because everybody believes in its cruel efficiency, one is extremely careful in avoiding anything which could hurt another person's feelings: deep and often ceremonial respect and fear of foreign, unknown people are the practical consequences on one side, and an extraordinary susceptibility for verbal or physical expressions and even for aggressive or insulting forms of behaviour (clothing, shouting etc.) on the other side. Foreigners would be wrong to believe that the people's present state of physical misery would change their attitude of self-pride and self-consciousness or that certain types of behaviour would become more acceptable (because compensated by "gifts" of vital importance) to them. There is no greater human value than self-respect, and it is better to die in dignity than to lose one's pride and self-respect.

*All* relationship is of a legal kind, the one between the humans as well as the one between the humans and the animals (and between the animals themselves) and even the one between the humans and the physical part of the world, the earthly matters. Peaceful *co-existence* is the key-word for the behaviour expected from all things or beings, including spiritual matters and God. Indeed, it is believed that only Justice can govern the world, and it is quite inconceivable that God the great Creator would not be a *just* God.

God is the cause to all existence, but people "pray" to him as the highest instance of justice: in fact, the Nilotic (or at least the Anyuak) "prayer" is never asking for impossible things but asking for justice, *pleading* for the cause of the humans.

If the people say "*God exists*", they mean in fact "There will be justice". If God is not here for giving support to his own creation, people seem to think, then there is no reason to adore him. A certain fear of God and all spiritual things corresponds to the one of unknown foreign people, animals and places. Rivers are particularly treacherous places; though they move through the sphere of the earth, they are reflecting the sphere of spirituality (the sky), moving on unsecured, unknown grounds. It is thus only normal that the Nilotic kings (who are immortal spiritual beings only temporarily visiting their people) are related to the sphere of the water, the Anyuak king having emerged out of the river and is to return there after his "death" (his disappearance).

The Nilotes settle their disputes in different ways but the fundamental approach to any offense is the same: the meaning of "making" justice is basically not to punish but to *re-establish a broken order*, to make peace rather than to offend and to hurt the guilty party. "We are all making mistakes", the Anyuak king would conclude, trying to satisfy both the accused and the pleasant. It is indeed important *not to exclude* a person from society but on the contrary to make him feel that he *is* a vital part of the community and as such responsible for his actions. This attitude may be illustrated by a case I witnessed once at the Anyuak court: a man had just been condemned for having stolen a certain item; when his case had been decided upon, a next case was discussed: the very man who had just been sentenced, far from being humiliated by the verdict, actively participated in the discussion, blaming the accused for what he did and now explaining how abject it was to steal and to rob a person of his belongings... Most cases concern marriage and dowries, and often the case dates back to grandfather's times. Even when settling disputes, the Nilotes are not in a hurry but can wait, knowing that one day justice will be made...

Europeans may consider many of the Nilotes' patterns of behaviour as brutal and cruel, but their legal system is much more human than the one applied elsewhere. Cruelty, torture etc. is happening in the private sphere which is out of public control, though it is - within limits - accepted. But there is, for example, rarely any physical or material punishment for an offense (except when it is settled privately!) but only *compensation* for the damage committed: somebody who accidentally killed an old mother's son may simply hand over himself to the mother and take the killed son's place..! The principle of not doing any harm to a "criminal" but to force him simply to pay for the damage or the loss is offending the feelings of Europeans who are only satisfied if the guilty person is made to suffer physically. The Nilotes do not know any prison and they are completely horrified by this type of anti-social institution. As every individual is always also a member of a group, a verdict is of concern for a number of people: taking away the dignity of one member, the whole group gets offended. The making of justice therefore has to consider the interests of society and of its faction, but these interests do not consist in protecting society from its aggressive members but also in making sure that society is not disintegrating and falling into pieces.

### *...on material values...*

It is because of the scarcity of material but even more because of the spiritual content of each object that the Nilotes are extremely careful about their few material possessions. Spoiling or neglecting things is considered to be a very serious mistake and sometimes even a personal offense. This is because it is not easy to find replacements for lost or damaged things, partly because the material needed is not available and partly because not everybody is able to make those objects (like spears, earthen pots etc.); one may have to wait for another season to find the plant or to reach to the place of the

craftsman. Because all objects are of course *handmade*, they witness not only of the craftsman's skill and artistic talents but also of his love and his consciousness. Many objects are said to be beautiful not so much because of their physical appearance but because of the person who made them, because of the amount of love and thoughts his objects contain. But objects do not get their significance from the person who made them but from the person who used them. A husband's drinking-pot, for example, has almost a sacred value because it nourished his spirits for such a long time that it became part of himself; a broken pot therefore makes a wife to run away from home in fear immediately, and she will never return unless she can appease the offended and hurt spirits of her husband (by bringing him a cow, a goat etc.). The link between certain objects and the person who used them is so strong that his personal eating-vessels are broken after his death.

Many objects are handed over from generation to generation. They are *heirlooms* which bring a person luck and protect him from evil; naturally, they are of great sentimental and psychological value, and their loss brings deep sorrow and much regrets.

Nilotic mythology is full of quarrels about heirlooms lost by other persons, the most famous being the one about a lost spear (and later about a lost grain of beads) between the leaders of the Jur (Dimo) and the Luo (Nyikang): the brothers decided to separate for ever.

Because of the *spiritual* essence of certain objects, the food and goods freely distributed by relief-agencies will not be able to destroy the immaterial values of food, utensils etc. Imported goods are, so to say, culturally "tasteless" and of no spiritual importance. However, one can fear that the general attitude towards food (and food-sharing) may deteriorate more rapidly if the present situation does not improve, air-dropping naturally being a particularly aggressive way of publicly showing one's lack of any spiritual consideration of the matter of food.

### *...on art and esthetic values...*

It has been said that "Southern Sudan is not a region where one looks for art"... Such a statement holds only true if one restricts "art" to the creation of objects which have a religious, magical or otherwise symbolical meaning, which represent certain social or cultural values or which possess mere esthetic qualities. But if one considers "art" as they means by which one can express one's *vision* of the world, the *intensity* of human consciousness and the *beauty and inner quality* of objects created by human mind, then the apparently artistically arid areas of Southern Sudan are in fact full of "art". There is no separation between "art" and reality, each person, each hut, each object and indeed each movement express this vision of existence and human life. This presence of an *artistic penetration* of all things has of course been observed by foreigners and did not fail to amaze and to impress them. Nevertheless, they used to call it "innocent aspirations of beauty", pretending to know "the essence" of any "art" and completely neglecting that there could be a more practical, more powerful, more spiritual and yet a more discreet form of "art" than the one which they are used to or even the one they like to call "African". The inner beauty of things (and persons) is perhaps less immediately striking but its qualities and its meaningfulness are not less captivating. "African" art has to be useful and to fulfill a function, it is more than beauty, craftsmanship and pleasure; this is perhaps why foreigners neglect "African" art except when it takes magical proportions. But for the "Africans" themselves, there is no gap between "art" and "reality": that is why they are not "making art" but are simply providing material objects (as well as immaterial matters) with the dimensions of their spiritual and sometimes visionary world.

The Nilotes are born poets, and some of them have risen to great local fame. The Anyuak even have professional poets who are (more or less) supported by the chiefs or kings; before completing their songs, they discuss them with the people and change the wording according to critics or suggestions. An average adult Anyuak knows up to 100 songs by heart.

Nilotic music, too, seems to be less "African" than elsewhere: their music is to produce an intensity of the earthly matters by bringing the earth to vibration and to force the human body into sexual and spiritual ecstasy. "The people of Juba make climbim-climbim", the Anyuak King commented on what he used to hear on the radio, "it is horrible. We don't like music like this, we like music which comes out of the deep ground"...

I have often tried to find out what the Nilotes find "beautiful". It is not easy to say, except that they are not used to comment on "superficial" aspects of things and beings, animals and girls of course excepted (though for marriage they prefer the less beautiful girls because they quarrel less and work harder...). There seems to be little interest on the beauty of landscapes etc., but this is probably due to the fact that they are seeing it from inside and thus not with the eyes of a foreigner. I remember the comments of some people when they watched me taking a picture of some extremely beautiful landscape: "He must see something", they concluded after checking carefully if there was really nothing to be seen... Natural sites of extraordinary beauty or appearance are usually thought to be inhabited by a local spirit; all according to the history of the place, they are completely avoided or approached with the respect due to all forces of nature.

