

*Pregnancy and Birth*



# Pregnancy

*A pregnant woman should not visit a source of water*  
(NDOGO-SERE)

## *How to avoid pregnancy*

“No girl wants to avoid pregnancy”, a *Toposa* tells, “they all want to be pregnant”. What may hold true for the *Toposa* may not be the case elsewhere. After all, the big problem of young girls is precisely to avoid pregnancy while still sleeping with their boyfriends. Pregnancy of unmarried girls is frequent and always leads to problems for the boy (who has to pay a heavy fine) and also for the girl who may have to marry the person who impregnated her. There is no knowledge of how to prevent pregnancy, which, as a *Zande* man said, “is difficult to avoid”.

Like most people in the Southern Sudan, the *Acholi* “do not know this”, but the *Murle* avoid pregnancy “by not having sexual intercourse during the first days after menstruation”, the *Lango* “by avoiding to associate oneself with boys” and the *Lopit* “by giving the boys advice and to prevent them from moving anywhere with big girls”. The *Päri* do it by “knowing the menstruation period”, the *Lango* “monitor the menstruation cycle” and the *Toposa* women “know their periods. But the young girls do not know, - and the mothers’ information is not always correct either”. While the *Päri* control it also “by agreement”, the *Lango* and the *Ingessana* seem to be the only ones really trying to prevent it ‘artificially’: “they take some herbs which are to stop the fertilisation of the eggs and thus pregnancy” or “they avoid pregnancy by taking some traditional medicine obtained from plants, roots and leaves”.

## Abortion

Abortion occurs without being frequent. The most cases are unwanted cases of abortion and may be due, as a *Toposa* notes, “to venereal diseases or the violence of the husband”, or, as a person from the *Ndogo-Sere* thinks, “because of malaria and sexual diseases”, adding that “there is no wanted abortion (though it may happen nowadays)”. In general, people dislike the idea of provoking abortion. Nevertheless it happens: the *Päri* explain that it may happen when “the girl’s parents refuse the girl’s boyfriend, or if the family does not want to get a bad reputation” (this would mean that the parents want the abortion), the *Anyuak* say that it could happen “sometimes, when the girl dislikes the man who had made her pregnant”, the *Nuer* would simply confirm the existence of cases of abortion and the *Lopit* that, in their culture, “there is no abortion, - except if there are some problems with girls”. The *Azande* give alcohol as a reason for abortion when they explain that “it happens when there is a problem with the husband (because of drinking etc.): a herb known by everybody is to be taken as a drink”. When a *Lango* woman gets abortion, “people go to the witchdoctor to find out what kind of curse this could be. Sometimes, the woman is questioned about the mistakes she has committed which could have caused abortion, mistakes such as bad talk or any other bad behaviour with parents or ancestors”. The *Murle* say that there is “No way of getting abortion”, and yet they have a medicine to provoke it: “by drinking rotten cow-urine; it is believed that such urine can lead to abortion. People just store it secretly for ten to fifteen days in a closed container where it gets rotten: then they drink it...”.

Abortion often results in the death of the mother as well and thus is a double loss for the woman’s husband. I am not aware of any legal consequences of such a sad event, but *Seligman:120* states

for the Acholi that *“If a woman dies in her first childbirth or without children, the husband should pay a fine of fifteen sheep to his father-in-law.”*

## Pregnancy before marriage

*“This happens when a girl and a boy are in love and refuse their parents’ advice”, the Pãri explain. When Atuot fathers suspect the girl to be pregnant “the girl will be beaten by the brother or other relatives until she admits who has slept with her. Her girlfriends will be beaten as well – and if that boy is near, he would be beaten too... Such a situation may lead to a dispute between the families. As soon as the girl has admitted and told the name of her lover, she will be told to pack her things and go there at once...”.*

Pregnancy before marriage is said to be frequent (“very frequent” even with the Toposa, the Baka, the Moruba, the Azande etc.). Only our informant about the Lopit states that *“in Lopit culture, a girl is not allowed to become pregnant before marriage”*... The reaction to the problem of untimely pregnancy varies from place to place. It can lead to social discrimination, as amongst the Lango where *“Pregnancy before marriage is nowadays rampant but previously it was rare. Girls who are getting pregnant while still not married are disregarded by the society as loose or disobedient to her parents’ advise. The man who had made the girl pregnant has to pay immediately three cows and five goats”,* or it can be violent as amongst the Toposa where it apparently also *“happens very frequently, and this”,* as our interlocutor stresses, *‘because ‘moral values are vanishing’...The girl’s brother may seriously fight the person who did it. It is very serious. However, the girl may inform her lover and that one will go into hiding. So the parents have to discuss the issues and come to an agreement. Either there is a marriage or there will be a fine or fifteen cows as marriage-price.”*

In most other places, the legal solution appears to be the normal way of ‘solving’ the problem, the man being told to marry the pregnant girl, and if he does, the fine can even become a part of the bride-wealth. A Moru girl, for example, *“the girl will be asked to reveal her friend’s name, then the boy will be summoned by the parents and the whole story normally ends up in marriage. Only in case the man should refuse to respond to the parent’s call, they will report him to the court.”*

If a boy from the Ndogo-Sere sleeps *“with a girl ‘in the wrong way’, that is without the parents consent, there is a fine which is to be distributed amongst the members of the whole family”.*

The Baka (where this occurs very frequently), *“people look for the boy and then he will have to marry. There will also be a fine. The parents keep the girl until she has delivered, only then the marriage will take place”. The responsible man will have to marry the girl”,* our Avukaya informant relates, *“...but only after delivery and after having paid a fine”,* and the Azande follow similar procedures: *“A fine is to be paid. One waits until the girl has given birth, names the child after the father”.* The Nuer, too, think that a girl who got pregnant before marriage should belong to the man: *“If a man gets a child from another man ( it is called ‘ruok’),”* we are told, *“there will be a case at the court and the man has to pay a fine of six cows; the child then belongs to the husband. If a man refuses to marry a girl once she is pregnant, he will be taken to court and has to pay six cows which are given to the relatives of the girl.”* The fine which a Nuer who has made a girl pregnant is identical to the one a boy has to pay for sexual intercourse with an unmarried girl without any pregnancy occurring. In Dinka society, *“If you make an unmarried girl pregnant, you pay four cows. If the marriage is rejected, the man may claim the child later on. If*

*not, the child will take the mother's father's name. If you make a married woman pregnant, you pay seven cows*"<sup>1</sup>.

