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The Human Rights of Cultures

Lessons from experiences with traditional South Sudanese Cultures¹

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Introduction

Unlike (most) of the distinguished contributors to this workshop on Human Rights issues, I am not really part of the international Human Rights movement but something like a humanitarian freelance who has been both an observer and a witness of political, military, social and cultural events in a number of war-torn societies and this in various functions. As I have been invited to share with you some of my life-experiences, let me start with a brief biographic introduction.

I am a Swiss who has taught literature at a number of European and African universities and who has worked during thirty years for the *International Committee of the Red Cross* (ICRC) in places like Vietnam, Bangladesh, India, Afghanistan, Central Asia, Congo Brazzaville or the South Sudan. I am also an ethnographer who stayed for many years in the South Sudan, conducting field-research amongst a Nilotic people living on both sides of the Ethiopian-Sudanese border, the *Anyuak*. My knowledge of the peoples of the South Sudan made me to become an advisor first to the *ICRC* and then to the many NGOs working under the umbrella of *Operation Lifeline Sudan*; I also worked as a consultant for *Unicef*, reflecting on so different topics as the Education of girls, Wild foods, Fishing, Tribal Fighting, Sickness and healing, and – in view of HIV/Aids – on the Sexual behaviour of the people in the South Sudan. After the conclusion of the ceasefire in the *Nuba Mountains*, I eventually happened to become the Sector-Commander of the Joint Military Commission (JMC) in the SPLA-controlled areas of the Nuba Mountains; working as a peace-keeper, it was my first time to get directly involved in politics. Since a few years, I am engaged in a project which aims at bringing ethnic harmony and thus political stability to the many nationalities living in the South Sudan. Because this project aims at the recognition of all the ethnic identities found in the South Sudan, it is directly and intimately linked to the respect of human dignity and thus also to the respect of human rights, non-regarding race, origin, gender or education. It is at this point where I am given the opportunity to speak to you, as an individual who is not part of any movement but who has always tried to build bridges between peoples and cultures.

But under this heap of so-called facts, who am I, really? The question of identity does not find an answer in a curriculum. I wonder... When I look back at my life, I remember only people and places, see colours, hear noise and silence... Life and Death? How many times I had to change my identity, to adapt to new environments, to look for new friends! I have spent my time between fiction and reality, moved back and forth between the interior spaces opened by literature and the life-threatening mine-fields of human existence, between moments of reflection and moments of personal physical commitment; I was a pilgrim in search of human values, as such a believer in poetry, convinced of the beauty of the human being, carrying my load of love and hope through the swamps of human misery, pain and terror. Where am I now? Did I already lose my way in the thicket of my beliefs in humanity or will this narrow path of hope eventually lead me to some safe place? How long will I be able to find inspiration in the bravery and kindness of people and get the force to move on?

Trying to give me new courage, my friend Willy Mutunga once told me that whenever he feels unhappy or lacks inspiration, he goes to visit the slums of Nairobi: it is there he finds the powers to continue to struggle for the well-being of the people, where he gets the strength to fight for human rights and justice, where he recovers from own frustrations. Having spent most of my life in the slums of humanity, I fail to find much new energy in the misery of other people. My only hope lies with the examples of other personalities – such as Willy

Mutunga -, who continue to work for their vision of a more just human world in spite of all they have witnessed, observed and endured.

I am sorry for being personal, but when it comes to human rights issues, it is difficult to separate my experiences from my feelings, emotions and thoughts: I happened not only to be an eye-witness to human misery, injustice, persecution, oppression and the consequences of brutal war, I actually had to share physically at many instances the fears and the physical or the mental suffering of the people concerned: I was starving, killed by thirst, died of malaria and all kinds of other deadly diseases, I was bombed, threatened, shot at, arrested and deported, and for having brought 10'000 Sudanese children to safety I had even managed to become a country's "enemy number one"... Having been close to people in prison, cultural, mental or political ones, I looked at human misery not only from outside the prisons' wall but also from inside, and thus I came to understand violation of human rights partly as a direct expression of human cruelty and sometimes bestiality, and partly as a consequence of lack of education, loss of culture, social conditions and indeed as the result of violent experiences endured by the oppressors themselves. Instead of accusing, I tried first to understand the causes to human rights abuses and the practical obstacles to violence, showing my concern, sympathy and understanding for the people's own problems; it was only once I had established a positive relationship that I started to convince the people of a need of change in behaviour, usually hinting at the people's own dignity, human feelings and understanding of human rights.

My personal experiences make me believe that the question of human rights is a practical rather than a theoretical one: we cannot enforce them but have to be realistic: it does not help to accuse and to threaten, *human rights issues have to become the project of the people themselves*, they cannot really be enforced from outside. The argument that human rights are often considered to be a "purely Western concept" which would not hold true for the rest of humanity² is a cheap excuse of tyrants, because the fact is that all living people are essentially humans and as such feel that they have human rights, rights as human beings, and that all cultures have a very sharp consciousness of human rights - even though the question of what is right or at least permissive and of what is completely prohibited or unacceptable differs from culture to culture and indeed from person to person. So our task in defence of human rights would be to *facilitate* the change from existing habits and traditions from within, using the positive arguments which exist within a culture or a group of people rather than imposing our own views on other persons.

My contribution to this workshop is limited to the account of some of my personal experiences in the humanitarian and anthropological field. I shall make a number of observations and remarks on cultures and their human values and rights, elaborate on some of the most basic conditions for human and cultural survival and eventually present a research-project as an example of what could be done for enhancing respect for cultures, people and their human rights.

Although I am supposed to reflect on traditional cultures seen from the angle of human rights, it would be strange if I would not say at least a word or two on my work as a delegate of the *International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)*³; this work is, as you are surely aware of, intimately linked to human rights and consists in asking for respect of the human dignity of

² "You Europeans can say whatever you like, Jomo Kenyatta once said, *but we here in Africa, we beat our women*"...

³ Between 1971 and 2001 I worked for the ICRC in countries like Bangla Desh, Viet Nam, India, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Congo-Brazzaville, Kenya and the Sudan.

the victims of warfare, wounded people, prisoners of war and unarmed civilians. This general introduction to the importance of the so-called *Law-of-War* will be a first occasion for us to see that, even in times of war, *indigenous cultures have their own rules of behaviour* as well and are in fact much more “civilized” than what many people may be inclined to imagine.

A second chapter shall change our focus from war to peace – and to the questions at what time a culture is in war and when it is in peace, and who are the real enemies of cultures: we shall look at oppression of cultures but also at cultural oppression, showing both positive and negative cultural values. This will be an occasion to show what happens when there is a *loss of culture* and a *loss of identity* and to stress the fact that both oppression and loss of culture threaten the stability of the Nation.

Our third chapter is to focus on the different basic elements on which cultural liberty is based, on questions such as ethnicity, identity, language, respect, dignity, freedom of speech and liberty of belief, recognition of traditional values etc. My comments will stem from the time I have spent with the peoples in the South Sudan, namely the *Anyuak*, but they are meant to be just concrete and substantial examples for the fact that even so-called “backward” or even “primitive” cultures possess a strong consciousness of human rights.

Eventually, I shall address the issue of *possibilities for cultural change*, enquire about reasons for cultural resistance to it (such as oppression, ignorance and poverty) and try to cut a path through the thicket of human rights declarations in direction of knowledge, understanding and respect, both of the human person and his/her cultural liberties. One of the means to enhance positive cultural change is *education* which, in combination with respect for the cultures, may contribute to peace, development and respect for human rights.

At the end of my presentation I shall briefly present a personal research-project in the field of education which is trying to address this inter-related complex issue of simultaneously respecting and protecting cultures while leading them to positive change: it is entitled “*Footprints⁴ to the Future...*” and is meant to start moving along the way from oppression and neglect to the promised land of cultural liberty and respect for the human rights of cultures.

I am afraid that the following remarks will be bristling with repetitions of arguments of a same kind which will all be leading to same conclusions. I do not know if such repetitions will really enhance my chances of being convincing, but it is the only manner how I can address an issue which is simple and complicated at a same time: How to protect and promote cultures while facilitating cultural change and enhancing the respect for human rights? My answer to these difficult questions is the result of experiences, feelings, ideas, some knowledge and personal convictions – I cannot do much more than invite you to follow the footprints of my reflections on a subject that is wide-open to personal understanding and interpretation.

^{4 4} It is surely by sheer coincidence that UNDP used, in their latest *Human Development Report 2004*, the symbol of *Handprints* for showing human cultural identity, illustrating this even graphically (in a similar way I had done it on p.26 of my project-proposal)... However, while handprints stand for pure identity, footprints stand both for a person’s identity and his movement from the past to the future.

Cultures and War

While working for the ICRC in countries in war, I was directly concerned with the most basic aspects of human rights: the right to be treated with *a minimum* of dignity *under all circumstances*, not to be humiliated, not to be attacked, harassed or tortured in any physical or psychological way and, if wounded, to receive medical help or, when in prison, to be treated with at least a minimum of respect and dignity. The *Law of War* which is enshrined in the Geneva Conventions, is a bold challenge to the understanding of limits to violence and brutality, and indeed to human behaviour in general: for war is the most tempting occasion for people to forget about the human dignity of others, enemy or not, to harm without need, to take revenge by torturing prisoners or killing unarmed civilians, to burn and to destroy in triumph, and, by doing so, to completely forget about the respect of the own dignity. Because the human person finds a terrible pleasure in using his physical or political power on helpless people and thus frequently behaves like a beast, this *Law of War* is really the most fundamental aspect of Human Rights, protecting the victims of armed conflicts in extreme situations. Of course, this law is far from being applied everywhere, but its mere existence (and the fact that it is respected at least to some extent) may give courage to those who are convinced that the struggle for human rights is not in vain and should never be given up.

The task of the ICRC and their delegates is to inform the governments and leaders of the armed forces of the existence of the *Law of War*, and to remind the responsible people in the Army and the Government of the existence of this law before and after a conflict has broken out; during and after the war, the ICRC would visit prisoners and check on their conditions, its delegates would make sure that they could stay in contact with their families and that wounded combatants are receiving medical care; whenever possible, they would try to unite relatives separated by the war and act as a message-carrier between the enemy-armies.

What can be the arguments for making politicians and officers to respect a law which seems to go against all human instincts of revenge? The human desire for reckless retaliation and the pleasure for inflicting pain seem too strong to be limited by anything.

Unfortunately, it would be futile to use arguments of a humanitarian kind, soldiers do not really have pity for the weak and helpless but rather think that it is their right to make use of their power; after all, they have not fought for being kind to their enemies. Human rights are of no concern to soldiers. But other arguments seem somehow to be worth consideration:

- The first one is of a *political* nature; it concerns the long-term self-interest of the State: governments are sensitive to their international reputation, want to be respectable and be seen by others as politically conscious, aware of their international obligations. This argument explains why even rebel-movements or liberation-armies find an interest in respecting the Geneva Conventions: it lifts them up to the level of true governments.