### *...on ecology...*

In spite of the great number of foreigners who have been working in Southern Sudan because of the civil war, few have been lucky enough to experience physically what it means to survive in an environment which is far from being friendly: *the permanent struggle for survival in the Southern Sudan is a war by itself*, demanding from the people a lot of courage, skill, physical and mental strength and, especially, many sacrifices of human lives. Most foreigners staying inside the country are temporary "guests" with a limited relationship with the Sudanese and no relationship with the environment (mosquitoes and flies of course excepted!). They may *imagine* what it means to be "lost" somewhere in the swamps when they fly over the immensity of the country and they may even wonder how it is possible to survive in an apparently hostile nature, amongst beasts, snakes and insects, but the certainty of returning soon again to mentally and physically safer areas outside of the Sudan prevents them to become really part of the people let alone the environment. This is of course not a critic but simply a fact, regretted by some, conditional for others: *in spite of all the "presence" of relief-workers, diplomats, journalists and numerous anthropologists, the Sudan still remains an unknown and to a large extent undiscovered country, a place which is too wide and too diverse to be summoned up by words but which has to be physically absorbed - like a magical potion against impressions and imagination*. Saying this, I want only to stress for another time the importance of the natural environment as the *context* in which all comments, analysis and descriptions must be understood: one cannot really understand the special relationship the Southern Sudanese entertain with spiritual powers and natural forces or the special position they attribute to the Human Person who is living between the two antagonistic spheres of existence without having a thorough knowledge of the place "where all this is happening". Patterns of behaviour may seem to be strange if one looks at them from outside while they are perfectly normal when seen from inside. So natural indeed that the people in question would themselves not even notice the importance of such a belief or

such a behaviour; when saying that "people are conscious" of something, it often does not mean that they are actually "thinking" of it but that, on the contrary, their consciousness is so deeply rooted that it turns into a completely normal, self-evident existential attitude: it is so normal that one does not (and perhaps should not) make a philosophy out of it.

The relationship between the people and the natural environment is just one example for this: understood as remarkable by foreigners observing it, it is yet the most normal thing on earth for those concerned.

It is difficult to talk about the environment in objective terms. Foreigners usually feel the extreme remoteness of the country, its loneliness and isolation, the dangers of many kind, the physical hardship endured by the people, and the general hostility of nature. It is amazing to hear then that the Nilotes pretend to "live in the best of all possible worlds", that they were given everything freely, shelter, food and water.

Hearing them talking about the generosity shown to them by nature, one can even understand that some jealousy may arise and encourage foreign forces to disturb the peace in paradise; while fighting back foreign aggressors is only a human problem, the invisible, treacherous spiritual ones are a real nuisance to human life.

Sometimes I wonder if the Nilotic claim to "live in paradise" is not just a way of accommodating themselves with reality, a subtle technique of turning negative facts into positive energy and to give their difficult existence a sense. Whatever the truth may be, it is a fact that the *firm belief in the goodness of their country* helps the Nilotes to survive under conditions which elsewhere would result in deep despair. The strong determination to maintain the human spirits and to preserve human dignity in a world full of misery and suffering has helped the people to survive the twenty-five years of civil war, and it will help the people to rebuild their "normal" existence once the war has ended. History has taught the Nilotes to help themselves whenever possible and not to give up; while their courage has certainly allowed them to bear all the past losses of human life, it has also misled foreigners about the extent and the cruelty of the suffering so bravely endured by the Sudanese. Because the Sudanese aggressively believe in the essential goodness of earthly existence, the outside world, it sometimes seems, does not get the visual excitement of witnessing (if possible life!) the horrors of the human disaster due to fighting, displacement and starvation.

From where do the Nilotes get their mental strength? In negative terms, one could explain it by lack of choice: if they want to survive, they have to fight for existence, and if they want to have a decent way of living, they have to create their own world in the middle of wilderness and to defend it against all the odds. But the Nilotes would not agree with this pessimistic view but rather refer to the *objective* richness of their country: the soil is (sometimes very) fertile, nature is generous by supplying fruits, nuts, honey and many edible or otherwise useful plants, there are rivers full of fish, cattle, antelopes and other animals providing people with meat, skins and objects of exciting beauty, and there is all the material needed for cooking, making tools, fabricating utensils and building shelters. To all evidence, *nature gives people everything*, including shelter after death! No wonder that this material, physical support by the sphere of the below, the earth, is finally perceived by the people as a substantial psychological or more precisely as *a spiritual support* of the people by the earth: they are not only given food and shelter but also *protection* against all possible intruders from the outside and, especially, from the immaterial sphere of the above, the sky.

*Naturally*, the special, *intimate* relationship between the people and the earthly sphere demands also special care and attention. For the Nilotes it is obvious that the earth is a living and therefore a spiritual matter, a force which is essentially positive and constructive but which also can get offended and become destructive and hostile. It is therefore *natural* to approach the whole sphere of the earth with *respect* and with caution

and to avoid anything which could offend the forces working there. *The earth does not belong to the Human Being*, it is a loan and sometimes a gift; if the humans want to benefit of its generous nature they should not exploit it but enter in peaceful communication with it, thereby reinforcing and tightening the existential ties between them and the earth. The Anyuak make use of a representative of the site's oldest family (the one who has already deep roots in that part of the earth) to establish the spiritual link between the human and the earthly sphere: before cutting any tree, before preparing a new field, before fetching firewood in a still unknown forest and whenever doing any important intervention in nature, this "descendant of the site", has to be asked to talk to the earthly force residing at that place and to make peace with it in forehand. If this man is absent, people would rather not touch the place rather than risk to offend nature. Before planting, this special human representative of the earthly sphere may bless the future crops, and before fishing for the first time in the season, the "father of the river" will bless the river and chase evil forces away. Interesting in his talk is his demand to *foreign* crocodiles to leave the place: the *native* ones are allowed to stay! This leads us to the notion of *mutual respect* within a same territory. Indeed, people believe that only *co-existence* can maintain peace and lead to prosperity. This holds true of course for the different interests of nature and the humans which have to be reconciled; it holds also true for the relationship between the humans and the so-called beasts and man-eaters, leopards, lions, crocodiles etc. These animals, too, have got a spiritual essence (though *of course* not of a human kind) and a *right on existence*. The humans are therefore expected to respect them as living beings or entities, and if they fail to do so they should know the risks they take! Of course, the animals should also respect the human territory and avoid entering it. If they do (as it happens during the rainy season when food may be scarce or when water drives them out of their usual territories), the "son of the site" will go and warn them not to come back; he does it in their own language, - by urinating in their footprints, by making mud-balls out of the such impregnated soil and by throwing them into their direction, enforcing his symbolic talk by strong worded warnings not to come back... People are convinced that animals, too, have a capacity to understand, even human talk (though some animals - antelopes for example - are more stupid than others); when informing other people about the presence of, for example, a snake, one should therefore not say "there is a snake" but use any other term (such as "something else is here"), as to avoid to let the snake know the awareness of the people.

*One can speculate what consequences the presence of relief-agencies in general and the free distribution of food will have on this concept of the essential unity and inter-dependency of all forms of earthly existence, the human respect for other, non-human beings and matters and the feeling of mutual responsibility for each element of nature. The fact that relief up to now has only been occasional and partial and has not (yet) led to a permanent dependency makes us hope that the foreign presence with their "gifts" is still understood as an interruption of normal life and as a by-product of the war. Nevertheless, the disruption of the usual fruitful relationship between the human person and nature through intervention from outside is likely to have effects on the mind of the younger generations which had never the opportunity to experience normal life and which already got used to depend on foreign assistance rather than on direct earthly support.*

### ***...on hunger and starvation...***

In times when thousands of people are reported to die (or have died) of starvation, one should perhaps clarify what this means: in general, people do not starve to death but die of the *consequences* of hunger, of sickness and/or because of lack of the energy needed

in times of war with its frequent displacements etc. Death due to lack of water is frequent, death because of lack of food exceptional.