The following song from the *Ceiecbet Dinka*<sup>2</sup> expresses the worries of a boy who has caused a girl's pregnancy without having the means to pay the bride-wealth needed for marriage:



As I keep silent like this,  
I have something deep in my heart to tell...  
As I keep silent like this,  
I have something deep in my heart to tell...  
But how can I tell as God has left me with nothing but  
obstacles?  
He took my father while I was still young,  
has left my home as an empty ground  
empty like the house of God  
where only witchcraft made a living,  
until there was absolutely nothing left...  
So where could you tell,  
the son of Mabor Deng Atem will kill you!  
Your horn is cut, Majok Rial,  
My bull, son of Rial Kol,  
Your horn is short like a log,  
Is short like a small boy's penis waiting for girls...  
The curve in the sky has been cut  
And is smiling like a smiling thing,  
Bright like a moon's lights,  
Majok Rial your head is like a thorn of the *Thep*-tree,  
Is like the thorn of a *Lang*-tree...  
Because of this girl I get bothered like a lion found in the  
desert;

she has brought me quarrel with the people of this camp,  
has brought me quarrel even with older women,  
with boys and with grown-up men as well,  
has brought me quarrels with all of them!  
Now they look at me with very unhealthy eyes,  
Now they look at me with very unhealthy eyes!  
Oh, sorry for those who want to follow me,  
they will be like a hyena following a human person with hanging arms,  
thinking they will drop anytime,  
oh, sorry...  
Your head is like a log,  
Your head is like a log!

With the *Anyuak*, early pregnancy usually results in marriage; but "*the parents can wait until the girl has given birth; then, the discussion about the bride-wealth will be conducted*". For the *Murle*, pregnancy before marriage "*is not so serious as they can bring the accused to the court of the elders, together with the girl's relatives; he will be sentenced to be whipped and has to give three cows to the girl's relatives. Sometimes, even amnesty is given and nothing has to be paid.*" Very interesting the additional remark made by our informant: "*It is against Murle law*", he states, "*to pay cows for an unmarried girl if she is to get married tomorrow to another person.*"

<sup>1</sup> About the *Dinka* and the *Atuot* reaction to pregnancy due to adultery, see the chapter "Sideways and Stigmas".

<sup>2</sup> By Matur Makur Apac.

While a pregnant girl remains in her parents' home up to her marriage, other cultures have different customs. A *Balanda* girl, for example, *"if she is pregnant before marriage, will be told by her parents to move to the responsible boy's home and to come back home only once she has delivered... When she comes back, the boy will have to marry her or to pay a fine."* And the *Acholi*, too, tell their pregnant young daughter to get out of the house: *"The girl will be told to go away to the place of the man who has made her pregnant!"*, we learn from our informant who explains that *"this is already considered to be like a 'marriage'. But the bride-wealth will be asked only once she has delivered. In addition to the marriage-price, the girl's husband will have to pay a fine for 'having done these things in a wrong way'."*

In case of rape, which is rare, pregnancy may also occur and provoke violent reactions from the girl's relatives. *"Pregnancy after rape is completely forbidden..."*, the *Ingessana* state, *"but if it happens anyway, the accused is to be hunted and killed by he girls relatives – unless of course he has managed to escape and to save his life."* Amongst the *Lango*, too, *"Pregnancy after rape is very rare. It is considered to be very brutal, and if you as a rapist are caught, you will be killed or beaten to a medical level!"*. In *Nuer* society, pregnancy because of rape is also called 'ruok': *"The woman may report it, and the man may have to pay the fine of six cows and may be jailed for one month. This would mean that a man is ready to marry the girl. The matter will have to be discussed between the girl's and the boy's parents."*

## Precautions to be taken during pregnancy

Sexual intercourse is considered to be a moment where the human persons are in a state of existential impurity. There are no indications which could make us believe that the very act of making love would be harmful to the involved persons nor to anybody else<sup>3</sup>, but the moment of human procreation is – at least in some places – considered to be dangerous for the fecundity of cattle or fields<sup>4</sup>. Pregnancy is of course the direct consequence of the sexual activities of human persons and implies therefore similar risks for the fecundity of other growing matters (cattle, fields), but at a same time it is the moment where a human person moves in the unknown but surely very fragile sphere between life, death and life: pregnancy as a very special state where a woman's body is constantly changing shape is obviously a physical process, but at a same time it works not less obviously on the psychological, mental level of a person: spiritual elements are actively taking part in the process of human procreation. Pregnancy may be harmful to other matters and therefore be kept away from them, but pregnancy is also a state of great human fragility: the growing being inside the woman needs a special protection, too! The absolutely fundamental importance of children for the survival of the individual person has been much stressed before<sup>5</sup> and does not need to be repeated here; what may be added here is a reminder of the difficult living-conditions of the people and the absence of medical care (in general and for pregnant women in particular), facts which may explain the particularly great worries of people for the welfare of a child which will be the source of their happiness.

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<sup>3</sup> To see people making love is something very shameful, both for the lovers than for the person who has surprised them: to have sex 'in public' (at places where lovers can easily be seen) is immoral and it is very bad to talk about intercourse in public and more especially in presence of older persons than oneself. . . For the *Azande* it is "a bad omen" to see naked people.

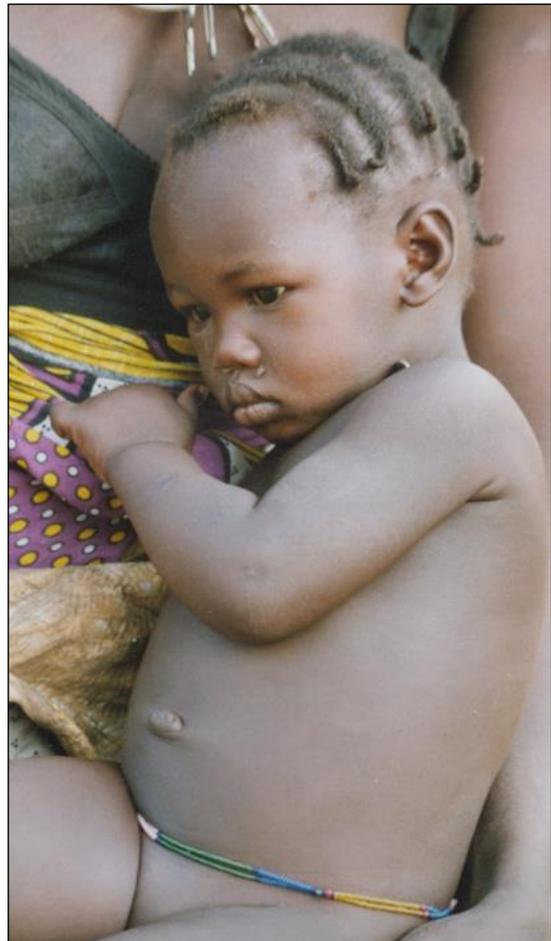
<sup>4</sup> See the chapter „Sickness and Disease“

<sup>5</sup> See the chapter „Begetting children“

The methods of protection concern purely physical aspects and precautions of a more spiritual nature.