- The second one is of a purely *military* kind: by respecting the rule of law, that is by treating prisoners as human persons, by respecting the dignity of women and by sparing the life of children and of sick, weak or old people, one reduces the soldiers' determination to fight up to the bitter end: if assured that their humanity will be respected when being prisoner-of-war, soldiers who find themselves in a militarily hopeless situation would rather accept to surrender than volunteer to get killed. Obviously, a human approach towards the victims of a conflict is to shorten the war.

- The third one is of a *practical/ logistical and spiritual/psychological* type: by limiting the destruction of buildings and bridges to objects of military importance, one limits the damage to local infrastructure and facilitates the rebuilding of villages and towns after the war. By protecting schools, hospitals and churches, one moreover avoids to cause spiritual damage to the society and its desire for revenge: damage caused to the mind of the people is, especially if it is done without any military reason, almost impossible to restore quickly, spiritual wounds needing generations to heal⁵.

- In the context of rebuilding the post-war society, one *humanitarian* argument seems nevertheless to be somehow convincing, especially in the ears of soldiers and young officers: when asked to think of their own fears and expectancies when taken prisoner, they get very sensitive to the problems of treatment while in captivity, and they are ready to acknowledge the necessity to respect the human dignity of all persons, non-regarding their unfortunate situation. Everybody understands the argument that prisoners-of-war who have been treated with respect or even with kindness are less likely to seek revenge and may even help later on in the effort of reconciliation and peace-making.

Though the latter type of arguments is used for convincing people and governments to respect the Law of war, they hold true for ethnic communities and cultures as well. Weak, powerless and often wounded in their fight for survival and dignity, cultures need the same respect and support. Put it into a negative way, one can state that where peoples do not enjoy a minimum of protection of their language and culture and where respect for their human integrity is lacking, co-operation cannot be expected and the necessity for peace will never get enrooted into the cultural consciousness of the people. A nation wishing all people to participate in the building and the running of the state would therefore do well in recognizing the dignity and the cultural values of the people, regardless of the community's size, the people's origins, colour or beliefs.

Cultures are the first casualties of war.

Humanitarian Law or the Law of War deals with international and internal military conflicts, not with so-called tribal wars. There are a number of reasons for this: tribal wars are considered to be local and, in any case, to represent a purely internal problem of the state; they gain international recognition only if the war escalates and turns into what is called a civil or liberation-war, and when the uprising threatens the unity and stability of the state. The so-called tribal wars are not wars between regular armies but simply wars between communities, a fact which makes it difficult to control them; and, finally, tribal wars are most of the time not affecting the international community and don't put in danger neither its stability nor the economic interests of investors – it is only where tribal conflicts occur within a wider context or spread to other places that the international community gets alerted and may intervene.

At this instance, we may remind of the well-known fact that many of the so-called tribal wars are inspired and fuelled by outsiders, governments arming the tribes in order to let them fight and to cause unrest on their behalf; the blame for having caused unrest lies then on the tribes and their “primitive nature” while the government can distance itself from such fighting. This has happened for twenty years now in the South Sudan and continues to happen in other regions

⁵ Besides of its importance for a place's infrastructure (with its importance for health, education and economic survival), the rules of law have a *cultural* component when they call on respect for places which are important for safeguarding the people's spiritual identity (such as places of worship etc.).

of the Sudan, such as Darfur. We also observe that sending weapons to a tribe for fighting another people is likely to backfire as many of the tribes will later on use their sudden military power for fighting for their own goals; because of lack of discipline and leadership, any attempt to make peace with these ethnic armed groups is a particularly difficult enterprise.

If the Geneva Conventions do not apply to such fighting and the victims of tribal wars therefore do not enjoy the same protection as the victims of international conflicts or of civil wars, how do cultures regulate their ways of fighting? Are there rules, limits to behaviour? Are tribal wars not supposed to be full of sheer brutality where people enjoy their naked physical power?

In my ears, I can still hear the words of an Anyuak man who was torturing a prisoner, calling on me: “*Come, come quickly, come and see how cruel I am!*” he shouted, obviously with pride and in any case without shame. I can’t forget either a dissemination-session on humanitarian laws in a church in the Niari-district of Congo-Brazzaville where the ICRC-delegates projected a film showing sequences of human rights violations: a particularly horrible scene from Liberia showed a young boy carrying the bloody head of a dead fighter to the market... Perhaps naively, the humanitarian workers expected the people to moan in horror, but to their blank amazement, the contrary was the case: the young spectators got very excited and shouted rhythmically “*Co-coy! Co-coy! Co-coy!*”⁶ – as a promise to be at least as cruel as the people they had just seen on the screen...! Violence produces violent reactions, was our conclusion, it does not necessary result in a desire for non-violence and peace. The church itself was apparently not sacred enough to contain the youngsters’ desire for revenge!⁷

If abuses of human rights are frequent in times of peace, how to expect that human rights are respected during a time when people lose control over their mind and just follow their instincts? To me, it seems obvious that the respect of the human person’s dignity must be cultivated during peace, while it is still time; once war has broken out, it will be impossible to restrain fighters to make unlimited use of their force and to control their anger.

At this particular time of its history, the South Sudan is looking for peace, not only with the North but as much in the South itself. This may not be the moment to address openly the abuses of human rights which have occurred during the past twenty years, but the many reconciliation-meetings held in the South Sudan suggest that there are still many very, very bad memories to overcome. Having been a strong believer in the virtues of the South Sudanese in general and their respect for human dignity in particular, I could hardly believe that people so proud of their humanity could commit such atrocities on their own people. How could it happen?

Even though, traditionally, the Nilotes were not very different from other fighters in the sense that they killed as many people as possible, burned empty villages to the ground, looted live-stock and used all kind of tactics for defeating the enemy (for example by preventing them from having access to waterholes), and yet there existed a kind of conduct which governed the

⁶ *Cocoy* is the name of a rebel-movement in the Niari-region of Congo Brazzaville.

⁷ However, I also remember an amazing interview a young soldier from the Congo-Kinshasa gave to a BBC-journalist. Asked about his plans to find out the whereabouts of some missionaries who had been kidnapped by rebels, he shouted “We shall get them, these rebels, we shall get them, even if they cross the borders, we shall surely get them and we shall kill all of them!”. But then, as to stop himself in his fury, he added “Well, yes, we shall kill them, - but if they surrender, of course, in that case we cannot kill them, in that case we have to respect the Geneva Conventions...!”

fighters' behaviour. Here are some examples of the Nilotic understanding of war and the spiritual implications of human conduct during violence:

-To start with, one should perhaps mention the fact that the Nilotes do not wage war in view of subjugating other people or to annex foreign territory by force. "*There is always a very good reason for going to war*", the Anyuak King explained, but thirst for power is not amongst those good reasons, nor are *hatred, racism*⁸, *religion* or *beliefs*. If *revenge* is a frequent cause to bloodshed, the main-reason for attacking another community and for dislocating them is found in the *need for water and for grazing-land*⁹. *Cattle-raiding* is another cause to unrest, motivated not so much by greed than by the young generations' self-pride. In more modern times, *natural resources* can become another motive for war, as this happened in the beginning of the last century when the land of the Anyuak was considered to be "*the last slave-producing area of Africa*" and where the Anyuak themselves sold plenty of Dinka, Murle and Anyuak slaves to the Ethiopian slave-dealers in exchange of firearms¹⁰. The problem of slavery has regained public attention since a Christian NGO is liberating children who had been captured by Arab militias in the region of Northern Bahr-el-Ghazal by paying a lump sum to the children's "owners"¹¹. In what concerns one of the South Sudanese community's unfortunate habits to *kidnap young children*, it must be seen as an act of despair rather than of aggression or of greed: as the tribe is facing terrible problems of reproduction, the stealing of children is one of the possible means to get a family.¹² Considering the human background to these kidnappings, it is not amazing that this tribe has also got the reputation of being particularly kind to children.

- As the Nilotes do not have prisons and thus do not know what to do with prisoners of war, no captives were taken; previously, captured women and children were integrated into the tribe.

- During the fighting itself, a number of *rules of honour* were (or were supposed to be) respected: it was considered to be shameful for a man to kill women, children or old people. Fighting was connected to self-pride and courage. Raping women was equally not part of warfare, perhaps because fighting was the collective enterprise of the community, women and children being later on distributed amongst the families of the village.

- Though *killing in a war* was considered to be a deed showing a person's bravery and skill, the mere fact of having killed someone requires the person's *purification* in order to reconcile with the spirit of the slain man and his relatives. In *Atuot*¹³-community as well as in Nuer and Dinka societies, the fighters have to name the people they have killed and have to undergo purification, the clan paying compensation for the people slain in the fight¹⁴. This tradition

⁸ People may look down on each other but this would result only in fighting in case of a direct insult, for example at a dancing- or drinking-place.

⁹ The history of the Sudan is one of continuous migration of people in search for fertile land and water.

¹⁰ This trade ceased when the slave-markets in Ethiopia got closed.

¹¹ There were discussions regarding the appropriateness of such well-intended and yet problematic actions, last but not least because some of the collected money apparently had ended up in the pockets of military commanders.

¹² The small and brave *Murle* Tribe has for this unfortunate health-reason (and because of successful cattle-raiding) become the victim of harassment and slander by other Sudanese communities and the Army.

¹³ The *Atuot* are a Nilotic people living in and around *Yirol*-town.

¹⁴ See "*But you know... ..Darkness is a big thing!*", a *Unicef*-paper by Kwacakworo (2001): "Every person who has participated in an official tribal fight will have to admit the number of people he has killed and speak out their names.... The blood-price will be paid collectively, clan by clan. In addition, relatives from both sides will later on perform other ceremonies during which they will purify themselves. In such a kind of war, there are no revenges after it was officially declared to have ended. If there was any attempt to seek revenge, this would be

shows how much a human person is, traditionally, considered to be responsible for what he has done (good or bad) during times of peace as much as in times of war: the spiritual entity of a person could not be divided, and if there might have been good reasons, there was no escape from the existential consequences of an act committed, if it was done in good or bad faith and even when it was the result of a collective enterprise.

- The *traditional way of peace-making and reconciliation* is equally interesting because it is (was) based on the understanding that, in a war, both sides are suffering and must be appeased, that true peace cannot be imposed by the victorious party. That is why, after the fighting, former enemies come together and discuss compensation for the loss of life which had been caused by *both* sides, not just from the community which has been defeated. Physical power is not enough to make peace viable, there is need for the participation in the peace-process by all people concerned.

It is amazing to notice that not only traditional customs of warfare have vanished but that other patterns of traditional behaviour have disappeared as well: the indiscriminate killing of civilians, torture and rape, were formerly prohibited and considered to be very shameful but nowadays they are not exceptional behaviour anymore. How could people forget so easily about the spiritual consequences of their actions?

One reason for the loss of culture may be the fact that *people, when changing situation and social context, tend to forget their own values and principles*. In what concerns the amazing change in moral behaviour of the South Sudanese, it must be found in the fact that the so-called liberation-army is composed out of soldiers from many tribes and that the *soldiers, as soon as they have left their own culture spheres forget about the education they had received at home* and behave as if they were in a new world where everything is allowed; *the power of automatic gunfire, lack of mutual control and group-violence* are probably enforcing this brutal type of behaviour. The *forcible recruitment of children* may have contributed to the collapse of cultural values as well, simply because these children were too young to get acquainted to traditional moral and civic behaviour.