The Southern Sudan is both a "blessed" and a "cursed" country: it is very fertile indeed but at the same time very exposed to drought, floods and the seasonal presence of weaver-birds and grasshoppers, insects, warthogs and apes doing additional damage. Because at least one of these enemies is active in destroying crops, people are used to hunger and sometimes even to starvation during some months of the year. These months are always the months where death-cases are frequent, weak persons falling sick, sick people losing their last force of resistance.

People try to survive these times of hardship in different manners, agriculturists and pastoralists using different resources:

- knowing that there is little hunting and fishing during the rainy season (antelopes are migrating to the South, the fishes are escaping in deep waters), people make provisions, dry meat and fish and store it in sealed earthen pots.- Food (grains) is also stored in granaries, a mother of young children being especially careful about the stocks.
- If the food is consumed, certain edible plants are collected and cooked. They usually taste good but their nutritional value is not high (the one of the popular nenuphar-plant is said to be nil). In general, agriculturists are better prepared to face starvation because of their greater knowledge of the soil's hidden richness.
- Nuts, wild fruits and honey are much appreciated, especially by children.- The milk of the cattle is the most sure nutritional "income" during times of hardship, but everybody has not got enough milking cows.
- While the pastoralists (Nuer, Dinka) return during the rainy season to their villages, agricultural people (like the Anyuak) frequently migrate temporarily to better-off villages where they stay for a while with relatives. These movements strengthen social ties and internal solidarity, but at the same time they are also a burden for those receiving and entertaining the guests.
- Experienced strong adults go for hunting big game (Giraffes, waterbucks) in the wilderness or move to nearby pools or swamps for fishing.

The mechanism of solidarity, mutual assistance and self-sufficiency got - at least partially - already broken at places where a local market existed and where people could sell their cows or beads in exchange for food. Because cattle and beads are important values of society and strong symbols for inter human relationship, the damage caused to traditional structures by foreign markets may become irreversible. Aid brought in by relief-agencies would have the same negative effect if it occurred under circumstances where tribal life would function normally; it can be hoped (and expected) that the old values of solidarity will be restored after the end of the war when people will find themselves alone with their nutritional problems as well with the problems of social relationship.

People who organize relief are often amazed, angered or even shocked by the lack of solidarity between the Sudanese themselves. This is sometimes due to ignorance of tribal differences in feeding-habits, and sometimes to a too naive conception of the principle of solidarity itself.

Indeed, when talking about traditional solidarity in case of starvation or other (for example legal) problems, it is important to keep in mind that this principle of solidarity *naturally* only exists between kindred persons, friends or age-mates, or in very specific contexts (for example fighting). In fact, solidarity does not depend on an individual's decision, it is rather a vital part of a group's existence, one of the mechanisms which facilitates its survival. A person may prefer to eat the little food he has alone, but such behaviour would have serious consequences for the future life of himself and eventually even his family or

group: solidarity should thus be understood as an act of generosity through which the individual selfishly assures his own well-being as a member of a group.

*...on religion...*

Religion has become one of the side-issues of the present war. In the account of history and in particular the background of the present civil war I shall stress the fact that religion is *not at all* at the root of the problem between the North and the South. It is certainly correct to state that the *present* military government of the Sudan is clearly inspired by Islamic principles of a fundamentalist type and that the introduction of certain traditional Muslim laws (the Sharia) was a supplementary argument for rebelling against Northern dominance. One should not forget, however, that this government has not yet been elected and therefore is not necessarily representative, not even of the Northern, Islamic population and its culture. The statement may be surprising and contradict present realities, but it is difficult to deny that *the Northern Sudanese belong not only to the kindest and most generous but also to the most tolerant people in this world*. Moreover, it is certainly not by force, through bombarding, killing and destroying that one will succeed in convincing people of the supremacy of one's own religion; it is fact that the present pressure from the North has led to an extraordinary popularity of Christianity in the South which has become a religion of liberation (though the lack of help from other Christian nations has brought doubts to the mind of at least some people: "after liberation", an old man told me once, "we shall collect all the bibles and send them back to Britain. They have brought us that religion, but once we had turned into Christians, hey left us alone with our problems. After our liberation from the North, we shall liberate us from them for a second"...). Indeed, religion is convincing when it helps people to improve not only their spiritual but also their physical existence, when it brings peace to mind *and* body. This is exactly why trade and development are much better arguments for a belief than warfare.

For the Southern Sudanese (or at least the Nilotic part of them), religion *can't* be a political problem because it is a personal matter. "Everybody knows that there is a God", the Anyuak King once explained me, "one must be blind or mad to deny it. And of course, there is only *one* God, but this one God has made many small Gods, one for the Christians, one for the Muslims, others for the Hindus, the Chinese and so forth. There are many Gods working at different places in different manners, but there can only be one God. Everybody has the same God." This wisdom is echoed by a Dinka parable: "The human Being is like an aunt", it says, "and then, - how can you expect an aunt to talk directly to God? There must be someone to act as a go-between, a smaller God, a God which is nearer to the humans, more understandable to them and more concerned by their small problems". "This is why we Nilotes have no problems in changing our Gods", a Nuer man explains to me, "sometimes we find that the God which we expect to protect us is not useful anymore, that he seems to lack or to have lost power. Then we change to another God and address our prayers to him, hoping that he will be more active, more successful and thus more trustworthy..." Religion appears clearly to be a very personal, intimate and fundamentally a *private* affair, is in no case the problem of society let alone a nation. Amongst the Anyuak, each family and indeed each father or mother has got its own "belief" in one or even several Gods (theoretically, they thus could be both Muslims and Christians at a same time), but all of them share the belief in the existence of the one and only supreme divinity, a God they call "*Jwok*" and which - because of its essentially non-human nature - is approached with so much fear and respect that the cautious distance kept to the sphere of transcendence appears almost as an expression of hostility (and indeed, the Nilotes acknowledge "*Jwok*" as the Creator of all things but take it also as cause for sickness and death).



*...on sickness...*

When living in Southern Sudan, I shared the life of the people at least in one regard: in case of sickness, I could not go and see the doctor and nobody would bring me to a hospital.

I don't wish foreigners anything alike, and yet I would like them to see how well the Sudanese care for patients, how great their sympathy is even for completely foreign, unknown people. It is such wonderful psychological support which encouraged me to stay alive where elsewhere I might have given up... There is no better chance of taking a lesson on Nilotic character than falling sick!

Once I "passed away" because of thirst - a short but horrible type of death. It was by pure miracle I returned to life, partly because some mud had been found in the more distant vicinity, but mainly because the people who were with me cried so ear piercing and heartily that I had no choice than to recover my lost spirits...

I was from time to time "dying", and probably it was good not to know the diseases I had, but I survived malaria, cholera and many other diseases; I don't know why, but I am convinced that the presence of so many caring people at least provided me with some additional energy. I was simply not allowed to die!

Amongst the many stories I could tell about being sick in Southern Sudan, I would just like to mention two which illustrate not only the people's attitudes on sickness but also the relationship which exists between the human person and his home.

In my early days in Anyuak country, I once fell so terribly sick that the people were afraid that I was dying. As I had no relatives, the king himself came in company of his religious specialists to "pray" at my bed. He said: *"You, Jwok (God, sickness - it is the same term!), go out of this body! You are coward, treacherous and arrogant!! How can you dare to disturb the life of a foreigner, of our guest!?. You know too well that he is defenseless and too weak to fight you! Why don't you come and try with us, we the people of this place? We are used to be visited by you, to fall sick and to die for absolutely no reason! But you, coward, you just want to take the body of our host! Go out now, leave him, go! Go now!!"...* And as if nothing had happened, I was immediately after the prayer told to go up: "It is all over now", I was informed, "you are well: Go up!" ... I have to admit that I really felt tremendous relief and stood up...