The following examples of how a yet unborn child gets protected is interesting because it shows which spheres of human life are of a particular importance and significance. There is a consensus on the need to protect the *physical life* of the mother (no heavy work etc.) and on a pregnant woman's *feeding habits* (the *Toposa*, for example, “*still believe that an unborn child is feeding through the mouth, and that's why its mother should only eat soft food*”); the prohibition regarding the eating of certain types of *animals* or the great role *colours* play when people decide what could be harmful would merit further investigation.

The danger does not only come from activities, animals and things but also from ‘*impure*’ persons, dead, sick or pregnant individuals. Worthwhile noticing is the fact that a pregnant mother should not *look at* certain things such as the sphere of the above (where the God and his spirits live), at blood, at mad or blind persons, at monkeys etc. *Physical attitudes* are also of significance, for the comfort of the child in the womb of the woman (therefore, a woman should have her legs stretched) as well as for its physical shape; interesting is the *Avukaya* explanation for their rule to let nobody walk or stand behind a pregnant woman: the fear is that the child would come to resemble those persons! *Sexual restrictions* exist as well but vary much; almost funny is the remark made by a *Sere* on this subject: “*they should not have sexual intercourse during this period...*”, he says, “*...except with their husband...*”.



Worthwhile noticing is the fact that a pregnant woman's *husband* is, at least in some cultures, also concerned or at least associated by the various rules.

If the necessary precautions are not taken, people believe, there will be great consequences for the welfare of the child, its chances of survival and its physical health. The specific rules may reflect the (different) beliefs which exist in the various cultures, but they are all the consequences of the particularly harsh living-conditions which govern the life in almost all places in the Sudan, and, more particularly, of the people's daily experience of sickness and death: if life is such a delicate and breakable matter, how much more exposed to mishaps must be the life of someone which has no protection of his own!

Here some examples for such rules of protection:

*Acholi:*

- The woman should not do any heavy work, not attend ceremonies (like funerals) and dances.
- People are not allowed to step over her legs (otherwise the mother's milk will dry up)

*Suri:*

A pregnant woman should

- not climb a tree
- not look up inside a hut
- not eat the spleen or the intestines
- not break the bones of an animal
- not look at blood
- not see a sick person
- not hold a dead body
- not look at monkeys

*Anyuak:*

- not to sit on a pregnant woman's skin (*Tung Watlwalo*)
- not to eat her food unless the woman's husband has tasted it
- nobody should use the woman's spoon
- not to look up (the sky, the hut) (*This rule concerns also the husband!!!*)
- other pregnant women nor their husbands shall come near ("*theeri*") – otherwise there would be a blood-case!

If the rules are not respected, the child will be born blind or paralysed.

The prohibitions end just before the delivery when husband and wife celebrate it by eating a mixture of beer and red durra.

*Balanda:*

- The woman should stretch her legs
- One can pass behind the woman but not stay behind her
- She cannot eat all types of fish
- She cannot eat the meat of buffalo, waterbuck, bushbuck and elephant
- She cannot eat the animal's head and the stomach (the bile)
- A pregnant woman selects her food
- She eats alone until the child walks

*Dinka:*

- A pregnant woman is not allowed to fetch water (if that is far away)
- One is not allowed to pass behind a pregnant woman
- When sitting, nobody is allowed to pass over the women's legs.
- During pregnancy, she has no sexual intercourse.

*Nuer:*

The pregnant woman has to avoid all heavy jobs.

- Should not have sex frequently.
- The food and water will be provided by the woman's relatives.

*Toposa:*

- A pregnant woman does avoid to appear in public, stays mainly inside the hut (this up to six months): there is fear of the devil-eye which may cause the death of the baby.
- The mother should not look at "strange" things, for example at monkeys, mad or blind people... ..nor should she watch videos or television (there could be bad images); the fear is that the baby may get influenced by such "visions" etc.

*Jiye:*

A pregnant woman should

- not sleep on her back
- not break bones
- not eat spleen, intestines, jaw-meat of antelope
- and nobody should be walking behind her

*Ingessana:*

- During pregnancy, the woman is not allowed to “eat some delicious food” such as simsim, fats etc. The belief is that the baby in the womb could develop fatness and put more weight into the woman, and that this could complicate the delivery and perhaps even lead to the death of the woman.

*Baka:*

- She is not allowed to eat pumpkin-leaves, yam, *red* animals (such as pigs, giraffes etc.), monkeys, turtles, warrels and crocodiles; if she eats python, her hair will fall off. If she eats red pig, she will get leprosy.  
- people are not allowed to step over her legs.

*Avukaya:*

- She should not eat monkeys and not do heavy work. She should stay in the house. If she eats prohibited food, abortion will take place.  
- People should never sit behind a pregnant woman: the fear is that the child would resemble those people!!!

*Ndogo-Sere:*

- The food is provided to her. Some food is not to be eaten (this according to the husband’s clan-regulations).

A pregnant woman should not

- visit a source of water
- meet certain people who are disliked by the relatives
- not have intercourse except with her husband (!!!)
- not to wear narrow (modern) cloth
- go to the person responsible for keeping the bride-wealth which was paid for her (that is her brother)