Another reason may well lie in change of warfare when the traditional spears were replaced by guns and eventually by automatic weapons. The old and of course wise King of the Anyuak told me that *“all the bad things came with the foreigners: clothes¹⁵, money¹⁶ and guns”*, he was probably right in all three points; in our perspective, we would surely highlight the last one, because since the introduction of firearms, the change in behaviour has dramatically changed to the worse and often to the worst. With modern weapons, a new type of violence has emerged. One does not recognize the enemy anymore, there is no human face to be seen, and everything goes fast and remains anonymous: one kills out of a distance,

considered to be a crime and it would not lead to another war; such a person gets simply punished, will have no clan-support and be forced to pay the blood-price all by himself. People who – during this reconciliation-period – deny to have killed someone in the fight will be cursed and will have to face a lot of problems afterwards. In case they should confess after the period of truth has passed, they will have to pay the blood-price themselves without getting any support from their clan.” (p.204)

¹⁵ The introduction of cloth brought the differentiation between well-dressed and shabby persons, between “respectable and good” and “poor and bad” people. The Nilotes had a high consciousness of decency, especially in the sexual and social context, but moral criteria were of a spiritual and mental nature and not lying in a person’s physical appearance. When the naked Nilotes would denude themselves, they would shave their head and strip themselves of all beads and adornments, this as a sign of deep sorrow (after a death-case).

¹⁶ Money changed the economic system: previously based on exchange (of goods, services or kindness), it turned into a system where materials had to be paid for in cash and where access to things and services were restricted to the rich people. But the previous system will get completely destroyed only once the marriage-dowries will be paid in cash (instead of cattle, beads, tools etc.).

without shame but with fear, often without even aiming at a particular person. The enemy of course is no better, killing indiscriminately as well: while the number of persons killed in a war was previously relatively small, automatic weapons kill in large numbers. In consequence, even small, local incidents cause great loss of life and lead to bitter retaliation. In this modern world, nobody is safe anymore.

Perhaps because of the anonymity of modern warfare (nobody knows the person one has killed and cannot even be sure to have killed somebody at all) but perhaps also because of the great number of people killed, traditional rules of behaviour, in particular the customs of spiritual cleansing and compensation, hardly exist anymore. Compensation for people killed in a fight was only possible because their number was small¹⁷ and because the victims were known: modern wars occur outside of cultural territories and the cultures' moral bonds.

I should stress here the fact that the international community has done very little to put pressure on the different warring parties¹⁸ to make them respect human rights, even though no one could really have been unaware of the horrors linked to the war, starting from the recruitment of child-soldiers up to massacres of their own populations¹⁹. A liberation-war, especially when it is a reaction to blunt racism, cultural hatred and religious fanaticism, is naturally getting the sympathy of human rights activists; it seems that this sympathy to the legitimate cause of the South Sudanese to free themselves from cultural oppression by the North has made observers blind toward human rights violations committed by the liberators and freedom-fighters. Though human rights' abuses in the South Sudan were diminished substantially since some years back, the international community would have done well to monitor the future development in the country: military leadership is not used to democracy and has own tactics to keep itself in power.

When looking back on the last twenty years of civil war in the South Sudan and looking ahead to the time of promised peace, one has little reason to be optimistic. Though the violent tempests ravaging the country have passed now and the rain has ceased, there are still dark clouds hanging over the country. Distant echoes of thunderstorms, long lightening cutting horizons. Reckless winds are moving in all directions, hitting the grass. Soon, rain may pour again over the people and destroy their cultures, their young crops of hope and peace. The international community must help the South Sudanese to plant the seeds of peace and human rights and to root out the weed of hatred and distrust, it must stop all forces which wage war on cultures and have no respect for the people's human dignity. The time for this is now²⁰, and it is urgent.

I would like to close this dark chapter on loss of culture during the civil war by an anecdote which should give us some hope for the future. It is a story about women who decide to stand up against human rights abuses and who have understood that it is not enough to cry but that one has to take action if one wants to protest against oppression and liberate the people.

¹⁷ In modern war, the number of victims is not counted but simply estimated: in what concerns the last Civil War in the South Sudan, one generally talks about 2 million victims of the war and its consequences.

¹⁸ Such as the South Sudan Liberation Army (SPLA) of Col. John Garang and the Government of Khartoum who was (and partly still is) supporting a great number of so-called "tribal militias" and other military Movements (such as the former SPLA-United, the SSIA etc.).

¹⁹ The numerous militias and splits within the main liberation-movement made such massacres possible.

²⁰ When asking the SPLA-leadership to formally recognize the 62 cultures found in the South Sudan and to institutionalise a forum for cultural respect and peaceful dialogue, the usual reply is evasive: "Yes, they say, *this is a very good idea... but the time for it has not come yet!*"... Nobody ever dares to deny the importance of cultures and the need to give them protection – but nobody would ever be planning to do something which would concrete enhance the human rights of cultures

The anecdote starts with the well-known story of the Liberation-Army forcibly recruiting young boys in a village, taking them to their barracks. What to do now? The women of the village consulted and decided to take action: they collected the village's infants and babies, carried them to the military barracks and put them there on the ground. To the amazed officers, they said: *"If you want to have our children, just take them now... Why should we bring them up for you and let you take them when it suits you best? Why should we get tired for nothing?"* And the women went back to their homes, leaving the puzzled soldiers behind with the children... Immediately after the mothers had left, the barracks got filled up by the ear-piercing noise of children crying in despair and anger. The soldiers did not know what to do and got scared. The situation got completely out of control. Now, it was the military people who asked themselves: what can we do? Under the stringent pressure of the children's cries, the only way of returning to normal life was to release the abducted boys, asking them to bring the infants back to the village and to their mothers...

A happy end of a sad story, a good example that abuses of human rights do not need to be accepted but can be overturned, if people only dare to fight for their human rights and are ready to act together.

The cultures' fight for survival continues after the end of the civil war.

2004 is the year in which a peace-agreement between the leaders of the North and the South Sudan has been signed. The international community is relieved that one of the longest wars in Africa has come to an end and that the Sudan, finally, is given the opportunity to recover its lost dignity and pride. The liberation-army of the South is proud of its victory over racial contempt, cultural oppression and exclusion from development. The people of the South Sudan are celebrating the prospects of peace and hope that they will soon earn the fruits of their struggle which consists in respect and recognition of their cultures.

But will the people really obtain the recognition of their cultural identity and be liberated from oppression and ethnic contempt? Will the future leaders of the South Sudan remain aware of the reasons for the war and learn the lessons, will they build the nation on the solid basis of respect of the cultural diversity of the country, or will they rather repeat the mistakes committed by the former "common enemy" (the people of the North) and impose their will on their own people, if necessary by using force? The answer to this question will decide about the future of the South Sudan, the choice between peace or war, and life or death of people and cultures.

History will remember the past civil war in the Sudan²¹ as a fight by the people of the South Sudan against cultural domination by the North. But even if all South Sudanese would agree that oppression of their culture and racial contempt by the successive governments in the North have made this war unavoidable and that fighting was therefore necessary and had a good cause, not all the ethnic groups originally felt directly concerned by the political problem between the South and the North of the country. Most communities live far from the centres and have only a very distant relationship to governments and their representatives. They do not worry much about the State but are rather concerned about questions relating to

²¹ At this moment, in October 2004, the peace-agreement has been signed but the questions of its implementation are still far from resolved. The conflict in Darfur-region has proved to be a new, unexpected obstacle on the way to peace.

their means of survival, to water, grazing-land, hunger and diseases; their neighbours are a much more direct threat to their cultural peace than governments and foreigners such as the so-called Arabs. In consequence of such isolation in the regions, the oppression by the government in the North was mainly felt in the towns, in the army and in academic circles and only to a much lesser degree by the people living their traditional life. Even though the Anyuak, for example, actively participated in the war and suffered a lot of its consequences, this liberation-war was only partly theirs²²: they would have preferred to settle their problems with the neighbouring Nuer or Murle tribes who are the real threats to their physical survival as a people and as a culture. If the civil war will not bring lasting ethnic peace to the Anyuak, to them the past liberation-war with all its suffering was in vain.

What then is war, when do cultures feel oppressed? One would think that both war and oppression are linked to physical power exercised on the people. But neglect, ignorance and isolation in times of peace can have the same effects. I mentioned before that one traditional way of defeating an enemy is to prevent them from reaching the waterholes: people will die by thirst, without any weapon being used. This is exactly what has happened before the civil war, and this is what could kill people and their cultures even after the so-called liberation has ended. Cultures cannot survive when they are left in isolation, when they are abandoned to themselves and have no opportunity to meet the challenges of the future. Is hunger not like war? Cultures need, like people, to be nourished; they need access to resources and must be allowed to breathe and to move. In such a perspective, the liberation-war has for the people in the South Sudan just begun, the people ask to be recognized, respected and protected, and they want the new Nation to welcome them not as mere subjects but as truly human beings and as citizens who are allowed to keep a cultural identity of their own.

Cultural values in the light of human rights

Oppression is not foreign to the ethnic communities themselves. Asking for respect of cultures and reminding of the high value of traditions and languages does not mean to close the eyes and look away when people get threatened, oppressed or injured in their dignity by the own culture or when customs and traditions prevent the women from participating in development and the process of emancipation. Cultures are not perfect entities, they have their weaknesses and failures exactly like everybody; they are also in need of learning tolerance and respecting others. But they must also be given the opportunity to change, to progress and to develop, they must be encouraged and helped to open themselves. This can only be achieved through respect and understanding, there is no way of getting someone out of his house if he knows that he will be humiliated, threatened and eventually killed.

People who argue against the formal recognition of cultural entities and their integration in the process of nation-building stress the fact that many chiefs are authoritarian and anti-democratic, and that traditional cultures usually do not respect human rights. Such arguments hold only partly true, because the chiefs (and indeed the kings) are nothing but the figureheads of their people²³: powerful, yes, by definition they are, sometimes even

²² The fact that the demographically more important ethnic groups were the leaders of the Liberation-army had also contributed to the fact that smaller tribes did not recognize themselves as bearing elements of the fight against Northern oppression.

²³ When praising an Anyuak King, one should not call him “kind, , tolerant, merciful” but rather insist on his “reckless, cruel, bold and terrifying” character and temper... People want to have strong leaders, leaders who are courageous and intelligent, able to defend the community in all circumstances; kind and weak leaders would not

excessively powerful and authoritarian, and yet all chiefs are very much at the mercy of their people who may desert, remove, replace or even kill them at any time – chiefs are therefore well-advised to listen to their people and not to act against their will.²⁴ If chiefs can be oppressors, they terrorize people not so much in their own capacities but as leaders of a dominant group (such as a clan) which wants to control the minority-groups found in the community. One could add that power as such is not necessarily a negative thing, that it is the use (or abuse) of power which determines if it is a positive or an oppressive and destructive force; governments critical of indigenous institutions should remember that. At this time, we simply have to recognise the fact that without the consent of the chiefs, the people may not turn up when asked for help or when told to obey the government, and without the participation of chiefs it will be difficult to promote development. If a government ignores his people, the people will ignore their government!