The same story repeated itself another year. But this time, the King changed his words: *"You, Jwok! (God, disease), go out of this body! How can you dare to terrorize this person!?. Do you not know that he is a son of o u r place, that he lives here since a long time, that he b e l o n g s to this piece of earth? This is his home, you have nothing to do here! Don't disturb him! Go back to your place, leave us alone, go! Go!!"* The notion of home and the notion of earth were this time sufficient to chase the invisible foreign presence out of my body - and through such powerful provocation of miracle, I survived again!

*Arguing* or simple *talk* are often used for curing people and for blessing those who are leaving or living far away. In general, the understanding of sickness is limited except in cases of accidents, wounds, eye- and skin-affections, constipation and diarrhea, with special treatment of madness; the root of sickness is thought to be in the sphere of spirituality (God) and this simply because there can't be any other and better explanation. But there are also "real" doctors with some knowledge of diseases and the plants which may give relief. In most cases, however, the disease needs special treatment, the lack of medicines forcing the doctors to explain the sickness by the interference of some spiritual

power (curse etc.) and to advise the patients of the places which are to be avoided. In case of an epidemic affecting a village, its whole community stands up in a very big demonstration of humanity against the powers of *Jwok*.

The knowledge and skill of the native doctors strongly varies from tribe to tribe, and people do not hesitate to walk long distances to see "specialists" or to ask foreign spiritual powers (Gods) for help. The idea that not every doctor knows everything is general, even within a tribe where different doctors have their speciality (some are good for snake-bites, others for a lost soul, others again for child-diseases etc.).

People know that certain types of sicknesses can contaminate other people. The Anyuak put very sick patients in isolation (outside of the village). Newborn babies are also isolated from the community and pregnant women and their husbands are held responsible for murder if they enter a newborn baby's place. The footprints of sick people are avoided, as if one wanted to avoid the path of those who are going to die (or who have already passed away).

### *...on death...*

Death is a permanent part of everybody's life, a continuous threat on existence. It would be completely erroneous to assume that co-existence with death would lead to a kind of familiarity or at least understanding and make people more ready to accept it. The contrary is true. Of course, there is not much one can do about it, but the greater the cruelty of destiny, the more frequent the cases of death, the more bitter people feel about it. It is not because half of one's children are dying or are already dead that one would more easily accept it and feel less sorrow. There is no comment on death, but deep inside one's heart there is this bitterness, is despair and anger. It is not the Nilotes' nature to lie down and cry for a long time, they know that they have to go up quickly and to keep their courage for further life. But nobody should try to imagine that the loss of a person gets more acceptable just because it is an aspect of daily life. People feel helpless whenever death occurs; the Nilotes' courage and (sometimes) apparent lack of emotion is just a way of saving one's dignity and pride as human being, a dignity which has to be uphold *against death and in spite of* all misery and apparent lack of justice. I have witnessed the tears of men when their young children passed away, but normally the men's tears are kept for *happy* events, for example when a lost child has been found alive in the wilderness.

The Nilotes bury their dead family-members inside the fencing, protecting them up to their total entry in the earthly sphere. Small children are not buried deep out of fear that the mother may otherwise stop to give birth. Nilotes abhor the idea of burning people. Once I was asked what should be done in case I would die... I replied that they could burn me and send me back to my country. "This we shall *never* do", the King replied horrified, selecting a tree inside my home as an appropriate burial-site... At the time I did not realize that I had been the first white man the Anyuak did not want to burn... Previously, white people were burnt and their ashes carried out of the territory, to make sure that the soil would not be spoiled!

The Anyuak bury their dead people "as fast as possible" "to get over it", but they do not leave them for at least one year; the graves are normally inside the fencing and given great care. After a death-case, people strip naked (i.e. they remove their beads, rings etc. and shave their heads), except the king or the chiefs who are not allowed to show any sign of psychological weakness. Visits of condolences during the year following the death are of greatest importance and make people walk for weeks to sometimes very far-distant places.

"It is good to grow old, but it is much better to die young", a 20 years old Nuer told me once. This philosophy sounds very strange indeed, but it is to be explained by the Nilotic belief that "natural" death is only the death due to violence. If someone gets killed in fighting, at least the cause of death is well-known, can be understood, explained and get

revenged. All other death is in the mind of the people not natural and certainly lacks any logic. Why should people fall sick and die, and why should small, innocent children lose their life without any *reason*? The Nilotic people strongly believe in God as the cause to all existence, but at the same time they wonder if God is really giving them always the necessary support in their desire to lead a peaceful existence *on earth*. Anyuak mythology for example explains how God, at the moment of the creation of the human beings, got amazed and then disgusted about the "transparent" appearance of these people, deciding that "his latest creation" would not fit into the concept of the world and consequently should be thrown away... It was the Dog who saved the humans and secretly brought them up. And when God threw "the stone of life" into the eternal waters of unconsciousness, it was again the Dog who brought a part of the rock on land (the humans had refused to help him) and thus allowed the people to live "at least for a while"... There is no direct enmity between the humans and God, but the humans are very cautious about the presence of spiritual matters in their environment, knowing that the spiritual nature and the physical position (Which lives partially "in the sky") of the human person makes it particularly vulnerable to the presence of such elements. To a certain extent, spiritual matters can be screened off from the human sphere (through protection by powerful earthly matters which may have spiritual impacts such as sound, colors, wood, earth, feathers, language etc.) but the major problems come from persons living within the sphere of the below (the earth) and which sometimes act as agents of pure spirituality (death), as carriers of disease and misfortune or as producers of a deadly curse.

Hating death does not mean that one is fearing it. The Nilotes consider death as a normal part of existence, and in a way even as a necessary step towards eternity: the remark may be misleading, but for the Nilotes existence somehow is only complete through death. This is because one does not exist as an individual but lives always as a member of a group. Death therefore cannot mean the end of one's existence, well on the contrary, it means that one actually starts an eternal life as a bearing element of the kinship-structure. A living adult person is only exceptionally called by his personal name: normally, terms of reference are used, either bull-names in reference to one's social identity or as "son of..." (the reference always being a name related to the person who is talking, the clan or village of his/her ancestors, from the father's or the mother's side). It is vital to keep this network intact and reinforce it whenever there is an opportunity to do so. While alive, one's name is never used so often and in so honorific terms as after one's death when one is stripped off all individuality but becomes a mere, pure symbol of a collective existence which is *immortal*. This immortality is a consolation for all what happens while living "on earth in the sky", provides a person with strength and courage and takes away his natural fear of death.

There is no personal life after death, but there is an eternal life as a member of a group. If there was a "paradise", it would certainly be situated *on earth*, at a place where one's ancestors are buried and where one therefore has not only his earthly but also his eternal home. The support given by the earth and the people residing there is so important that the Nilotes (or at least the Anyuak) would always return to their home-village. When resettling "for ever" to another, distant place, the Anyuak, for example, would carry along some soil from home and would, while living in the new place, mix it with water and drink it. After some time, they would start to mix it with foreign soil and drink that mixture, the proportion of "native" and "foreign" soil naturally changing after a period of time. Once the potion is consisting of "foreign" soil only, the period of adaptation has ended and a person can consider himself to be a "son" of that site and expect the protection which everybody naturally enjoys "at home".

Another demonstration of the intimacy between the human person and his site is the way of *oath-making*: one grasps a small quantity of soil from the ground, puts it on the lips and says "I am eating earth"... This is the most sacred promise an Anyuak can make.

Everybody is related to someone and therefore has got the assurance of surviving his death. Nevertheless, people dying without own children or at least without close relatives are terribly saddened: "Somebody who died without children is really dead", the Anyuak explained me. Hence the tremendous, *existential* importance of off-springs and the deep sadness one feels after each loss of human life. When the bearing structures of humanity (kinship) have collapsed, there is no hope left. Fortunately, most of the time someone *is* surviving, and the Nilotic system of knotting their kinship-net very large helps them in their effort to escape final death.