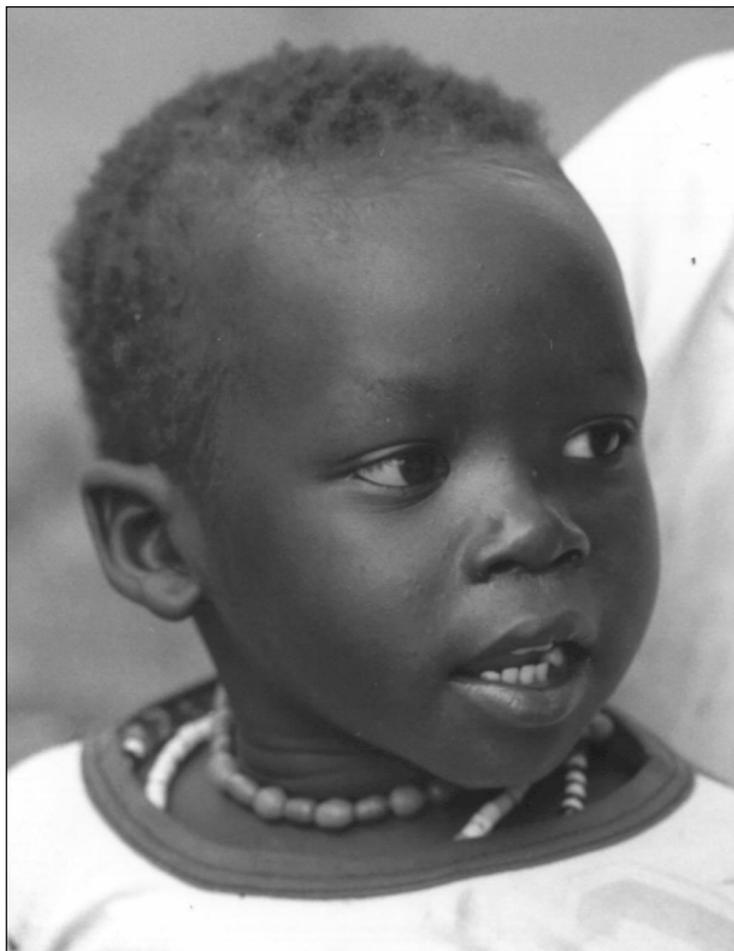
She should

- pray to her ancestors
- receive blessings from old relatives

*Zande:*

A pregnant woman should not

- eat an animal with a red skin,
- porcupines
- certain species of monkey
- certain species of fish
- not eat out of the pots where such animals have been cooked
- not sleep in the room of that brother of hers who had got the bride-wealth from her marriage
- not step over lianas
- not fold her legs while sleeping
- not to look at the roof of her hut (otherwise she will miscarry)
- She should keep her legs stretched but nobody should step over them
- (some clans) not to walk behind a pregnant woman



## Birth



### Delivery

Circumstances of delivery vary from culture to culture. With the Nilotes it is usual, as for example for the *Dinka*, that “a woman, after five to six month of pregnancy, moves to her parents’ home. She will give birth there and returns to her husband’s home only after about six months”, even though this normally is the case only for the delivery of the first child. In some cultures, delivery is to take place in the house, in other cultures it should happen outside of the house, even outside of the compound. Differences exist also in the people being present during delivery; while the mother is everywhere assisted by some elder women, the presence of the husband and other relatives is sometimes permitted, sometimes prohibited. Differences exist equally in what concerns the child’s placenta which sometimes is buried

inside the homestead but sometimes outside of the village. I don’t know if all people pay as much attention as do the *Päri* or the *Anyuak* who want the umbilical cord to be cut by a sharp grass and not by a knife: it is a custom which stresses the people’s understanding of the very process of birth-giving and indeed of sexuality from which all artificial, ‘non-earthly’ matters have to be kept away.

### Confessions:

From a purely social viewpoint, biological fatherhood is not of an utmost significance: a girl would always bring bride-wealth and a boy conceived by someone else could always be sent back to his real father to get the bride-wealth for his marriage from there. Yet, all men want to be somehow sure that their wives’ child is ‘really’ theirs. The *Azande* seem to worry at a very early stage: “When a man realises that his wife is pregnant”, Streck:298<sup>6</sup> relates, “he will go to the poison-oracle. He speaks ‘Poison-oracle, I heard that my wife is pregnant, so please poison-oracle do confirm that this is my child, a child of my soul – but if it is not, if it is not of my soul

<sup>6</sup> Streck, Bernard, „Sudan“, Köln (DuMont) 1982

*but of another man's soul which is inside my wife's body, that is while I think that this is my child but in reality it isn't but comes from another man, - then, Poison-oracle, spare that chicken and show me, that this is not my child'...*". Most other people wait for the moment when a woman delivers to learn the truth, that is in case the woman should have made "a mistake" before or during her marriage<sup>7</sup>; if the delivery is slow or difficult, the woman will asked to save the life of her child by confessing all her previous "mistakes" and naming her lovers.

The most amazing thing about this custom of using the painful moment of birth-giving as a means to gather hidden information on sexual activities is not so much the very fact of its existence... ..but the conclusion<sup>8</sup> that it exists practically everywhere in the Southern Sudan!<sup>9</sup> People participating in the ordeal and methods naturally vary from place to place, and the consequences of the confessions are not everywhere the same neither..

This is how our interlocutors commented on the tradition:

*Nuer:*

When giving birth, a midwife (an old woman) will assist the woman.

During the labour-pains (which may be prolonged), the woman may be asked if she had not been faithful and she is told to reveal the name of her lover. This confession, however, will remain secret. "Na" is the term for the pains occurring during birth.

*Shilluk:*

The mother cannot see the child unless she has admitted all her mistakes... Usually, she admits two to five, sometimes more. The "responsible" boy has to pay one ox to the husband; but if there are more than ten "mistakes", nothing has to be paid...<sup>10</sup>.

At each birth, the woman will repeat all what she has confessed before...!

*Balanda:*

Indeed, if the delivery is difficult, the woman will be questioned by the *mother or the sister of the husband*.

*Azande:*

Yes, the custom exists, but it happens *only if the girl is not married* yet.

*Anyuak :*

If the delivery is slow and difficult, the husband is called and he puts his foot behind the woman's back.

*Acholi:*

If a woman cannot deliver easily, she will be asked who had "deceived" her: "perhaps there was someone else?" She is forced to make confessions, about her previous lovers but also about conflicts between the families.

*Dinka:*

When delaying birth, you have to confess and you would admit who was your lover. That man would be fined for adultery.

*Avukaya:*

The husband is present during delivery. If the delivery is difficult, the mother will be questioned about her previous sexual life. She will tell everything. The husband will pour water over her womb and the child will come out fine. There will be no dancing during this ceremony, just talk.

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<sup>7</sup> Cases which could not be solved at court can be postponed up to the moment of birth: "latest then we shall learn the truth", the elders may conclude.

<sup>8</sup> Could this be by accident? At least all our interlocutors from twenty-five different cultures acknowledged the existence of the custom.

<sup>9</sup> It exists also elsewhere. See Axel Ivar Berglung, "Confessions of Guilt and Restoration to Health. Some Illustrative Zulu Examples", in: 'Culture, Experience and Pluralism', Uppsala Studies in Anthropology 13, Uppsala 1989

<sup>10</sup> see Hofmayr: 271-72

*Ndogo-Sere:*

Indeed, if delivery is difficult, the woman has to be questioned about her past sexual relationship; she will confess... The names of the men are not asked for, so there is no fine.