In what concerns the *violations of human rights within the framework of a culture*, we should be careful not to mix up our own understanding of human rights with the understanding by other people. Cultures are as different as people, building their behaviour on experiences, social needs and understanding of human rights. Just think of the different understanding of the death-penalty even in Western civilizations, while they believe to know what is a human right and what, in the mind of people, is simply right!

The following examples, taken from Anyuak culture, may show differences both in the understanding of human rights and in the importance attached to some values:

- *Freedom of expression*: There is an absolute right to speak the truth and no ruler should get offended by such speak, even if it is the most unpleasant one.

- *Participation in the public decision-making*: Adult men are expected to participate in the decision-making at the chief's or king's court, in the socio-political as well as in the judicial field. Decisions are usually taken by consensus; chiefs trying to impose their opinion on others will lose respect and power. A majority can of course impose itself on a minority, but care is taken not to split the community.

- *A legal system based on the value of the human person*: The judicial system is based on the existential value of each human being and, as a consequence, on the necessary compensation for all persons killed, non-regarding if it was involuntary homicide, an accident or deliberate killing.

- *Protection of society against internal scission*: Quarrels which are internal to a group of related people are supposed to be settled privately at the “*wi-mac*” (the family's spiritual hearth). This rule prevents the ‘government’ to be forced to take side and to lose a part of its authority; the state would normally only interfere in criminal cases, in problems related to the community or as an arbiter in very complicated matters.

- *A legal system based on social inclusiveness*: A person found guilty for an offence or a criminal act is to be punished in such a manner that he does not feel excluded from the community – usually by paying compensation.

be able to hold the society together, and the enemy would get an easy victory. Who would like to have a leader who is not powerful?

²⁴ This explains why chiefs sometimes are unable to prevent people from attacking another community: they are not powerful enough to be dictators.

THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF CULTURES (Draft! Not for publication nor quotation)

- *No executions*: People may get killed in revenge or in the course of a political plot, but executions are not part of the criminal code.

- *Protection from persecution*: There is a sphere where persecuted people can take refuge; this is similar to the sacred institution of churches, with the difference that the place here is the home of the king or the chief.

- *Arrest but no prisons*: There are no prisons: people think in blank horror of this unbelievably inhuman habit of locking up people in a room. Prisoners would stay at the village's court and work for the chief or the king until their case has been settled.

- *Reconciliation after a death-case*: Much importance is laid on the reconciliation between families separated by a death-case. What matters is the life of the community which needs rest and peace, especially after a loss of life.

- *Special care for vulnerable persons*: Sick people are being treated with utmost kindness, old people are given great respect and handicapped people (including bold persons!) are not harmed in their self-pride and dignity. Old people may be helped to die in dignity.

Special attention on children's welfare: Special attention is paid to infants and to children in general. Violence towards children will cause great harm to the person who has harmed them. There are a lot of worries regarding the health of an unborn child; the mother (and indeed her relatives) have to take a lot of precautions in order to protect the child, even at the risk of her own health.

Sexual liberties: Positive attitudes towards sexual activities, including contacts before marriage. Social rules, however, have to be respected. There is no circumcision.

An island outside of public law: the Anyuak know a very special type of dance which is held outside of the village and where violence (between dancers) is allowed...! If bloodshed has occurred during such dancing, no compensation is to be paid.

On the *cultural side*, we should mention some interesting features which may amaze people who would not expect so-called backward and illiterate people to have elaborate, beautiful artistic talents. It is important to note that Nilotic art is possessed by spiritual qualities which are not mere luxury and pleasure but which are protecting the human person during his/her wandering on earth. While working, walking or relaxing in the shade of a tree, when lonely, when in company or when mourning, *poetic songs* stay with a person and give him/her the assurance of his/her humanity; songs are the medium by which a person links himself to past generations, history and places as much as to political life, social relations or love. Because of their beauty and force, songs are known by everybody and travel to distant places and cross generations: any Anyuak may know by heart at least 200 songs! Especially young people love to compose and to write songs, but there exist even professional poets and singers! Music is more than entertainment, it has to role of calling on the spiritual forces which are found in nature and society; dark tunes are echoing the deep sounds of existence, sometimes powerful such as in drum-dances, sometimes meditative and melancholic such as in the playing of the Nilotic guitar or the sanza.

For the mere sake of curiosity, we should finally also mention the interesting rules concerning the *economic life, co-existence with animals and respect of nature*, all features which would be applauded by modern protectors of the environment and which show that the human

person is not the master of the universe but has to share his environment with other forms of existence:

- *Nature* is not just a wilderness but has its own integrity and spiritual life. This is why it is not allowed to interfere in it, by, for example, cutting a tree for making a canoe. Special permission is needed, and if such permission is given at all, certain rituals have to be made in order to be sure that the tree is not taking revenge.

- There is a kind of *peaceful co-existence* and mutual understanding between the people and the wild beasts sharing a same habitat: both avoid harming the other, knowing that enmity between them would have deadly consequences. Communication with the animals is done in a symbolic way (the footprints being the container of such language) or through direct talk. Foreign crocodiles are, for example, told to leave the river while native crocodiles, believed to be harmless, are allowed to stay...

- The *killing of animals*, though necessary for survival, is limited to the minimum: If a hunter has succeeded in killing an antelope, the animal is to be shared with whoever happens to pass the site, though not more than with three other people. There are precise rules who is entitled to which part of the animal, the successful hunter getting the least... This rule obviously reduces the number of animals to be killed and helps unskilled persons to survive.

- When *fishing* collectively (with spears or big hooks), a fish would not belong to the successful fisherman but to the person who shouts "I am claiming this fish!". This rule makes sure that everybody gets his fish, even those who have no talents for fishing. A king's people can claim fishes or animals at any time, the court's needs having priority over private interests.

- *Trophies* of important animals (elephants, giraffes, leopards etc.), do not belong to the person who has killed them but either to the chief (the head of the community) or his maternal relatives. This rule makes the (so tedious) hunting of these animals little attractive, except for the hunter's reputation.

- There are a lot of *killing-taboos* related to animals. It seems wherever certain animals are found in abundance (lions, scorpions etc.), people respect, do not kill nor eat them.

The few examples I have mentioned show that cultures have definite values, particular beliefs, rules of behaviour and ways of approaching problems; we notice that they are particularly concerned about the human person and their role in society, in the wilderness and in nature. We also observe that they are in many ways less cruel and more sensitive to the integrity of the human person and his/her environment than what we are.

But, of course, on the *negative side of cultures*, we can also enumerate a great number of abuses of what we came to understand as human rights. Amongst them, we mention those listed by the women themselves²⁵ such as

- early, arranged and forced marriages
- the problem of paying dowries²⁶

²⁵ At the occasion of the recent workshops held in the Sudan and in Kenya on the 'House of Nationalities' (topic 'Women and culture') in 2003 and 2004 (see the unpublished workshop-report, December 2003).

²⁶ For the Nilotes, the dowries are beads or cattle; differences in the kind of dowries made inter-tribal marriages difficult.

- tribal markings and the removal of the six lower teeth²⁷
- the custom to inherit a father's wives
- the custom to be forced to marry in the name of a dead man
- the attitude towards rape
- the exclusion of women from political life

If many of the customs are for us unacceptable because contrary to our conception of human rights, we should be reminded of the fact that oppression can be felt as terror and humiliation only within the limits of the own understanding of the world. Looking for the deeper meaning of these "primitive" customs, we rapidly discover that most of them are meant to protect human life or the survival of the family, not to terrorize or to humiliate people. Traditionally, these rules and habits were accepted and not questioned, not even by the victims themselves who later in their life would take identical decisions.

Even though the list of "bad cultures" was made by women and may therefore be partial²⁸, there is no doubt that the women do not enjoy same or similar rights than the men have. But cultures differ, and they differ most in their attitudes and their respect for women. In societies where the women are expected to work very hard under difficult ecologic circumstances, they are likely to be courageous, fearless and to have a strong self-consciousness. The social role of Nilotic women, for example, may be inferior to the one played by men, but this would not mean that women suffer of a feeling of inferiority, well on the contrary, they are very much aware of both their human value and their human rights, ready to fight for them by all, including violent or psychological means²⁹. Women usually are in control of the economic aspects of the household (food-reserves etc.) and play indirectly an important role when advising their husbands or sons what they should do. In this regard, we have to stress the fact that it is the woman who acts as the mother of culture and who makes sure that traditions, good or bad ones³⁰, are respected; language, knowledge and traditions are all taught by women. The crucial role played by women in the field of education and all other cultural issues as well as the women's fearlessness and determination when struggling for respect and human rights gives us much hope for the future of cultures, for change and progress: because unlike the state will the women as the care-takers of traditions always combine respect for culture with the need for change and development. The power of harmonious change lies in the hands and the hearts of women.

²⁷ These customs have already been abandoned by most tribes; the change was relatively easy because the people had forgotten about the spiritual and social meaning of markings which had symbolised a person's passage from a private to the social and adult sphere of existence. After the removal of teeth, the Anyuak would for example conclude that "now s/he has become a truly human being". Note that men without tribal markings were considered to be children and not allowed to marry nor to get killed.

²⁸ It is sure that even men have their real problems, enduring much pressure from the own family and from society. But because the men do not suffer physically of such pressure or because they do not recognize their problems, they accept more easily the decisions taken for them by others.

²⁹ Whenever Anyuak women feel frustrated, they simply go on strike and refuse to cook for their men, caring only for their children...

³⁰ Even the girls' submissive role in society is prescribed by the mothers who are telling their daughters to look up to the boys and to behave accordingly...

Cultural Liberty³¹

Cultural liberty is based on the understanding of one's identity (ethnic or not), the right to use the own language, to keep own beliefs, to follow traditional customs and, more generally, to preserve values which are important for a person's understanding of the world in which he/she spends his/her life. Basically, the term "cultural liberty" stands for a person's cultural identity, the respect of his/her human dignity and the freedom to exercise his/her traditional way of life.

Like so many other principles, cultural liberty needs to be accommodated within a wider context, usually the state, because the threat to cultures, language and traditions, emanates from outside forces, institutions and powers which see themselves in opposition to traditional cultures and which do not pay attention and give consideration to the people's customs, beliefs and rights.

Where cultural liberties are lacking, the cultures may lock themselves up and become sterile, or the cultures may disintegrate and fall into pieces, many young people getting squeezed between the own culture and the demands of modern life. Lack of cultural liberties gives harmonious development no chance.

It may be worthwhile to provide general terms like "identity", "dignity", "respect", "ethnicity" and "religion" with some concrete substance and meaning. The following remarks originate from the *Anyuak* understanding of fundamental human values and have therefore no pretension to hold true for other cultures. Cultures are different, and that is why we speak about cultural diversity. What is universal however is all people's desire to be recognized and respected as a human cultural being, as a proud member of a community which is carried – through language - by the consciousness of its history, its self-pride and its own humanity.