### **...on time and space...**

When remembering the time I spent in Southern Sudan, I certainly recall these extremely strong impressions of being "out of time" and "out of space", to understand my own existence not as the product of age and activity but as an entity which was not filled up from the outside and which was not conditioned by conceptions of existential transitoriness and the impression of being lost amongst objects, people and current events. The feelings were quite similar to those I had when climbing mountains and exposing myself to the temptations of space and eternity, only that here I was more passively and more permanently possessed by the very acute consciousness of my physical *existence*. Time and space were no abstractions anymore, they became *separated* from myself and could be *seen* from the outside; as if they were mere objects of human consciousness, they took an almost material density.

Such (perhaps strange) feelings and impressions are naturally alien to the people living *normally* in such conditions and who are more concerned by problems of survival on earth than questions of surviving after death (where there is no doubt). Foreigners must remain conscious of the permanent danger to give interpretations of other people and culture which are of concern for their own understanding but which are often quite irrelevant for the people concerned. Amongst the Nilotes, for example, all metaphysical and esthetic considerations are no matter of discussion and whoever wants to start such futile deliberations immediately turns himself into a strange object of curiosity, may appear ridiculous or even become suspicious. Like in a mirror, every alien look at a foreign culture is nothing but a reflection, of the other but finally of the self who is looking and trying to see and possibly to understand.

This does not mean that one should not make personal use of such mirrors, well on the contrary this should be the basis to the understanding as it will help all people concerned to understand themselves. But it is important to keep in mind the difference in approach and the difference in understanding, to remember that one's reflection is not necessarily and not always corresponding to the reality of the concerned people's mind and body.

Even if the Nilotes cannot see themselves from outside (*they see us!!*), they yet have an intensive experience of the time which has gone, which passes and which will come. Their songs widen the present space into the past and surround the presence with its intensity and glory, linking a person with his ancestors and their deeds. The presence itself is nothing but a step in direction of future generations, the support of their coming existence. In a way, people can said to be living only in relation to former generations, as "son of" or "daughter of" etc.; only after once death a person reaches his full identity and becomes a point of reference in which others can find their identity.

The Nilotes are extremely patient people, very careful and cautious in all their doings. *Slowness* is not an expression of a heavy mind, a low mobility let alone of

laziness, it is a *way of moving* one's body and one's mind. Nilotes *stalk* and never run, caring more for their *inner* cohesion than for efficiency and productivity. It is always amazing to see that, when rains are pouring from the sky, people would not run the 20 meters separating one hut from the other; they would walk as if it was not raining! Indeed, there are more important things in life than not getting wet! A human being should not lose his dignity; only when walking slowly but steadily one reaches the aim without getting exhausted, stumbling or falling into pieces. For the aim is not a distant goal, *the aim is the path*, the very moment of existence. It is not in vain that the Anyuak (like many other people) understand the footprints to be of existential significance and take them as witnesses of a person's earthly "soul".

I shall never forget the moment when I was running home while returning from hunting. All at a sudden, I was outpaced by a small boy carrying a heavy piece of antelope: while I was running, he was simply stalking! I was so outraged and ashamed that I decided to walk as if I had a lot of time to waist...

There is only one space and one time: the Nilotes are not in a hurry, they are aware of their past, their present and their future, and they don't need to worry about the meaning of their "existence". Nevertheless, there are certain things they have to prepare to make sure that they will be able to rest in peace. These two things get expressed by *blessing* and *cursing*: both activities are very frequent and, because they are known to be successful, very much hoped for or deadly feared.

A ppor boy once told me that soon he would have no problems anymore because he was much blessed by his old mother. While I myself - in my early days in Southern Sudan - disliked the continuous spitting on my head and face (especially by old women unable to produce the transparent, light type of spittle), I took a different view once I discovered that other people became jealous because I blessed so much... Blessing can take physical forms (and then always occur when a person is leaving) but it is in its most potent form expressed by *private, secrete language*. While blessing is naturally a welcome and generous activity, cursing is its exact contrary, an act of torturing and killing people. Amongst the Anyuak, *cursing* is understood to be *the most common cause to death*, known to be the terrible habit of people who look for revenge because of an insult or an offense which was not compensated for at court. What is somehow consoling is the fact that only *real* harm can be revenged through cursing and that such revenge realizes only *after* the person's own death. Because people are so sure of the effects of their cursing or blessing, they are not really deadly worried anymore if justice was not given during their lifetime.

### *...on language...*

Language is the most frequent source of problems between foreigners and the Sudanese. This is partly because the Sudanese are *translating* from their own language and that many foreigners as well have to use a language which they do not always master (even English-speaking persons sometimes have such a strong accent that even people "knowing" English well have problems of understanding). Language is the carrier of culture and thus the most *common place of misinterpretations and misunderstandings*, different conceptions of behaviour and thinking clashing almost naturally. Often, such problems can not be avoided, but one can overcome them if one remains conscious of the difficulty of understanding each other while using different languages and culture-related expressions. As a foreigner, one must be aware of the fact that *we are the strangers* and that we are the ones who have to learn (language, behaviour etc.) and to adapt. We should therefore listen and try to understand *before* arguing and contradicting, even when the Nilotic way of discussion (by using intellectual arguments) often invites and sometimes even provokes people (not only foreigners!) to enter disputes without any prior intention.

The Nilotes are masters in the use of language, and they are extremely sensitive to the language used by other people. They know many types of communicating with people, animals and spiritual matters. The normal speech is direct and clear, because of its crudity often considered to be aggressive. In company of friends or age-mates, obscene terms are in frequent use, the youngsters enjoying this opportunity to pronounce terms which are in other context strictly forbidden and immediate cause to troubles (including cursing). People address other people always according to their age, their function or their relationship to oneself, the basic principle being to avoid any (involuntary) offense of the other. Language is often the cause to troubles, fighting and death: it is a spiritual power, a weapon which can hurt and kill. One should handle it with greatest care!

A totally correct use of language can never be learned, but one can limit any damage to inter human relationship by *strictly refraining from shouting*. To the ears of Africans, shouting is an insult by itself, expressing lack of respect and self-respect, a loss of consciousness, self-control and self-pride. A shouting persons has no arguments left, no dignity and no hope to regain any esteem. The matter gets worsened by the fact that frequently *young* and yet hot-tempered foreigners dare to shout at other people and that their only "argument" is their (material) power; in such cases, the young age is an additional insult, but while young people have their age as an excuse, shouting by elderly persons simply can't be accepted without retaliating (directly or indirectly). The Sudanese have in the meantime learned how to react (not to react) on offenses of this kind, but such lack of reaction, as I mentioned, does not make things better.

Though the direct type of language is often offending to foreign ears, it is nevertheless the better type of communication, the one which is not directed by fear or suspicion. Unbiased, open language is a sign of good human relationship. *Silence* is the opposite of it, the expression of fear and hidden thoughts. If people stop to argue but say "I am keeping silent", there is ground to wonder about what went wrong. *The Nilotes are the masters of hidden thoughts*, and one should be happy if they express themselves in a direct and open way.

One can also study *body-language* which expresses not only feelings and thoughts but also more existential attitudes. For example, the height of a person is shown by holding the hand vertically (horizontally is for animals only!), and one does not point at a person with the finger but simply by the head or by the tongue. When greeting, people make a sign with an *open* hand, thereby showing their good (peaceful) intentions.

The best approach to Sudanese culture (and indeed any other culture) passes through communication, an honest interest in the other's way of living and thinking. *Sharing one's precious time* with the people (with those with whom one is in professional contact as well as with others) is the key to mutual understanding, for the Sudanese are unable to give us their support unless they know, understand and trust us. Once confidence is established, it is quite permissible to make mistakes, for if the Sudanese are able to remember, they are also ready to forgive, especially if a person excuses himself. Even if they publicly may strongly disagree, they understand a different position very well; but they are too intelligent to accept arguments which are weak, wrong or inhuman without counter-arguing and eventually getting angry. Like everywhere in the world, *power* is not the best of all arguments; foreigners working in the Sudan do certainly well in remembering it.