*Moruba:*

The firstborn child is always delivered in the home of the mother's parents. In case the woman is married, there is no problem.

But *if the woman is not married*, she will be questioned to tell the lover's name. The relatives of that man will come and say that "if such a statement was true, the child would come out easily.. ...but if it was untrue, the child would actually never come out!". Afraid what could happen, the girl eventually tells the real name of her lover (and the child will come out quite normally).

*Lango:*

At birth, a woman should tell all she has done before. Men are not allowed to be near.

*Ingessana:*

The woman has to confess to the relatives who has been the father to the child

*Baka:*

In case of delayed delivery, the parents will be called and she will have to confess. Then, the husband will pour water on her womb and the child will come out..

*Toposa:*

If a woman will delay to deliver, she will be questioned about her previous relations. The woman will confess and provide the names of those men; the accused people will have to pay, - unless the husband is mild. An accused man has no chance to deny, nobody would believe him.

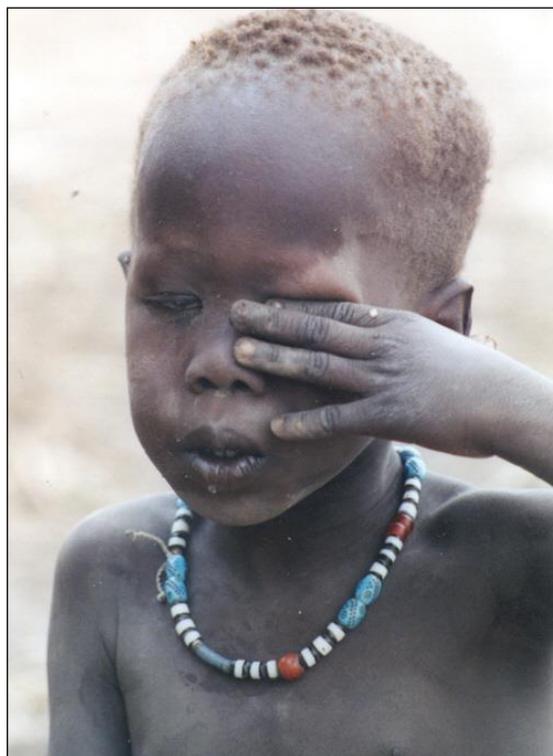
*Päri:*

Confessions are only asked for if the delivery is difficult: afterwards, the husband will pour some water over the belly.

*Sometimes, when the husband has been away on a journey and has left his wife at home, and it happens that his wife got pregnant and he doubts that the child is from him, he will say that "if this child is mine, I will not step on your blood, but if the child is not mine, I will step on your blood". If he does step on the blood, the woman will die instantly.*

The *Didinga* believe "that pregnancy cannot just come from one person alone, there must have been other men..." and therefore do not only suspect but are sure that a woman must have had other lovers.

Unlike other people who say that such painful questions are only asked in case of a difficult delivery (what is rather usual), the *Didinga* use this type of 'torture' under all circumstances: "*At the moment of birth*", our interlocutor states, "some woman may block the mother's vagina, thus causing great pain to her: in result, she will confess her previous lovers... They will all have to be fined." Very special and interesting is an additional *Didinga* custom: "*when pregnancy lasts too long, the girl's maternal uncles are called and they have to confess as well, will have to admit all their bad talks...*"; one only wonders how the maternal uncles are made to confess...



Note that the *Dinka*, when a mother gives birth too early, "*people will say that 'she is not normal', - and they believe that the child is sick because of that. The name of such a child is Piok*".

## The first days in the life of a new-born child

There is a space which lies between the time of delivery and the entry into the sphere of the humans: it is the time when the child's wounds after delivery are still healing, the navel slowly drying up (to speed it up, the *Suri* are putting mud on it while the *Anyuak* woman makes it to dry while putting her hot thumb on the wound). Because of the child's extreme fragility, the access to this space is - in all cultures of the Southern Sudan - reserved to a few persons only; there is the fear that 'impure', jealous or simply 'bad' people may come near to the child and cause its premature death. While the child stays inside the hut for a certain time, the space surrounding the hut is equally 'taboo' for a certain category of people; if I should happen that someone of those categories comes too near to the hut and the child should perish, he or she will be accused of murder and will have to pay the usual blood-price; an example of such a person is the pregnant *Suri* woman who "*is not allowed to approach or to urinate near to the place of the new-born*". Some people - such as the *Anyuak* or the *Shilluk* - mark the place in a particular way as to make people aware of the situation, the *Anyuak* "*surrounding the compound with a rope*" and erecting some kind of tree in front of the compound as a visible signal to the people not to approach. To mark the place of a newly born infant, the *Azande* put some elephant-grass above the entrance of the hut; it is not only a warning sign but also meant to purify people entering the place; everybody entering has to pass under it.

The fear of infections or other dangerous matters concerns people considered to be 'impure', such as *pregnant women* (and their husband!), "*women who have their monthly period*" (amongst the *Balanda*), and more generally *men*: "*after birth*", we learn from the *Toposa*, "*the mother will stay inside the hut, with no one near except very close female relatives. Neither husband nor male relatives are allowed to come near to the child before nine days (when the navel has dried up), and even later on, when the child is brought out and a ceremony is held, the men will have to watch from a distance*". "*People who had sexual intercourse should not enter during the first eight days*", a *Zande* states, linking most types of prohibition to the sphere of sexuality which is generally considered to be unclean, infectious and thus potentially harmful. A *Shilluk* mother is, according to our informant "*herself considered to be impure, and she should not take anything into her hands; she will be served water and food. The mother's relatives tie a container full of ashes around themselves and walk through the house: then they can see the child.*" The *Dinka* include into the category of people who are potentially harmful to the child even the brother of the mother: "*besides of pregnant women are not allowed to come near to the new-born*", we are told, "*the mother's brother is not allowed to see the child before he has made some sacrifices and ceremonies*". In what concerns *Murle* precautionary measures, we learn that they "*do not allow most adult persons and all those who are considered to be impure persons to enter the mother's room. As a means of personal protection (and protection of the child), the mother will touch with her feet the body and more especially the breast of the child: this as a kind of blessing; it is done to protect from visitors who claim to be good people...*". A prohibition related to the *fire* and its purifying and protecting force was told to us only by our *Suri* and *Didinga* interlocutors: "*nobody is allowed to take fire out of the hut while the baby is still 'new'; if it should happen "the baby's umbilical cord will tear and its urinating will be painful"*.

The husband will see the child only after a few days.

While a *Zande* husband "*can be present right from the beginning*", a *Nuer* husband will see his child after a few days only, a rule which is easy to respect if the child is born at the mother's place.