Ethnicity and Race

Most people recognize themselves as members of a family, a clan, a group, a community and a people. It is difficult to survive without feeling to be deeply enrooted in a village, its landscape and its cultural sphere, in society and history, and not being proud of one's origins. Ethnic identity is an essential part of a person, as much as is regional or national identity; but it becomes of real relevance only when looking outside of the own community, when comparing oneself to the others or when being threatened by other people. Within a community, one's ethnic origins remain unconscious; one "discovers" one's local and ethnic identity only when meeting with people from other places and of other origins³².

Even though they don't hesitate to be very self-critical, the Anyuak are (of course!) proud to be Anyuak. But though he or she may have very strong opinions about other communities and may seem to hate all of them ("*All the Nuer are stupid*", "*the Ciro-Anyuak are all thieves*", "*the Dinka eat people*", "*small people are not human beings*" etc.), the attitude is hardly ever based on appearance, colour of skin or even on culture. In that sense, the Anyuak are tolerant

³¹ "Cultural liberty is violated by the failure to respect or recognize the values, institutions and way of life of cultural groups and by discrimination and disadvantage based on cultural identity" (HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2004, "Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World", p. 27, UNDP 2004)

³² We notice the universal desire to differentiate oneself from others, to compare and to measure. The human person likes to put borders, and ethnicity is just one of them: even in a small village one would identify oneself in opposition to other quarters and people (normally pretending to be better than "those ones").

and surely not racists; when a member of an enemy-tribe is on visit, there is not the slightest sign of cultural animosity. What the Anyuak hate is oppression by other cultures, non-regarding if the oppressors are white people, Arabs, foreign ethnic groups or members of the own tribe.

Ethnicity is understood to be a positive, not a destructive force, it is self-consciousness and pride rather than contempt of others. Being proud of the own identity does not need to lead to hatred of other people, well on the contrary, self-consciousness is the pre-condition to tolerance, co-existence and co-operation. People who question their identity are usually weak, afraid or hesitant and thus unreliable partners in a dialogue.

Racism, cultural oppression and contempt result in hatred and eventually in fighting; the Sudan with its long history of cultural tensions is a perfect example for it. But the Sudan is also a perfect illustration of the fact that feelings of inferiority and racial aggression are bound to produce violent reactions which in turn lead to repression and scorn; under pressure and threat, it is difficult to respect other cultures and to remain tolerant.

The following account of the origins of the racial contempt shown by many people in the North Sudan to their brothers in the South may be understood by some as being a much too positive approach. But my explanations are not to excuse racism and attitudes inspired by a feeling of ethnic or religious superiority; they are rather to show that it is difficult to expect tolerance and sympathy from people who have been discriminated and scorned themselves for no other reason than the darkness of their skin. Indeed, the biggest problem of the people in the North Sudan is that, most of them (and indeed all “true” North-Sudanese) are of a dark, brown and sometimes even of a shining black colour; most of them are of a mixed Arabic and African descent, many being the descendants of South Sudanese who had been captured and enslaved. Because they are black and not of the light colour “real” Muslims are supposed to be, they are met themselves with strong racial contempt by their neighbours, in particular by the Egyptians. Because of this racial contempt, Northerners hate their light-coloured neighbours, and unconsciously they even hate themselves, bluntly refuting their African blood. All this makes the Northerners extremely sensitive to critics and incites them to have quite radical views on the Islam and on all those who do not share their religion. Because the Northerners refuse to recognize the roots of their culture³³, they always feel threatened and insulted. And because the Northerners, people of great humanity whenever liberated from their trauma of being inferior to others³⁴, do not feel at ease with their own identity, they show the very same racial contempt under which they suffer themselves to their brothers and sisters in the South, sincerely believing that their own African ancestors were primitive beings with no pride, no dignity and no human values whatsoever. Lack of interest resulted in almost complete ignorance, and this ignorance resulted in its turn in a policy of oppression. Not surprisingly, this haughty, humiliating and often repressive attitude produced open hatred from the part of the Southerners and eventually led to uprising and war. It is a quite sad consequence of such cultural ignorance that people who could have easily lived together in peace will most probably never be able to join hands again and recognize themselves as the brothers and sisters they – historically – are.

³³ See the highly interesting paper presented by *Al-Baqir al-Afif Mukhtar* at the CODSRIA African Humanities Institute, Northwestern University, Evanston (in 2003?): “*The Crisis of Identity in Northern Sudan: A Dilemma of a Black people with a White Culture*”.

³⁴ My own view on Islam roots in strong friendship with Northern Sudanese whom I find not only extremely kind and human but also very tolerant and open-minded. Sometimes I wonder if these friends are not more Africans than Muslims and, thinking of the war, if I was not mistaken in drawing such positive conclusion (However, my friends in Central Asia and in Afghanistan showed me that tolerance is neither African nor Muslim but probably the product of an education based on respect and understanding of the human nature.)

Under conditions of racism, war is unavoidable. We know what has happened in the South Sudan, we know what happens presently in Darfur... But are we really ready and able to promote respect of cultures in places where same or similar oppression is still going on? Everybody is against racism, but who cares about cultures? Enlightenment is the door to tolerance, the key to understanding and ethnic peace.

Religion

In today's world, it sounds almost unbelievable that there are people who do not care much about religion, who consider it to be a very intimate, personal and private affair which, moreover, transcends the relationship with God to a relationship with existence in the widest term.

Religion, for the Anyuak as for all Nilotic people, is nothing but the relationship with spiritual forces such as God but also such as animals, natural sites and indeed the spiritual essence of other people. For the Nilotes, God is not a concept but a concrete daily reality which has mainly practical components. Under the extremely difficult living-conditions, people feel exposed to all kinds of unpredictable and unexplainable events, natural catastrophes, hunger, sickness and epidemics³⁵. Because there is no other explanation to all these happenings, God in its absolute spirituality and lack of humanity is feared very much and therefore asked to restore a state of normality whenever this state has been broken: all they want from God is Justice, respect of the human right to exist and to live in peace.

Though the Anyuak belief in God is categorical, there is no room for playing one God against another. Explaining the Anyuak beliefs in God, King Agada once made it very clear to me: *“There is a spiritual force (Jwok, God), one must be mad or blind to deny that. But the highest spiritual force is so remote from the small human being that it cannot be approached directly. The human person is like an ant on a tree – and how do you want this ant to talk to God? That is why this highest supreme spiritual Being has created a great number of minor spirits and Gods, for example for the Arabs, the Christians, the Indians or the Chinese, including Gods residing in trees or pools or hot springs. All these minor spirits are just mediators between the humans and the supreme Being, they are nothing but different ways leading to the same final point of existence”*. Such a statement shows that religious tolerance prevails and that the Anyuak do not find it easy to play Christianity against Islam. However, because any attempt to impose one particular belief on them would be understood as an intrusion into a person's most private and intimate sphere, people would strongly resist and reject spiritual domination. People must have the choice to believe what they consider to be best for them, they can only be true believers if they can have trust in their God.

In the view of what I just explained, it is amazing to notice the advance of the Christian church into cultures which have no religious dogma and never knew anything like a religious institution. Reasons for this must be found in the Civil War which allowed religions to occupy the space which was left open when the normal life of cultures got disrupted by fighting, bombardment and the movements of people, most young people having left the village³⁶. While the church replaced many of the traditional cultural activities (such as dancing and singing) and brought hitherto unknown moral “values” to the people, it offered at least a space

³⁵ Significantly, the Anyuak term for “God” and “Sickness/disease” is identical: “Jwok”, standing probably for whatever is unknown and not understandable for the human mind.

³⁶ Many people fled to refugee-camps, many men became members of the liberation-army or militias and young people either got recruited or escaped recruitment by moving to other countries.

where the people's mind could get some rest from military pressure. At a time where school-education was lacking in most places, the church became popular as a kind of learning-institution where children would receive lessons and where their thirst for knowledge got somehow satisfied; the children would believe the priests as much as school-children believe their teachers, without much changing their private behaviours... The church's biggest contribution, however, has nothing to do with religion but is of cultural importance: by using the local language, the church did not only give support to the native language but even to the culture in its totality, including of course traditional beliefs, customs and values.

Identity

Our identity starts when receiving a name, when entering the social world. We need to be recognized by others, we need to know who we are in order to understand ourselves. Without a name, without an identity, we cannot be addressed, we don't feel concerned, and actually we do not exist as self-conscious human beings. Looking into the mirror of our existence, we discover ourselves as different persons all according to the angle from which we see ourselves... Others look at us, and sometimes we discover ourselves through our differences with others, look at us in the mirror of other cultures. Essentially, we construct our identity out of elements which are not within us, nature, family, foreigners, and spiritual forces. Our identity is the result of a learning-process, step by step we grow into what we later understand as our cultural self.

It is very interesting to see how the Nilotes are obsessed by the question of identity. The immediate question is 'Why are they so interested in their identity?' but in fact we should rather ask ourselves 'Why are we not so interested in this crucial question and take our identity for granted?'. Who are we? Who are the others, those surrounding us, those playing the roles of a girl, a mother, a father, a chief? How can we identify ourselves, how can we best display our identity in public, how can we fill our name with substance?

People living in very natural, isolated places are much more intrigued by questions of identity than we are in our more modern societies. This may be explained by the fact that the human being is constantly threatened in his/her existence by natural disasters, wild animals and all kinds of treacherous diseases. But if the question of identity appears to be more or less acute according to a person's cultural environment or economic situation, its importance remains nevertheless universal: we all need an identity of ourselves, and if it was only to be remembered after our death and continue to exist in the memory of the people we leave behind us.

The Nilotes worry much about the spiritual, human nature of a person and want to make sure that a person is really a *human* Being. Apparently, in their mind, not all people are actually "human": some may well look human but have in fact "*something else*" in their mind. Distinction is made between "purely" human persons and persons who possess non-human, supra-natural forces by which they regularly threaten the people's human right of existence.

How to know who and what is human?

Well, there is no other way of differentiating one person from another than by looking at the person. The Anyuak, for example, carefully check the sexual organs³⁷ of a newborn child in

³⁷ Sexuality makes the difference between God's creative powers and the purely physical reproductive activities of the human beings.

order to decide if it is really “human”... Everybody who is circumcised is said to be “*pa dhano*”, “*not a human person*”, a sorcerer or a witch... And what is a witch or a sorcerer supposed to do? Well, he or she is actually torturing people, making them infertile or blind, or is simply killing them; one can find them dancing joyfully on the graves of those they have killed.