### ***...on relationship with foreigners...***

Historically, when talking about *human* relationship between the Southern Sudanese and foreigners, one can only refer to a continuous history of *exploitation, oppression and slavery*, - a relationship which brought only suffering and misery to the

people in the South. In no period of the past history there was an attempt to consider the needs of the people, to think of their future and to help them in their continuous struggle for survival. Foreigners were looking for slaves, for ivory and gold, for fertile land and, especially, for the water of the Nile. Projects like the Jonglei-Channel with its unknown, unforeseeable consequences for the people, their culture, their economy and indeed their survival were undertaken for the benefit of the North and Egypt (which is completely depending on the waters of the Nile). The exploitation of the Southern oil-fields (yet largely unexplored but pretended to be huge) was started (in Bentiu) and a National-Park for Wildlife (at Boma) was opened without any concrete projects for the people directly affected. It was said that the Southern Sudan was so fertile that it would be the "food-basket" for the whole world, but there were no attempts to prepare the exploitation of such potentialities. *"All the bad things came from foreigners"*, the Anyuak King told me once, *"cloth, money and firearms"*. Indeed, neither the British nor the Northern Sudanese really ever *cared* for their citizens in the South, except of course when it came to maintain "peace", law and order. For implementing their rule, the British sent "punitive expeditions", bombed and harassed the tribes they qualified as "wild". Military expeditions of the most brutal type continued even after independence and the first civil war, the army (with mainly Southern soldiers) attacking and killing indiscriminately members of small tribes (such as the Murle).

The continuous history of foreign aggressions (by Europeans, Ethiopians, Northern and even Southern Sudanese) has strengthened the inner coherence of the tribes and encouraged the people to resist foreign pressure and temptations, to concentrate on their own social and human values and to maintain their dignity in spite of all difficulties, misery and death.

The Nilotes have really no reason to trust foreigners. *"They make tschwir-tschwir in the sky, take pictures, make promises and - tschwirr! - they disappear. They never stay with us for a long time, they are afraid for their health and they fear of the mosquitoes, the animals and say the water is too dirty for them... They have never shared our suffering, our hope, our loneliness. And of course, they never come back..."*, a chief told me one sad night, when a cholera-epidemic had decimated the village. *"If only we were left alone, we would have settled our problems with the other tribes"*, another chief said, suggesting that it was better to be alone than to suffer of foreign interference. And indeed, the biggest interruption of traditional tribal life was caused by the mass-importation of machine-guns which decimated not only the wildlife but even more dramatically the civil population.

Since the outbreak of the war between the South and the North, many foreign organizations have come to help the Sudanese in their struggle for survival, and the people had to get acquainted to the presence of foreigners. Perhaps more because of natural suspicion than real fear of spies and agents, the members of the military security of the SPLA made it often very difficult for the people to organize and to supervise their help. There was more mutual distrust than mutual understanding, and this not only because war makes fruitful dialogues more difficult but also (and perhaps mainly) because there was a lack of communication between the parties. The behaviour of foreigners was sometimes so arrogant that the Sudanese almost wished to be left alone, knowing however that they were dependent on the foreign presence. Because the Sudanese could not accept certain patterns of behaviour and moreover wanted to impose their own rules and regulations, the foreigners in their turn did not really find much reason to show more flexibility and greater comprehension.

It is futile to discuss who was (and is) responsible for the problems which used (use) to occur between the Southern Sudanese and the foreigner relief-workers. Mistakes were certainly committed by both sides, and there was (is) a considerable amount of unconscious and unwanted provocation. Nevertheless, the foreign workers should always

keep in mind that *they* are the visitors who have to adapt both to the country and its people and that it is not only the Sudanese who have to change their way of living and behaviour.

"Adapting" to a new country does not mean to give up one's own identity and to forget about one's own values. Well on the contrary, it is always important to *be oneself*: different cultures do not clash because of difference but because of the arrogance with which one is meeting the other, different one. *Modesty*, combined with *kindness*, *generosity* and *sincerity*, will facilitate any relationship and finally result in the acceptance of each other's differences. These "differences" are, after all, only of a cultural kind and not racial; *essentially*, the human being is the same everywhere, and even society as the human collective entity is similar in its composition of "good" and "bad", "intelligent" and "stupid",

"generous" and "stingy", "ambitious" and "self-satisfied", "hard-working" and "lazy", "cruel" and "tolerant" or "kind" and "aggressive" (and so on) persons as elsewhere. The fundamental approach therefore should also be the same everywhere, a combination of *politeness*, *sympathy* and *understanding*.

It can be both easy and difficult to get in close contact with foreign people. The key to any positive approach is, in my opinion, *self-understanding*. It is only when we know who we are that we can openly and sincerely present ourselves to others, and if we do not have too many illusions about our personal "merits", our "knowledge", our achievements, our character, temper or our sentimental life it will be easy to get in a positive contact with others. For each encounter starts from zero, is an adventure and a new experience, both with the foreigner and the self.

What matters when trying to avoid problems due to misunderstandings is of course some basic knowledge of the other's cultural background, or, if that is failing, some *self-control* when reacting. Many incidents between the Sudanese and foreigners were due to patterns of behaviour or ways of talking which were understood to be insulting, while in fact they were not meant as an insult at all but simply due to different habits.

Of course, it takes time to learn about a foreign culture. It is not possible to come in a physical, direct contact with people through reading, though information can help a lot, especially when it comes to avoid misunderstandings. One needs to be *patient*. Many Nilotes do not like to be known before they know the other, they are discreet, often shy and sometimes suspicious. And sometimes they are simply not interested... Of course, people are everywhere very critical of foreigners and check their physical appearance and their behaviour in details; even this should be remembered when getting together for the first time. It is not because people are poor or because they feel more at ease when going naked that one should do the same: the Nilotes are extremely *sensitive* about other people's clothing, language and other ways of behaving, and they feel *easily offended* by (physical or verbal) expressions by foreigners. The Nilotes have their own particular feeling of *shame* (which do not concern nakedness as such) and follow particular rules of behaviour all according to the circumstances; at a same time, they logically expect the same respect from other people). Foreigners want the Sudanese to adapt as well and to show more comprehension for their behaviour. To such critic one could reply by pointing at the fact that the Sudanese are usually not prepared to receive and to deal with foreigners and thus taken by surprise; also, the fact that foreigners publicly display their economical power about the people and their life and sometimes force them to submit to their orders (through threats etc.) provokes them to retaliate by the only means they have to defend their dignity and self-pride: aggressiveness, arrogance and even defiance... During the last years, the Sudanese have made their experiences with foreign relief-workers and have learned how to "deal" with them without making problems; it is not sure that the "lack of reaction" is necessarily a sign of better comprehension...



When I suggested that all comprehension of the other and foreign should start with the knowledge of oneself, I also wanted to indicate that *one should not deny oneself*, one's own culture, traditions and patterns of behaviour. The foreigner, and for sure the Nilotes, appreciate the differences and accept it easily, *if only they feel sympathy and honesty in the other person's approach to problems and persons*. Misunderstandings and even quarrels become therefore only a major problem if there exists a moment of suspicion in the relationship; once the Nilotes know and trust a person, he can make mistakes and can be sure to be pardoned.

It is often said that the Nilotes are a "difficult" or even "hostile" people. May be that this is as true as to state that Westerners are rather "complicated" and "self-conceited". There is not much sense in attributing qualities to people without showing the *context* in which these qualities are needed. For example, it would be interesting to show how "easy" the Nilotes behave when living in difficult or dangerous circumstances or how "kind" they can be when a foreigner is sick or lost and in need of help.

Because people behave differently all according to circumstances, it is crucial for the good relationship with the people and thus the success of one's work to be *at ease* with oneself. This is certainly the most difficult task a foreign relief-worker has to accomplish for the sake of his professional activities, for climate, mosquitoes, frustrations, infections and other diseases (malaria), feelings of fear of the unknown (people, animals and war) seem to combine in making existence (and co-existence) extremely difficult. The best remedy to such a challenge is to try to *feel at home*, by making oneself *comfortable* at a place, by having as much as *privacy* as possible and by sharing such privacy with people of one's liking, with people who share one's interests or simply with interesting people. Through privacy, one gains strength and comes to peace with oneself, but through invitation of other people one forgets about the daily problems and escapes the loneliness and the boredom of routine-life. The Nilotes are very pleasant, they like to converse and to laugh: for them, too, life is often boring, always difficult and frequently sad, and any moment of happiness is a moment of real relief.