The child stays in most cultures only a few days in the hut: for a girl, the number of days is always *four*, for a boy it is only *three*. The same principle of three or four days is applied when a person is mourned: usually there are three days of mourning for a man and four days for a woman. The figures are *sexual symbols* and refer to the *uneven* (three) number of a male's sexual organs and to the *even* appearance of the sexual parts of a woman. In Nilotic cultures, however, a child stays much longer inside the house (more than eight days for the *Päri*, one month for the *Anyuak*, between two and three months for the *Balanda*). When a *Balanda* “*new-born child is sick, it will stay in the hut. The father has to go out, kill an animal and bring it home. Beer is put on the mouth of the new-born on the day of birth. There are native drugs for cleaning the wounds in the stomach.*”



While the first days (or even months) of the child are thus spent in social isolation, the moment when it is taken out into the world of the humans is duly celebrated by parents and relatives. The first appearance of the infant in public is the moment where people will have a careful look at it.<sup>11</sup> During the ceremonies, the child's name will be made public as well: when birth is taking place in the home of the mother's parents, the name is usually given by the mother's relatives; it can reflect the circumstances of birth (“*born during the drought*”, “*born by night*” etc.) or remind of the child's appearance at birth (“*black*”) but in case the relationship between the families on the mother's and on the father's side is not good, the child's name may well be an insult to the father (“*son of the criminal*”, etc.). The father may then accept the name or call the child by another name. Our *Avukaya* informant tells that in his place “*a child is named when taken out of the hut: certain leaves are put in oil and then put all over the child's body. The child gets its name and explanations are given why it has got*

*such a name. My own name, Agole, for example, reminds of the time when my mother was pregnant and quarrelled with her husband: she left him and went home to her brother's house. The verbal meaning is something like ‘has left both woman and child’.*”

The ceremonies which take place at the moment when the child is made to see, for the first time, the light of the world, are relatively modest in most places but quite elaborated in others. Here just a few examples for the way different people celebrate this important event:

#### *Toposa:*

The naming of the child happens at that time (after about eight days): very important, as this means the child's entry into society. It will remain within the neighbourhood up to the age of fifteen, shall then enter the sub-section... Even afterwards, the child is kept away from the public: when the mother carries it around, it is always covered.

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<sup>11</sup> The Nilotes check in particular a male child's sexual organs (if they don't look normal, the child is supposed to be killed, usually by getting drowned in a river).

*Lokoya*<sup>12</sup>:

After delivery the woman is confined until the umbilical cord detaches itself from the child. She is brought out by the traditional midwife after three or four days depending whether the child is a boy or a girl respectively. She sprinkles grains as a sign of good delivery and thanksgiving to God. The baby is asked to multiply children in the future like the grains... The mother, by this act, is allowed to come out of the house to get fresh air and sunlight in the morning hours... The child's mother wears skin in her front and back. She carries on her side a knife if the child is a girl, and an arrow with a broken handle if the child is a boy... On the naming day, the mother is asked to bring the child out and lay him/her on a skin mat. The child's mother is asked to sit and get up three times on the stool for a boy and four times for a girl. She finally rests on the stool. The paternal parents sit on one side and the maternal ones on the other. The child is placed between them. The paternal grandparents begin throwing grain on the child, three times for a boy, four times for a girl while calling the proposed names. When they finish, the maternal grandparents do the same while calling the name of their choice. Finally, the midwife brings food and a sauce of beans. The maternal grandmother puts the food into her mouth three or four times, depending on the sex of the child. Each time she spits it out before finally eating it. The women join her in eating as well. This is to signify that the child should grow up and contribute to child-bearing."

*Didinga*:

The infant is kept inside the hut for three (for a male) or four (for a female) days when the child will be taken out. A mixture of charcoal and coffee (if there is no coffee, one just calls something else "coffee") is prepared for the blessing of the new born.

*Avukaya*

The child will stay three (for a male) or four (for a female) days inside the hut. After that time, the child will be taken out and there will be a ceremony in the morning (at day-break), with consumption of food. Before washing the hands (after having eaten), people put their hands on the mother's breast to make her free for feeding the child.

*Moruba*:

When a child is born, it will be taken out of the hut after three days; in case of a girl, after four days. A ceremony will take place on the occasion of taking the child out: food (simsim etc.) is to be cooked and eaten by the family.

*Azande*:

The child is named by the father or the grandparents, after four days.

An amazing ceremony takes place when the child is to be taken out of the hut: a fire made out of sticks and leaves is lit at the entrance of the hut and the child is turned over the fire ("roasted"); this is (probably) supposed to make the child strong and resistant, perhaps also to purify it. While this happens, everybody has to look into the fire (in order not to get blind).

A four to five year-old child with a stick will stand near to the fire, as a kind of guardian of the entrance of the hut. Kasava-food has been cooked and was put inside the hut. All at a sudden, another boy is jumping out of the hut (over the baby and the fire) with the food in his hands! The boy will be hit at his legs by the boy who is standing near the fire with his stick; but the child will succeed in running away and go outside of the compound where he will eat the food, sharing it with other children. (If the infant is female, girls will perform the ceremony).

## The time it takes to become a truly "human Person"...

Even if this topic seems to be out of the scope of this presentation of habits related to sexuality and family-life, the question is yet significant enough to be mentioned briefly. Indeed, the notion of a 'truly' human person is crucial in the self-understanding of the people in the Sudan, in

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<sup>12</sup> See Lomodong Lako, "The Lokoya of Sudan", p.106

particular for all Nilotic cultures. The belief is that birth alone is not making a being really 'human' and that other criteria need to be looked at before one could really call someone to be "a human person". Such criteria can be age and sexual maturity, appearance (circumcised people, twins etc.) or be of a more social type (initiation etc.). The *Didinga*, for example, consider (as we are told by our informant), that a child is considered to be of a human essence "*already after three months, when there is 'water in the stomach': foetus is considered to be a 'human being'*". They consider any miscarriage as a death-case. The person who impregnated the woman will be held responsible and is fined the full blood-price!". Similarly, the *Toposa* insist that "*a child is considered to be a human being from the very first moments of pregnancy*". The *Azande* - like many other people in the Sudan - think that a child has become a 'truly human being' once it has been taken out of its initial isolation in the hut and brought to public attention. When our *Murle* informant says that it is "*usually, after seven to ten days*", one wonders of course what he means with "usual" in this context: most probably his statement refers as well to the time when a mother takes her child for the first time out of her home.. The *Lopit* say that a child has got its truly human identity after three years (that would be the time when it is walking) and the same time was given by an *Anyuak*. However, from the *Anyuak* we know that a child is considered to be 'a truly human being' only once it has reaches its (sexual) maturity, a belief which is, according to our informant, also shared by the *Nuer* people.