What appears to be not much more than racism (judging a person according to his/her physical appearance) and seem to be extremely superficial (so, for example, when the Anyuak King explains that “short people are not human beings”) has in fact moral implications: after all, it is not the appearance what counts but the acts these “non-persons” are believed to do: it is their superiority (their invisible powers), not their inferiority, which is feared. We notice that people have a strong consciousness of how a person should *morally* behave. “Humanity”, in their mind, is directly linked to character and behaviour and thus has a cultural content: when I was once was fed up of living behind walls of grass, far away from any modern comfort, my Anyuak friend replied angrily: “*What do you mean, ‘far away from civilization’! Don’t you know that this, our village here, that this is the centre of humanity?!!!*”³⁸

Asking an Anyuak “*Who are you?*” he would not – as expected from him – tell us his or her name. He would answer “*ani dhano yaak*” – “I am just a human person”. While we want to know more and get his true identity (his name), we overlook the fact that, in his mind, he has told us more than what we had asked for: he had given us the assurance of his humanity and thus taken away all the fear we could possibly have had – and there is no need to tell us more. Obviously, such a response shows also the people’s fear of revealing their identity to people they do not know (and therefore cannot trust).

It can now hardly surprise that the very collective name the Nilotes give themselves, “*Jey*”, means nothing but “people, human beings”, a sub-group calling itself even “*Luo*” what means “pure human beings”, with emphasis on ‘pure’ and ‘human’.³⁹

If the *first* identity of an Anyuak is of the mentioned *existential* kind and identifies him as a distinctive member of humanity (this in opposition to spirits, ghosts or devils), he has a diversity of other identities:

- the second, so-to-say *ethnic* identity of an Anyuak is the one of his/her ethnic group, a title which is pre-conditioned by relationship, the origins of father.
- the third identity is the *personal, individual* one, consisting of a name given by parents or grandparents and reflecting the circumstances or the appearance at birth; often, it gives additional information, such as the position within a group of children, twins, family-problems etc.⁴⁰
- the fourth identity is the one linked to *a person’s parenthood and geographical origins*. It shows a person’s wider *historic and spiritual existence*, as being deeply rooted in a particular place and as being one segment of a collective existence. All people are identified by being “the son of so-and-so” or the “daughter of this or that place”, names which are used by related people only who in this way identify themselves as being related, acknowledging and honouring the relationship.

³⁸ I have to admit that they were absolutely right in their protest, for whenever I returned from the wilderness to my village, I realized that the beautifully clean and elaborated settlement was really an expression of human consciousness, intelligence and art.

³⁹ The Anyuak are also part of these “pure” people, “Anyuak” itself standing for “people who get together, who join in doing something, who help each other”.

⁴⁰ If a child’s name (given by its maternal grandparents) is insulting to the father, the father may call his child by a different name.

- a fifth identity reflects a person's *social* name; it is created when a person, at the brink of adolescence and after initiation, receives a bull from the ruler of the village⁴¹; the removal of the six lower incisors is one of the physical marks of humanity, differentiating a human being from beasts. Originally empty, this identity gets successively filled up by the experiences and deeds made by a person: slowly a person grows into a personality and becomes an active carrier of collective consciousness in the framework of social identity. Eventually, it will be this identity which will survive his individual death.
- a sixth identity goes along with the social identity and shows a person as a member of a particular *age-group*. This identity is collective rather than individual, but because of all the deeds committed by an age-group and their particular responsibilities in public affairs and military matters, it is particularly important. Some names of age-groups continue to shine over a community long after they have ceased to exist. The older a person, the more pride he will find in this identity.

In addition to all these identities, some persons will naturally also be known because of particular skills, functions⁴² and deeds, enjoying the reputation of being a courageous fighter, a good hunter, a talented musician or a great poet, a black-smith, a diviner or a healer, of being a chief, a historian or a particularly wise man; many of these “professional” individual skills are linked to spiritual powers and can be transmitted to descendants. Amongst all the hereditary functions, the one of being the care-taker of a site (called “father of the land”) is of a particularly high spiritual significance as this family is to assure that the relationship between the site and its habitants (including wild animals) is a fertile and peaceful one.

Summing up, we could conclude that an Anyuak is like a spider moving within a web made out of other people's identities, that – carried by language which holds his consciousness – s/he is actually hanging in a network of human relationship, history and culture; s/he exists only because s/he can share the identity of others, such as ancestors, relatives, age-mates and friends⁴³ in a same cultural context. We find that most identities are linked to notions like honour, respect and pride, reflecting both self-consciousness and the consciousness of a collective existence. We can also see how a person receives not only own substance from outside identities but also protection and support⁴⁴. The whole network of identities is kept together by culture and more particularly by names, references or symbols, - that is by *language*: identity is always a *cultural* identity; nobody can survive in the empty room of individual existence. “To be” means to have an identity, to enter history, to have a relationship, to move through the cultural space of human existence.

Names are of course nothing but symbols for persons. Language carries a person's identity through his/her life and transcends it to other people, during life-time and after death. But because language is a spiritual matter, it cannot express a person's existence in a physical, visible manner. Other symbols are needed for showing a person's identity or transmitting it to other people in a more tangible way. Amongst such symbols, the Anyuak have chosen the *spittle* and the *footprints*, both standing for a person's human essence: spittle is the carrier of language (which in turn shapes and carries human consciousness) and the footprints witness a person's physical passage through existence. While the footprints reveal the very personal

⁴¹ The young man creates his own “bull-name” in a very poetical manner, reflecting on the bull's colour or design.

⁴² We refrain from elaborating on military or political identities such as being a commander, a war-lord, a soldier, a governor or a commissioner.

⁴³ This to the extend that it can become a problem: if a close friend dies, some Nuer men would have to cut the ties through sacrifices in order to be left alone and not be haunted by the spirit of the dead person.

⁴⁴ The wider the identity-network, the more support a person can expect from different quarters; practically, he is never alone and unprotected.

identity of a person, the spittle is able to physically transmit a person's identity (with all his/her physical and spiritual force) to other (beloved) persons in an intimate act of love.

Cultural identity as a means of identification, as the motor to human relationship, as a means of transmitting spiritual forces and as a source of self-recognition: if no person can stay without an identity, the Nilotes take identity as the very substantial basis for their understanding of the world, of their society and of their own nature as being recognized as "truly" human beings.

Recognition⁴⁵

Each person has an identity and wants this to be *recognized*. Dignity, respect and the value of the human person are the basis of human existence; they are, in other terms, the foundation of human rights. Individuals can only enter a dialogue if one recognizes the identity of the other and pays him the necessary respect. If my value as a human person is not recognized, if I am ignored or just told to disappear, I shall refuse to listen and I shall not enter any discussion. What is true for individuals is true for the relationship between a person and his/her community, between the state and ethnic groups.

Because ignorance is understood both as an insult and a hidden threat, the recognition of one's identity is fundamentally important. Just take your own family as an example and imagine you would not be listed as one of its members! "*Am I not their son or daughter, too?*" would be your outcry. Recognition of an individual person is, as it was seen, also extremely important within the own community: to be recognized someone as being a member of that Nationality, that village, that age-group, that clan and that family, as the son or the daughter of that man or that woman gives a person the feeling of being respected and valued.

When listing up the different Nationalities which live in the South Sudan, we were faced with the problem of recognizing the different communities as being separate ethnic entities of specific cultural significance, or, on the contrary, to deprive some communities of such recognition and list them as sub-groups or sections of another group. It was very interesting to see how deeply concerned all South Sudanese felt by this list, last but not least those who use to argue that tribes have no importance anymore and should therefore be excluded from the process of nation-building! Nobody, really, would feel unconcerned by the question of his ethnic identity and by the place his/her ethnic group was to occupy in the New Sudan. To be officially recognized or not – this question was for the members of a community apparently of an existential significance.

Recognition of cultures becomes of greatest political importance in the modern context where the state imposes itself on the communities. If the state fails to recognize the identities of the distinctive ethnic groups and refuses to give them some space in the national set-up, it in fact ignores the communities' existence and with it the value of its culture: though the people would be considered to be subjects of the state, they would be deprived of their cultural identity and with it of their self-pride and dignity: they would not be in a position to enrich the state by their culture but would simply have to surrender their self-consciousness and fade

⁴⁵ "Cultural liberty is violated by the failure to respect or recognize the values, institutions and ways of life of cultural groups and by discrimination and disadvantage based on cultural identity" (UNDP Report on Human Development 2004, op.cit., Chapter 2, Box 2.1, p.27)

away. While the state would have the power to enforce itself, it would nevertheless not have the means to oppress identities for a long time: only recognition of the cultural diversity of the country would help the state to reach an identity of its own, that is the identity of being a multi-cultural nation full of human resources.

Denial of the people's right to get recognition prevents the state to give any support to those people, at least as members of a distinctive ethnic group. No recognition means no support and no protection; excluded from participation in the national process, cultures are forced to withdraw and to look for means of self-defence. Self-defence can be defensive but it is likely to turn aggressive and to result in war. Communities which are isolated remain closed to prospects of development and change. Denial of a people's cultural identity is an expression of fear but also of ignorance; it means to reject all forms of co-operation. But through recognition of cultural values and language, doors can be opened and misunderstandings can be removed.

Dignity and Respect

The notions of dignity and respect are interconnected: respecting a person or a people means to acknowledge his, her or their dignity.

It seems superfluous to elaborate on terms which are so evidently of an emotional and spiritual significance. If it is nevertheless necessary to talk about them, it is because of the dramatic consequences of *the lack of* respect for the dignity of others: it always leads to bitterness, anger and hatred, and where such lack of respect takes the form of cultural or racial contempt, it results almost always in violence and bloodshed.

We may distinguish between the respect due to cultures and the dignity of the human person, between the individual and the wider respect of his/her cultural identity. Both spheres condition each other: a person's identity has always a cultural content.

For the Nilotes, the most basic form of the respect is the one concerning a person's human essence, his/her beliefs, values and his/her place within the social sphere. When discussing an Anyuak's many identities, we have seen that the majority of his/her identities actually refer to people or places and that his/her own identity is growing slowly with the time, blooming only at a high age or after his death. A person's dignity is therefore not just his/her own self-consciousness and pride but more importantly the respect due to the person's spiritual, emotional, historical, social and cultural surrounding. It is this identification with the whole cultural sphere which explains why all people get so upset if a whole ethnic group gets abused when being collectively called "stupid", "thievish", "cannibals" or simply "backward" and "primitive". It is as if the whole sphere of existence would get poisoned through insults, not only the small individual part of such existence. When trying to upset a man's mind, people would therefore not hit at a person directly but undermine his existence by insulting the person's origins or relatives, preferably his mother: indirect insult are of a spiritual-emotional nature and hurt much deeper than direct blows to a person's integrity.

Anyuak respect is more than just the acknowledgement of someone's personality and dignity. It is closely linked to fear and to the belief that lack of respect may have terrible consequences; feared are less the purely physical reactions by the insulted person than his spiritual revenge. Language possesses the power to retaliate and to kill. It is to avoid such retaliation that the people show greatest respect (or fear) for vulnerable people like children or

handicapped persons and are extremely polite and friendly when talking to old and seemingly weak people. If the mind of such persons gets stirred up and is not in peace anymore, the life of the man or the woman who committed the crime is in great danger; vulnerable and old persons are known to have great spiritual powers, their language can reach everywhere, it pursues a person up to his/her most secret hiding-place and nothing can stop it from reaching its goal.