"Good" relationship is not necessarily the opposite of "bad" relationship: asked about their relationship with foreigners, some Sudanese told me recently that "the relationship is good", adding then, however, that "in fact, we have no relationship...". It needs some patience and some real interest in people to make friends - amongst the Sudanese as well as amongst other relief-workers. It is worthwhile trying, because a more private relationship with the people does not only help to overcome moments of stress, solitude or mental tiredness; it can be vital in case a danger threatens or any other problem occurs: dangerous animals, sickness, accidents, isolation, bombardments or military attacks may all at a sudden change the situation of a stranger and make him completely dependent on the help, advice and support of the native people. Foreigners have usually the impression to be in safety, relying on planes, food-supply and evacuation in case of any (medical or military) emergency; but in spite of all provision they remain exposed to all possible eventualities and have no more reliable protection than the one provided by the people who are familiar with the place, its nature and hostile forces reaching there. Those who have got friends while they were well-off and enjoying life will be on the safe side even in times of troubles and hopelessness.

*It is therefore vital and in the foreigner's very personal interest to establish a strong personal relationship (possibly friendship) with the people living in the village of one's work while one is still in the pleasant position of power and material dominance; once a situation becomes difficult or even dramatic, one will be glad to have friends! Friendship is indeed a very important security-factor!*

When informing foreigners about the Southern Sudan and its people, one has to give emphasis to all the difficulties one may encounter there, climatic, sanitary, cultural and political or military ones. Foreigners must be aware of what risks they are taking, and what type of dangers they may encounter. However, such information gives the impression that the Southern Sudan is a physically hostile place with mainly arrogant inhabitants, a place full of threats and hardship of all kind. If it is true that life in the Southern Sudan is - especially for the Sudanese themselves! - often difficult and sometimes even cruel, it would be wrong to describe the Sudan in negative or even frightening terms: the Sudan is a captivating place where one can (still) find extraordinary sensations and where one can meet with wonderful people who are full of courage, dignity and pride. Whoever is allowed to spend some time in such a fascinating country is very lucky indeed, and people who have the chance to help the Sudanese in their struggle for survival should feel privileged and grateful. It helps not to forget this, even when times are difficult and probably not so beautiful. And possibly it helps also to consider the fate of the people who are more directly concerned by the problems caused by the climate, by disease and by war, who bear the misery with so much dignity and who never give up their hope for a more decent, more joyful and more human existence. The Sudanese teach us how to survive and how to keep the self-consciousness of a truly *human* being alert in spite of all misery, injustice and hardship: by simply *pretending* that they are living in the best of all worlds and organizing their life and their beliefs accordingly they succeed to survive where other people would have lost hope. Such a conception of life should give courage to all those of us who, like myself, often feel lost in their own mental and cultural wilderness.

### **...on the many causes of civil war in the Southern Sudan**

When asking foreigners and indeed the concerned Sudanese why there is a civil war in the Southern Sudan, one gets a variety of explanations and arguments. Foreigners generally believe that the main cause is the implementation of the *Sharia* (the Muslim law); the Southern Sudanese feel the need to remind over and over again that the war is to fight "a common enemy, - the Northern Sudanese" (whom they simply call "Arabs"), as if there could be a doubt about this... Indeed, recent events have brought considerable confusion to many minds, not only in what concerns the roots of the conflict but also in what regards the participants let alone the final aim...

This is not yet the time to draw any conclusion on the history of the present civil war, to comment on people, movements and particular events or to predict the outcome of the war. But it may be worthwhile to point out a few very basic elements of the more recent conflict between the many people of the Sudan and, instead of going into details, to concentrate on some problems of principle significance.

As the Sudan has got about 177 different languages and many more tribes and cultures, it is difficult to talk about any ethical *unity*, in the country as a whole or in its different parts in the North, West, South or East. Nevertheless, one could talk of various *zones* which are more or less homogeneous and which find their own unity rather in opposition to other parts of the country than within their own "territory". The greatest "unity" can certainly be found in the North where Arabic language and Muslim religion have contributed to organize society in a similar, almost identical way and to maintain their traditional values (which were inherited from the Nubian culture). But the inhabitants of this Northern part of the country are a *mixture* of people of Arab, Nubian and African descent, many Nomadic tribes from the West or the East contributing to the racial diversity of the Northern Sudanese. Marriage, servitude, military service, forced labor and slavery were at the origin of the present mixture, the Nuba, Hamaj, Burun, Ingessana,

Berta, Dinka and Shilluk being major "contributors". Because of the "blackness" of their skin, the Northern Sudanese suffer much of the comments made by Egyptians and reproduce this racial type of arrogance on their compatriots in the South. What really makes the "unity" of the North is - besides of religion, language and cultural habits - the *economic superiority* it has over all other parts of the country, in particular the South, and in consequence the power it can exercise there.

The "unity" of the Southern region is made by the climate, its particular ecological conditions and its lack of almost any development. Though the Nilotes form by far the largest ethnic group, there are a multitude of other tribes of different origins, all speaking their own languages. The absence of any common language or religion and, of course, the lack of any communication or development has allowed the different people to preserve their culture, to maintain their way of living and to remain self-sufficient. Neglect, exploitation and oppression made the Southerners suspicious of all what comes from foreigners and logically enforced their traditions and self-consciousness, their sense of liberty and independence, their dignity and pride.

To understand the causes of the present war, one has to stress the fact that though the River Nile (the artery of life, as it is called) was certainly since immemorial times the powerful link between the two parts of the country but one should also emphasize the fact that it was only flowing in one direction - from the South to the North, making history fertile only for the Northern countries... This is of course very much simplifying, and yet it is true that the Southern Sudanese did hardly ever get anything from the North but were, well on the contrary, exploited in both human and material values: slaves and ivory were wanted goods in pre-colonial times while colonial and modern times rather searched for the precious natural elements which are water (Jonglei-channel) and petrol (exploitation at Bentiu) or started certain other spectacular projects (for example the Boma National Park) which were of no benefit to the people of the region (well on the contrary). The relationship North/South was thus traditionally one-sided and therefore bound to collapse. The British must be partly held responsible for much of the present situation as it had been in their hands to start some development in the South; instead, they made it a "restricted area" where they concentrated their efforts on keeping (their own) law and order and to force (their) peace upon the tribes in the South. Missionaries established a few schools, but for the rest it was emptiness and wilderness: South Sudan had become a natural reserve of people, animals and nature, visited (with special permission by the North) by anthropologists and a few tourists.

It is difficult to understand why the British at the time did not think of keeping the Sudan together by separating them into two (or more) independent or interrelated parts, the natural relationship and interdependency being a strong natural factor of unity in any case. But while the British had failed to prepare the way for such a solution, (perhaps simply because they understood that it would require a lot of time to make the necessary arrangements, they in fact prepared for the different wars which ravaged the country since independence (in 1956) and which are the normal consequences of lack of development in the economical, medical, technical, logistical or in the educational field.

When the British left in a great hurry, the first civil war had already started: the Southerners started a rebellion which was called *Anyanya* (the term refers to a snake-poison in Mahdi-language); it was a war for independence from the North which finally came to an end after 18 years and resulted in 1973 in the so-called *Addis-Ababa-agreement*.

The Addis-Ababa-agreement resulted in a "Southern *region*" which was given a semi-autonomy which included an own regional government with its own President and certain guarantees on the composition of the army serving in the South. This period of so-called "peace" was too short (ten years only) to bring any significant development in the

South, except that the Southerners became more and more conscious of the differences between the North and the South. Many Southerners worked in Khartoum, enjoying the boom (due to the money sent home by Northerners working in Saudi Arabia etc.) in the building-branches; most of them tried to get the education they could find at home, but what everybody learned was the general attitude of the Arab-Sudanese towards the people from the South. Because of this increased consciousness of the situation in the South, the suffering of many Southern Sudanese became more and more intolerable. Certain projects (such as the Jonglei-channel) increased the feeling of being exploited, oppressed and remaining helpless, the regional government with its Southern parliament contributing very much to the general frustration and deception. The feeling of being treated as an inferior type of human being resulted in much hatred and suspicion amongst the educated people of the South; a new dependency on Arab markets brought dependency of a new type to formerly self-sufficient tribes and made them suffer more than usual of the natural calamities. Tribal wars continued, especially in Upper Nile region where cruel interventions by the Army had led to more suffering and bloodshed than the continuous tribal wars could ever have done.