## The period of weaning the child

If, in the culture of the *Ingessana*, "*during the time the child is at the mother's breast, the two partners practise sex without any worry*", this is an exception to the general rule that a mother who is breast-feeding her child should abstain from having own sexual activities. The duration of abstention varies: for the *Murle*, "*Traditionally, no intercourse should take place between fifteen and twenty days. But in reality, there are violations of this old belief.*" The 'belief' is of course that the mother's attention could get diverted from her child and that, in consequence, the child could suffer: the *Anyuak*, for example, fear that "*if a father is sleeping with the mother during that time, the child will die*". The *Dinka* idea that the diarrhoea of an infant is due to "*the mother's mistake*" is another illustration of the belief which holds the mother liable for anything which could happen to the child. The *Lopit* are allowed to have intercourse after a relatively short time ("*when the child has reached the age of eight months*"), while an *Acholi* must already wait for "*one year or one year and a half*", actually "*as long as the child likes...*". Almost everywhere, the period of expected abstinence is even longer: the *Lango*, the *Moruba* and the *Avukaya* have "*No sexual intercourse during the weaning-period, one to two years*", "*not even nowadays*". A *Balanda* "*child is at the mother's breast during two years. There is no intercourse during that time. When the child can walk, antelope-meat is brought to the midwife: now the mother will eat normally*", a *Baka* mother will have "*no sexual intercourse during two years*" while the *Azande* don't want a woman to have intercourse "*until the child walks*". The child is also deciding in the culture of the *Ndogo-Sere* about the mother's sexual activities: "*Husband and wife do not sleep together before two to three years*", we are told, "*the mother can breast-feed her child while it is already walking, even running... She leaves it only once the child wants to eat normal food. But if the man should run after other women during this time of weaning, the mother may consent to have intercourse much earlier.*"

*A father's sexual life during the weaning-period...*

During the time a mother is weaning her child, the husband is not supposed to have sexual intercourse with her. For a man with several wives, this may not be a problem, but for those who have got only one wife, it definitively is one. There is no doubt that most men use this period of

time to sleep with other women, married and perhaps unmarried ones. Everybody seems to know it and to accept it as the direct consequence of the prohibition to have sex with one's wife for sometimes a considerable length of time. My *Balanda* friend has no problems to admit that he *"is going out and has sex with other women, but only when out of his hometown which is Yambio.."*. While the *Ingessana* men can have it easy because they are allowed to sleep with their wives, and if the *Murle* men *"would just need to be patient...and have nowhere else to go..."*, their patience is not required for a very long time. For all other people, there seems to be no other way out than to look for other wives: the *Didinga* guess that *"the husband may marry another woman"*, the *Dinka* know that *"he will get involved with other women..."* while a *Nuer* husband, who *"is supposed to stay at home until the child walks will most probably go and sleep with other women, or with the women he has inherited from his father (co-wives = lwom)"*. In *Toposa* culture, *"The father may marry or sleep with his other wives. He can also simply look for other women - secretly, of course..."*.



The *Lango* are ready to make a compromise: *"The father can sleep with another wife, or he can wait... ..and in that case, he can sleep with the child's mother after six months already, though not frequently."* The *Baka* men *"may well go outside..."*, the frustrated *Avukaya* men *"may 'go around' during that time (and commit adultery)"*, while a *Moru* man will indeed refrain *"from having sex with his wife"...* ..but *"if it is the only wife, he will go out and look for other women, possibly committing adultery"*. The *Lopit* men, too, do not stay at home but will go and *"look anywhere to get any girlfriends during this time"*, and the *Azande* father will do exactly *"according to his wishes. He will sleep with other women, of course"*. Our *Acholi* interlocutor draws the conclusion of something which obviously must be called a *general habit* when he says that *"during all this time, a man should not... But nowadays this rule is not respected anymore: the men will sleep with other women... This is the cause to so many diseases."*

Our final remark would emphasise the fact that the men's habit of having sex with other women than the ones they are married to has nothing to do with lack of love or infidelity and is therefore not really a moral question. If cases of adultery are so frequent, it is last but not least because of the tradition to keep a mother away from all sexual activities.

## Children who are different

“If I get a child that roams around  
I shall throw it out of the stockade  
if I get a child with a circumcised penis  
I shall throw it out of the stockade,  
if I get a child with curved legs  
I shall throw it out of the stockade.” (repeat)  
(NILOTIC)

When a mother gives birth to a child or children who are, physically, not looking normal, there may be different reactions, but in all cases the people get scared, fearing that something very special has occurred. The belief of the *Päri* “*that the parents may have been cursed, that it is due to some Gods, or also to some sickness or disease*” is shared by all people in the Sudan. ‘What shall we do?’, the people will ask themselves. The *Balanda* “*would look for medicine*”, hoping perhaps to help the child, more surely hoping to protect themselves.

### *Handicapped persons*

One of our *Lango* interlocutors describes the general attitude towards disabled persons very well: “*Children who are not normal are well cared for and given everything they need, cloth, shelter etc. If their spirit is not cared for, they may seek revenge after their death and kill other children*”. If “*children who are not ‘normal’ are so much respected*”, as an *Acholi* expressed it, it is not because of pity for these people but merely because of the mentioned fear of the unknown, of the spiritual power such persons may have. Amongst the *Azande*, the fear of the consequences of any ill-treatment is so strong that “*Father and mother curse a child who has insulted a handicapped person*”, but even elsewhere the ‘respect’ of such potentially dangerous human beings is very big indeed. Amongst the *Murle*, persons who have mental disorders can marry: “*A mentally disabled person can marry but practically he will not sleep with his wife. If the person is a woman, she can produce children, she can be married to any normal person, or to any person ‘not normal’ like her.*”

In some cultures, children who are born handicapped get simply killed: “*They are well kept in some families...*” a *Murle* explains, “*but in other families, human rights-abuses are taking place: cold blood killing by those who are closest related to them, like own mother, own father, and sometimes an uncle*”. Such killing is not needed when people understand already at an early stage that there is ‘a problem’: “*in case of crippled or otherwise handicapped infants*”, a *Toposa* relates, “*People may simply leave the child to die, and they will conclude that the child was to be ‘on transit’*. Such an attitude is also the one taken by the *Nuer* who crudely state that “*their future is death*”...