The link between (lack of) respect and fear should be kept in mind: lack of recognition of cultures and ethnic groups will show for the nation-community the very same disastrous results than it does on the individual level. Whoever does not respect me, my people and our cultural environment should not expect to be respected by us either.

I really do not know if cultural liberty as it is defined in the latest *UNDP-Development Report 2004* is officially recognized as being a human right.⁴⁶ Respect and dignity are notions which are open to interpretation and seem to get attention only in the negative sense, that is when they are lacking. Lack of respect is, in any case, not a criminal or even a civic offence, except the one which is required from the state for protecting its institutions and leaders. This is, as we have seen before, not the case in times of war where at least the signatories of the Geneva Conventions are bound to pay a minimum of respect to the civilian population, to wounded persons and prisoners of war, and where even important sites such as churches and hospitals should get protection.

It is sure that the respect of the cultural essence and the human dignity of a person is contributing to social and political peace, during times of war as well as during the times when communities fight for their recognition and cultural rights.

Language

Everybody is conscious of the significance and importance of language as the carrier of human consciousness, the container of identity and culture, the medium between the human person and all other forms of beings, animals, spirits, Gods and indeed the environment. It is language which differentiates human beings from animals and other forms of existence, it is language which allows people to think and to be human, and it is language which carries our cultural values. All our thoughts are based on language, and of course we need our language to express ourselves and to communicate with other people and indeed with our own body and mind. To all evidence, the entire perception of the world we live in, all our understanding and all our imagination is based on language. Language and culture are inseparable, any loss of the former results in the loss of the latter.

It is because of such an existential and indeed spiritual importance of language that language-issues are so often a political problem and are or have been the cause to so much unrest even in countries which otherwise are supposed to be stable democracies: take Spain, Belgium or Canada as examples, or think of the French people's desperate fight against the dominance of English language. People who feel that they are losing their own language do not react because of self-pride but act in a kind of self-defence: they know that when losing their language, they lose whatever is linked to it, culture, identity, the way of understanding the

⁴⁶ The "International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights" (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights) of 1976 is not elaborating much on cultures which have not reached the stage of modern development yet. See <http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/cescr.htm>.

world. Language is really at the core of culture, contains its spiritual essence. Only once we speak another language we can understand the mind and attitudes of the people speaking it and this not just verbally but on a much more general level: through language we receive our cultural education, we learn behaviour and we learn a specific way to perceive things. When we speak French we do not think like the English, and a Swede has obviously a different way of approaching things than an Italian.

The people in the Sudan are very much aware of the *spiritual essence* of language. There is an amazingly high consciousness of language's nature which is to call, to knock or to hit on people's mind and indeed on all forms of existence which are supposed to be living entities. Great caution is the consequences of such an awareness, people exercising high control of their use of language, making sure that nobody could possibly be offended or even hurt. For example, one would never make any allusion to someone's physical default (like squinting, stammering etc.), one would always use respectful and decent language, one would not name dangerous beasts in their presence and one would avoid shouting near infants (out of fear to shake up their minds); because of such restrictions and caution, it is an act of liberation to use insults of the crudest type, but such insults are only allowed within the group of age-mates and thus actually a sign of friendship and free relationship...

Language as the carrier of spiritual matters such as hidden thoughts and secret feelings gets, in Nilotic cultures, a number of very concrete expressions: amongst them, the *curse* is the most widely spread and best known one, acting secretly, reaching far and causing harm of all kind; the Anyuak link it to the notion of justice and – so to say – to the human right of getting legal satisfaction: to be able to reach the aim (the guilty person), the curse must be the result of a big offence, and be the reaction to a serious injustice, growing slowly out of year-long bitter inner complaints into powerful spiritual substance. What is very particular to the Anyuak curse is the fact that it can reach its final goal (revenge for a crime or injustice) only once the offended person is dead, the curse surviving the physical disappearance of the offended person.

But even more interesting perhaps is the use of *spittle* which, for the Anyuak, is the carrier of language (without language, we cannot speak and we cannot survive) and thus the expression of the very substance of our thoughts, dreams, beliefs and spiritual forces. By extending the spittle to another (beloved) person, a person is actually able to transcend the own spiritual powers to another body and mind, providing that person with one's spiritual force and energy. Spitting on the head (the mind) of a person therefore means to protect him from all evil, to give him strength to overcome problems even when far away.⁴⁷

Such blessing through the medium of language and its physical carrier can of course transcend in a vertical manner and link generations: by regularly spitting on objects of personal importance (as it happens with beads worn around the neck) and by leaving such specific objects as heirlooms (this can be done in the testament which the Anyuak significantly call "talk of the mouth"), a person's beloved heir will enjoy the protection of people who have passed away a long time ago.

Spittle (language/consciousness) is also the medium used for calling back people from far away: by spitting on an object (such as a ring thrown into a river), a personal message can

⁴⁷ When in Anyuak country, it took me some time to appreciate this custom... It was only once I understood how jealous other people were when they saw how often I got blessed by old women that I fully understood that human spittle is something like the holy water of the mind...

travel long distances and reach a much wanted person who will not fail to understand its significance, follow the urgent call and return home.

When thinking of the consequences of loss of language as the container of culture, we can now understand the importance of cultural diversity: it is much more than the protection of folklore, traditions, customs, dances and arts; it is the spiritual and intellectual forces of our world which we have to save from disappearance. In a world of superficial but fast communication where everybody is believed to be linked within a global network, the importance of languages as carriers of culture needs to be kept in mind. Loss of language means loss of culture, and this holds true for a person as much as for a whole community, a country or indeed humanity as a whole. By reducing our languages to one, we may well finish to behave like animals, communicating on a basic level, exchanging messages and looking at our environment with the same eyes. While it is good of course to communicate using one common language, we simply can't afford to loot our world from its humanity. Poverty of life is not just economic and social.

Languages are changing, reacting quicker to the environment than the cultures that are heavier and thus need some more time to adapt and to change. Languages open windows through which the cultures can receive fresh air, look out and discover new horizons. Protecting languages therefore also means to help the cultures to get used to new elements in their life and make themselves ready for change. Change in another language is more tedious and less acceptable because it always appears to be foreign and thus hostile. Only things which grow from within and from below can grow and survive, whatever is imposed from outside and above is seen as a threat. People who have not the right to speak and to learn in their own language naturally feel both excluded and oppressed.

Language is the best indicator for a culture's vitality, the vessel of its consciousness. The more its form is shallow, the less consciousness it can carry and transmit. But language is the last part of a culture to give in to pressures⁴⁸, it struggles to survive even when its cultural content has already been damaged or was thrown over board. Where a language is lost and no vessel is available anymore to carry consciousness, the culture itself cannot be reanimated, not even artificially; only remote feelings of former existence may vibrate in the body, in forms of instincts, emotions, customs or handicrafts rather than in form of sharp consciousness. This is to stress the fact that people (and indeed nations) who dare for the survival of their identity should take care of their language, protect and promote it. Promotion is vitally important, must make use of all available means: of school-books, radio, at public events etc. Especially small ethnic groups need such promotion to be able to survive and to integrate smoothly into the modern world. Language is the spiritual light of a culture, showing a culture the way to new horizons.

⁴⁸ Where related cultures are sharing a same living-space over a long period of time, cultural assimilation takes place and a same language can be shared.

Cultural Change

Change goes together with respect of existing values and traditions. Contempt and haughty lectures will just be counter-productive and incite the people to resist: whenever the dignity of their culture is concerned, people will not give up but struggle, battle on and if needed even fight for recognition and respect.

Cultures do not live in isolation, they are always in contact with the outside, ready to adapt to new circumstances and conditions. Cultures learn from experiences and are eager to develop, provided they have the liberty to do so and provided that basic values are respected. If cultures are conservative it is partly because their values are often deep and of a spiritual kind, and partly because they are constantly under pressure from outside, feel threatened and are in need of confirming their ethnic identity. Practical restraints (such as poverty, lack of education and medical facilities) and geographic isolation contribute to the cultures' apparent incapacities to adapt to modern times, their requirements on education and their rules of conduct.

A damaged and bleeding culture will not be ready for change but concentrate on the wounds inflicted on them. Paradoxically, only strong cultures are ready for changing, and this simply because they can afford it and do not need to take up defensive positions. Recognition and support of cultures are therefore the keys which open the doors for peaceful change.

One should differentiate between progressive, smooth cultural change and the collapse of a culture. Even though the latter of course implies a change in culture as well, it is in fact not change but simply a loss of culture, a loss of identity and thus a loss of consciousness and strength; a person who has been deprived of his culture is not free to change, he/her is just erring between other cultures, cannot find him/herself and therefore cannot contribute to the community. Because only "happy" cultures can contribute to the set-up of a nation, damaged cultures need to be given the time to heal their wounds. This holds particularly true for cultures which have suffered of the war and which are left with scattered identities, with a broken self-consciousness, without self-confidence and without a strong social body. If the liberation-war in the South Sudan has cut deep wounds in the minds and bodies of cultures, it is necessary to provide them with first-aid and material support; they have to be helped to regain consciousness and to recover physically. Cultures with a disturbed mind and an ailing body will be weak elements in the building of a strong, self-conscious nation; sick entities will never remain in peace. The New Sudan should not be erected on loose and moving grounds and on the remainders of crashed identities: a broken pot will not be able to contain anything. Only stable cultures will be ready to open themselves and to get integrated in another body. The restoration of harmed cultures should therefore be understood as a pre-condition to social change and progress.

Careful and conscious about their own identity, cultures want to grow slowly and in the way crops are growing, they need patience, care and protection. As cultures have deep and strong roots, change will take some time, but cutting the roots is surely not the right solution unless one considers people to be ill weeds which are not welcome in the new garden. Unfortunately, cultures are often neither given the necessary time nor the physical means to change, being left alone exposed to the pressures of other cultures or governments. Sudden and uncontrolled change is happening very quickly but results in a loss of culture, values and knowledge. This is what has occurred in the South Sudan during the last twenty years of war.

When considering what we would understand as “negative cultures”, that is traditions which do not comply with our understanding of human rights, we should make the following remarks:

-We should distinguish between *fundamental* human rights (such as the right to keep one’s identity, to speak one’s language, to have own beliefs, to be respected and to have the right to participate in the socio-political dialogue) which cannot be discussed because they apply to all human beings, between specific *cultural* human rights which will develop and change through social and economic change and between *modern* human rights (which include the right to education, access to water and medical care etc.) which will develop progressively as soon as the practical conditions for it are fulfilled.

- It is obviously unfair to accuse people of not complying to our understanding of human rights when the conditions for such understanding are not given and when the people concerned do not feel that their rights are violated: Girls who do not go to school do not feel oppressed unless there are schools for boys and unless they are prevented from going to school. Here we should remember that, in the beginning, not even boys were allowed to go to school and that missionaries had to invent all kind of tricks to lure the chiefs’ children to school. Should we remind ourselves of the fact that absence of schools does not mean absence of education? It is only in recent times that school-education has become important for everybody, on the other hand, girls are considered to be the propriety of the family and any attempt to change this would of course be understood as a violation of the father’s legal rights on his daughters.