When trying to explain that the fundamental reason for the present war is found in *racism* ("All we fight for is *to keep our dignity as human beings*", a Southerner explained once to a journalist), it is important not to distort the truth: the fact is that the Northern Sudanese *in general* are - I voluntarily repeat myself - not only kind, modest and generous but also very *tolerant* people. They are not even racist in the sense that they would hate the Southerners because of their black skin-colour (many of them are very black themselves), but they simply disregard the Southerners way of living and consider their behaviour as inferior and "primitive". I would like to pretend that it is *ignorance* of the rich cultures of Southern Sudan rather than racial hatred which could explain the *general* attitudes of the Northern Sudanese towards the Southerners, - even though it is of course amazing and sad to see that even educated people from the Northern share views which witness of their ignorance and which are in no way acceptable, neither for the Southerners concerned nor for anybody else. If the present civil war can be said to be a *liberation-war*, it is not only a liberation from political and economic domination but more fundamentally a liberation from such racially founded attitudes.

Even though the present war has also got religious aspects, these are rather caused by the fanaticism of present rulers in the North than by any opposition by the Southerners to Muslim religion. As I tried to explain when discussing Nilotic concepts of God, the people in the South think that religion is a *private* matter. The people in the South have no problems in changing "beliefs", some people adopting even a Christian as well as a Muslim name, all possible religious beliefs finally concerning one single Entity which has got one universal name which is God... Logically, any attempt to impose one's beliefs on another is therefore absurd and arrogant at the same time; only *private, intimate experience with God* can result in a true, strong and lasting relationship, and where such relationship is lacking all "belief" becomes empty of any personal sense.

*Religion thus is not the cause to the present war* (which started *before* the introduction of the Sharia!), even though it has become a part of the general vocabulary explaining the war. The amazing spread of Christianity since the introduction of the Sharia is, by the way, a direct result of the present government's plans of islamization, - a further prove that religion nowadays has more to do with politics than with beliefs and piety.

While it is relatively easy and safe to describe the *objective* differences between the people of the North and the people in the South, it is almost adventurous to discuss the (political) differences which separate the people in the South. When blaming present leaders for their various positions, one could remember that a first split had already

occurred at the very beginning of the war, even before the present movement could take off: the Nuer followers of Samuel Gai Tut (a former minister in the Southern Government) which called themselves *Anyanya-Two* disagreed with the goals proclaimed by Garang de Mabior, the former wishing to fight for independence from the North, the latter for the liberation of an undivided Sudan; a big battle in 1984 decided in favor of John Garang. It is evident that the scission of the SPLA into different factions has done great damage to the movement as a whole and even more to the understanding and peace amongst the different tribes or tribal factions. It is sure that none of the present leaders wants his faction to get a purely tribal identity, but the common tribesman understands the problem perhaps in a more simple manner - and acts accordingly. The best one can hope for is that the present fraternal bloodshed will be understood as a lesson and as a warning for the future, when the Southern Sudanese, independent or autonomous, will have to take full responsibility for their country and its people.

At present, the differences seem to divide mainly the people in Upper Nile and Bhar el Ghazal (Nilotic tribes, Murle, Latuka, Toposa etc.), but the present war tends to hide a more fundamental difference which separates the semi-nomadic Nilotic tribes from the sedentary tribes living in Western Equatoria. One should remember that before the outbreak of the present war, the Central Government in Khartoum had dismissed the Southern Government and imposed on the Southerners the "re-division" of the region into three provinces which would have their own governments and depend directly from Khartoum. This was not only a breach of the Addis Ababa agreement (changes could only be made with an approving 2/3 majority of the Southerners) but also a gift to the Equatorians who were tired of being ruled by the generally less educated Nilotes... Any future peace-agreement has to take these differences into account and find a solution before the problem of division can repeat itself.

### **...and its consequences...**

In the conclusion of a paper presented for a Workshop in Bergen (see Annex), I summoned up the various aspects of consequences of the present war on the Anyuak tribe:

..."the constant *displacement of people* because of fighting, hunger and natural calamities, the *disruption of family-ties*, the *destruction of natural resources*, the *harm done to wildlife*, the *lack of medical and veterinary services* with the subsequent spreading of diseases and epidemics, the steadily increasing number of *war-wounded*, disabled and amputees, the sad fate of *children* separated from their parents, cut off from their cultural environment and desperately looking for education, the *disruption of normal social life with its loss of experience and consciousness*, and, last but not least, the continuous *tribal fighting* which now got all the dimensions of modern war-fare. However, it is impossible to provide a full account of the terrible sufferings endured by the people, and to describe the *tragedy* which each individual has passed through"...

Talking about the plight of the people, I said: "The human consequences of war can be listed: hunger, exhaustion, fear, sorrow, solitude, sickness and despair. The real impacts of war, however, cannot be measured, and will not be understood, because they are in the unknown future. We can already see some of the future results of years of human and ecological destruction, but we cannot see the wounds which are not bleeding, which lie in the heart and the mind of the people, and which may never heal. A war destroys much more than what is seen, and these invisible wounds are perhaps the worst of all consequences of war. The war in the Sudan is not a forgotten war, as it is often said; it simply ignored. One may hope that a coming, unavoidable peace will be of more interest to those sharing the humanity. .... When speaking of human consequences, it is perhaps easiest to think of the future life of children separated from home for many years, mentally tortured

by the events of the war, left completely alone with their ears and their tears. Laughter helps them now to struggle on, to resist despair, and this laughter gives us still some courage to imagine better times. But the future is, at present, empty of any hope. And whoever looks at these children feels ashamed."...

One and a half year after the anthropological workshop on the Sudan in Norway, nothing has changed to the better, well on the contrary, the suffering of permanently displaced people and the lack of any prospect has increased to a point of intolerability. What I said on the Anyuak is still holding true, but the longer the war lasts, the more complicated the future problems appear. Soon the people have not only been displaced geographically but also in their culture, their ways of living and their patterns of behaviour. What about the pastoralists who have lost their cattle and who have been forced to learn the tasks of an agriculturist? What about all the children who never went to school and who never got any education at home? What about the women who have lost their men and who will have to care for their surviving children without the support traditionally provided by society? Or what about local tribal socio-political structures? What about all the people having spent so many years in big town like Juba or Khartoum? Will they ever be able to survive under the difficult conditions in the South, physically, spiritually? What about those who were educated in the religion of the North, indoctrinated with different values? And what about the peace amongst the tribes, after so much hatred having been spread all over the places? And, finally, what about the refugees and all the "unaccompanied" minors (and former minors) who will have to leave their school in Kakuma and return to the educational emptiness of Southern Sudan? Obviously, amongst the many consequences of war, the worst is perhaps this loss of identity and the absence of any visible chance to find a new one.

Perhaps I am wrong to be so pessimistic. The Anyuak King's words (which I quoted in the above mentioned paper) were seemingly more optimistic: "Soon, very soon", he told me, "soon things will be better. God shall create a new type of people. Completely new people. People who are not tired yet!" And as if there was any need for further explanation, he added: "*For we people living now, we are so tired, so deadly tired!*"... But while the old King may have lost all illusion for a better life in *this* world, the younger generations is still struggling for maintaining their dignity and fighting for peace which *must* be the last consequence of war. Let's hope that for once peace will not prepare the next war but have time to heal the wounds, in culture, nature and the human person. And let's be confident that foreigners will not only focus on war-situations but also help the Sudan in those overdue times of a future peace, when the consequences of war will be felt in totality.

*Annex:*

- "The Reward of Life is Death"
- "Seven early Years in the Life of Napoleon"
- "Notions et valeurs de la Terre"
- "Bibliography"