The *Atuot* consider “*children born with some abnormality e.g. with an extra nose, eye, leg or anything else to be not human and call them ‘Acek’*. The elders decide if minor things like an extra finger should make people worry and if they keep it they give it a name related to that deformity. A child with a major deformity is to be ‘God’ (‘jok’) and it is taken and put into the river in a ceremony attended only by the spear master (spiritual leaders). These kind of children are also given a name so that their memory is kept and they can be cared for at later date when someone will marry in its name (the procreation in the name of the dead is called ‘cuong’)”.

## *Twins*



Seemingly, there is nothing wrong with twins, and there is no reason why one should not like them. Yet, twins are obviously very special in many ways, last but not least because of their resemblance<sup>13</sup>: people who are so much worried about their identity of being a truly human person must ask themselves the question of the twins identity: are they really human, and are they in fact one or two? Why did this happen, and from where do they come from? From the humans like all other children, or are they actually created by something else, in another sphere of life? The questions are manifold, the answers left to speculations... At this instance, we may simply take note of the fact that the majority of our interlocutors believed twins to be one entity, that some linked them to birds and that most of them said that “twins are good” while at a some time expressing all kinds of measures to be taken to keep any harm caused by twins away from the people. As this paper wants to give evidence to specific attitudes towards human persons who are different from others without analysing the ‘deeper’ reasons for it, the following examples may be detailed enough to understand the different kind of approaches taken by Sudanese people on the existential ‘problem’ related to twins.

Beginning with cultures which appreciate twins and which seemingly do not worry, we shall see how other cultures express their doubts about the human identity of twins and what kind of

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<sup>13</sup> People do – to my knowledge – not differentiate between one-egged and two-egged twins.

measures are taken to keep possible evil away, and eventually we shall take note of some more radical reaction to the birth of twins.

*Baka:*

The Baka like them. If one dies, he will be buried normally. If the 1<sup>st</sup> born of the twins is of a male sex, the twins will be kept three days in the hut, if it is a girl four days.

*Avukaya*

Twins are liked. There is the same attitude as the one of their immediate neighbours, the *Baka*.

*Moruba:*

Twins are liked and considered to be two *different* persons. The only fear of people is linked to the fact that “they are very demanding”, need a lot of care and a lot of money.

*Ndogo-Sere:*

They like to get twins.... Yet, twins need *special blessings*, and special attention: each of them is getting exactly the same thing. There is the belief that the *twins can cause much harm* if they are not treated well.

*Didinga:*

Twins are considered to be good... ..but *precautions* will have to be taken: twins should never eat the head and the legs of any animal (and this during all their life).

*Lango:*

Twins are much respected (feared) in *Lango* culture. At the moment of delivery, a ram has to be slaughtered for the twins’ blessing. The twins’ parents are not allowed to fight or to quarrel with each other or anyone else, and the father is not supposed to go hunting before the twins have grown up.

*Acholi:*

Though the *Acholi* like twins, it is yet considered to be an *abnormal situation*. Hence the necessity to perform ceremonies. There is so much fear of the unknown...If one of the twins dies, he or she is *not buried* (this would be a curse for the surviving) but is put in a gourd and *hung up in a tree*. One should not mourn for such a dead twin, for otherwise the remaining one would be bound to die as well. Twins are considered to be *one* person.

*Seligman:120* completes this information: “The birth of twins, whether of the same or opposite sex, is recognised as dangerous, for the babes are regarded as a menace to the lives not only of their parents but also of any elder brothers and sisters, while they will *certainly bring bad luck in hunting*.... If only one survives, there is no problem, but if both survive then *one of their relatives is expected to die*. The father of the twins build a special shrine, in appearance resembling a “*kac*” but called “*jok rut*” or perhaps only “*rut*” (twins). A goat and a chicken are killed, and the older people of the village eat the flesh before the shrine together with vegetable food. The shrine is used for some years. The father may resort to it before going hunting, and perhaps will not eat the meat of his kill until some has been roasted before the “*rut*” and a small piece eaten there... ..*Crazzolar*a informs us that the umbilical cord of twins are buried in a space round the hut, often under the “*okango*” tree (“tree of God”) or granary...*If the twins die, the young bodies are put in a pot, with two small openings in it but with the mouth well-closed, and buried in the bed of a small stream; if the house is moved to another site, the pot is dug up and again buried in a stream...*”.

*Balanda:*

Twins are good. After birth, they are put to the river to be bathed there.

*Anyuak:*

After birth, twins are left one night on the river bank: if they are surviving, they are to be kept but given special charms which may purify them. Twins must be fed equally. Special names are given to the twins (*OpiewAchan* and *Ochan/Achan*). Note that the Anyuak consider even the child born after the twins to have been ‘infected’: it is given a special name (*Okelo* for a boy or *Akelo* for a girl) and has to wear – during childhood – a white bead which protects him or her from evil.

*Päri:*

Twins have to be brought up together (identically)

*Atuot:*

When one of the twins dies, one small part of his body is not buried: the ring finger (or the toe) is cut and taken to the place where the placenta was placed during the birth. His head is to be shaved before burial. The remaining of the twins is kept away from the grave for two days. *Twins are called 'birds'*, and the death of one is understood as one of the 'birds' having flown away. Keeping the finger is to ensure he health of the surviving twin.

*Nuer:*

The same as with a circumcised boy: one hopes that one of the twins may die. Otherwise, there will also be sacrifices (a bull to be slaughtered) and prayers.

*Toposa:*

Traditionally, *all twins are disliked*, human or not (even twin-cattle are much disliked!). *One of them is to be killed, that one is said to be "on transit"* (left to die 'naturally'). However, nowadays twins are accepted.

At the birth of twins, there is a ceremony, a kind of play where the man dances with spear and shield, while the woman's breast is full of blood (from a sheep which was killed). The hope is that such a thing should not happen again.

*Murle:*

Both of the twins are kept alive. The funny thing is... ..that *they turn the elder to be the younger and the younger to be the elder!!!!*<sup>14</sup>

There must be a goat or even a bull to be slaughtered. It must be done by an experienced person. One or two milking cows must be kept for them in order not to share the milk with anybody else except father and mother, maybe the brothers and sisters.

*They must marry at one time.* What happens if one of them cannot marry yet, is that, at the day the espouse reaches home, *both twins must go to bed with the wife*, though one of them will escape later on when his brother starts to have sexual intercourse with his wife... This is to show that they are all married at the same day.

*Ingessana:*

The last one in delivery *must be killed immediately*, and this because the community believes that twins are due to witchcraft.



<sup>14</sup> The logic behind this only apparently strange custom is the belief that the one who has entered *first* (was conceived first) would have to get out *last*.