- When addressing the problem of cultural change, it is urgent to tackle the issue of education very seriously and not be satisfied too easily. A school without teachers and school-books is just responding to basic criteria of education (to be able to read and to write) but not more. There is urgent need to invest in education which will be the key to understanding and knowledge and give access to the modern world: it is mainly through education that issues of cultural change and human rights, in particular the rights of women, can be addressed positively that is without destroying the people’s cultural identity.

- Considering that a modern state puts a lot of pressure on traditional cultures and wants them to change quickly in order to comply with new socio-political realities, change which passes through the process of education may be too slow and require from the state a patience which it may not be able to afford⁴⁹. One way of speeding up cultural change without damaging traditional structures and values may be a collective approach by different nationalities: while one culture alone may be reluctant to change habits, a discussion amongst many nationalities could well result in the opening of cultures and eventually in a change of attitudes. The proposed *House of Nationalities* would be an ideal place where traditional leaders could look in a critical manner at existing customs and decide on necessary changes. To change needs courage, to be shown by persons as well as by cultures; together, it would be easier to tackle problems and to overcome the obstacles to change.

- To enable the people to respect these different aspects of human rights, the people are not in need of blame, accusations and moral lessons from outside but need concrete help and support. This holds particularly true for what we called modern human rights which depend very much on infrastructures and qualified manpower. Cultures must be given the means to *afford* cultural change and human rights (for example: if there is no water in the vicinity, girls

⁴⁹ We should not forget that education is itself an issue, many cultures believing that they cannot afford education economically or that the girls’ education only leads to alienation or even prostitution.

have to help their mothers and cannot just spend their time in school), they cannot be expected to change and understand if they are not given the tools for it: How should people, for example, learn ethnic tolerance if they are not informed about the life and problems of other people? We have seen that cultures are very tolerant within their own set-up, not only with people but even with wild beasts. But it is difficult to expect them to respect rules which do not correspond (yet) to the structure of their own ideology.

- It is not wise because counter-productive to *impose* rules which are not enshrined in the traditions and which cannot be understood easily. Where changes are in the interest of the people, it is the people themselves to initiate and to adapt them. Cultural change must build on existing values, human rights issues need to be developed on the basis of existing cultural concepts of human rights. Human rights must get a cultural legitimacy.

The Anyuak are aware of the implications of cultural change, of the necessity to adapt but also of the need to take precautions. Changes have to occur progressively, not abruptly, without causing damage to a culture's or person's integrity. This is what we could learn from the Anyuak about cultural change and the precautions to be taken against the danger to get lost in or to get overpowered by a foreign culture:

When an Anyuak has to move to another place (say London, Khartoum or a town in the South Sudan) to stay there for a while, he will prepare himself for the change: he will fill a pot with soil from home and carry this pot to the new place. When starting his new life there, he will take a container such as a glass, fill it with water, mix the water with the soil he had brought from home, and he will drink it. During the first days or weeks, he will put much soil and little water, but days passing, he will change the proportion, putting every day a little bit more water and less soil into the glass. Eventually, there will be only very little soil in the container but much water, and one day he will forget to put soil in the container and just drink the water. That is the moment when he feels at ease in the new environment and does not need to protect himself; that's how an Anyuak is dealing with cultural change, conscious of his own identity but ready for widening and enriching it.

Having highlighted the procedures leading to cultural change, it remains the crucial question who would be the persons to initiate and promote it. Surely, it can't be the state which will put pressure on the cultures and force them to adapt to what is known as "modern times". But this is not the type of change which is healthy, neither for the cultures nor for the state. The role of the state is merely to provide change with material and logistic support, in the field of education, communication or commerce. But if positive cultural change has to occur from within, who should be the promoters of such change? Education will just serve as a vehicle for change, leading to a new understanding within the cultural setup of the community⁵⁰. Chiefs may occasionally take a progressive stand and initiate changes which they understand to be unavoidable; the more often chiefs get in touch with their colleges from other cultures, the more likely they will be ready to harmonize the need for change with the necessity to protect traditional values. But the real stakeholders of change will be the women with their direct impact on the children's education; because women have all reasons to promote change, they can be expected to take up a lot of issues directly linked to the respect of human rights, such as the social status of the women and their right to decide themselves about their life.

⁵⁰ This of course provided that the school is not situated outside of the community.

Education

Everything in life starts with education, the learning of language, of behaviour and customs, values and traditions; we learn our roles in society, get our beliefs and receive information about our world, about food, animals and other people. We get our identity, learn who we are, what is acceptable or not. We receive the tools which will help us to shape our understanding of the world, we learn how to survive.

When I was addressing some of the fundamentals on which cultures are based, the role played by education was, in spite of its obvious importance for a culture's self-understanding, self-esteem and behaviour, not yet highlighted. This is because education takes place within a cultural context and builds on existing cultural values. Education itself is a value, but it is - so to say - an internal value, is the vehicle by which other values are transported, projected and understood. In absence of education, a human Being has not the means to turn itself into a Human Person, conscious of the world and responsible for his role in his human environment. Education is everywhere, is a process of learning and understanding and has no limits; but while one can feel the fruits of education (for instance by observing a person's maturity), it remains a subjective value which corresponds only to local criteria. It is only in the cultural context when we can see if a person is educated or not, and we actually think of education only if someone lacks good behaviour⁵¹ and is thus qualified as lacking education.

When we discuss issues concerning the education of children, we always apply our own cultural criteria. We are all aware of the fact that education starts at home, and yet we say that someone who never went to school lacks education. Traditional education, that is education at home and within the cultural context, is in many ways more important than school-education, at least in places which are not in need of the kind of knowledge we require in our modern cultures. If education is a means of survival, the practical skills needed for survival may be more important than textbooks. Intelligence itself is not a product which one can receive at school either, and concrete life-experience helps to open the mind as much as do studies.

This is of course not to argue against the benefits of school-education; it is just to remind us of the fact that an analphabetic person is not necessarily lacking education and that we should really show more modesty when talking about people who do not have literate skills – we surely do not have the qualities we would need to survive in their difficult environment.

Modern education in schools is important because it brings knowledge from outside into a culture, opens a window, perhaps even a door, to the world outside the own borders. It brings knowledge and the skills which are now needed for surviving in a changing world. Without school-education, cultures will remain locked up and suffocate. In the South Sudan, fifty years have passed without children getting access to education at school, and though Unicef has done its best to start programmes of education on the primary level, it is still not possible to speak of education in the South Sudan, last but not least because school-materials and – even more importantly – qualified teachers are lacking.

If education is really opening the mind, producing knowledge and increasing understanding, schools are a great chance for positive cultural change and respect of human rights as we

⁵¹ As a sign of respect and moral decency, Anyuak women would, for example, move on their knees to address grown-up men...What seems to us to be a terribly humiliating custom is, by the women themselves, not understood as a degradation of their human value at all but rather seen as an expression of polite, respectful behaviour, occasionally even as a sign of love...

understand them. But schools should not project a hostile picture of the own culture by – for example – insisting on its backwardness, they should on the contrary build on cultural knowledge and enrich this by more information and advise⁵². Education should never take place in a cultural vacuum but relate to the concrete aspects of life, addressing issues of interest and concern. By using the local language⁵³, the cultural context would be preserved and a collision with cultural values would be avoided.

Provided schools are not losing touch with reality and provided that education builds on the firm ground of cultures and does not attempt to undermine them, schools can become the bridge between cultures and modern knowledge and make them to enrich each other. Traditional and modern education should both be in the service of culture. Schools should protect cultures rather than threaten and mislead them towards a future without cultural substance.

But what could be done to promote education while protecting cultures and languages? How to make sure that school actually enhances the children's chances to cope with modern life, how to use modern education in a constructive, positive way and to let schools contribute not only to greater awareness but even to a smooth integration of cultures into the larger framework of the nation? How to open cultures and enforce their positive values, how initiate people to the concept of modern human rights, how to bring about cultural change from within a culture instead of imposing change by force from above?

In July of last year, while working for the establishment of an institution which could bring ethnic harmony to the divided peoples of the South Sudan, I prepared a project-proposal which has a same aim of bridging the gaps between the cultures but which would work on a more popular level and in the field of education. It was my personal reaction to the fact that, while there is a general agreement on the importance of culture, respect and dignity, very little is done on the practical level. Everyone deplores loss of culture and abuses of human rights, but few people only recognise looming dangers in time and come up with substantial and realistic proposals to protect and promote cultures while it is still possible. In that sense, my project should stand up as a modest example for what could be done to enhance human respect, to protect the dignity of cultures and to bring peace and harmony to a war-torn, multi-ethnic society. Though the project is nothing but a small step within the wider movement towards the respect of human rights, it is nevertheless crucially important because it is directed to the future and not looking backwards: by addressing the young generations, it may lay the foundation for a less biased understanding of cultures, restore the people's confidence in themselves and prepare the ground for peace and pave the way to the respect of human rights.

Making use of the symbolic significance of footprints as the carriers of human identity and as a movement from the past to the future, I have called this project "*Footprints to the future*"⁵⁴.

⁵² Besides of purely spiritual values, it is important to save practical knowledge: the Nilotes know/knew how to survive by wild foods, they could make salt or render water pure, they could produce cloth out of bark, they were making boats, producing tools, pots and all kinds of handicrafts, and of course they had a great knowledge about medicinal herbs. Once lost, such knowledge cannot be recovered anymore, people becoming dependant on markets, transport and money.

⁵³ Studies have shown that people who enter the learning-process by using the native language are showing better school-results as children who are taught in a different language.

⁵⁴ The symbolical contents of Footprints for some of the Nilotic peoples are explained here on p.46

“Footprints to the Future...”

A Project in Support of Children’s Education and a Future in cultural Harmony and Peace.⁵⁵

Education is one of the most pressing concerns of the emerging South Sudan: there is a lack of schools, a scarcity of qualified teachers and an almost total absence of school-books directly related to the South Sudan. But perhaps even more crucial is *the need for peace amongst the many ethnic groups* which is the basic condition for co-operation and development: this goal will only be reached once all peoples feel that their cultural identity is respected and not seen as an obstacle to progress. Denial of peoples’ self-consciousness is a hinder to cultural change and development: only trees with strong, deep roots can resist tempests! The protection of the country’s cultural heritage is another difficult issue to be addressed, especially at a time when ethnicity appears to be the cause to so many misunderstandings.

The project wants to address all these issues by producing *a book in which the many peoples found in the South Sudan would be seen at one place, sharing there their own identity with all the others*. It would be a book providing knowledge, leading to mutual respect and tolerance, a book where all readers would discover the treasure of Sudanese cultures and feel proud of being a vital and precious part of it. For the teachers, this book would be of fundamental importance when trying to inform the children about their country and their people and when preparing the young generation for their future life.

While looking back to the past and showing the present, the planned book is to prepare for the coming times. The *Footprints to the future* should thus make sure that the necessary movement progresses smoothly and in harmony with the cultures, that changes can occur without causing harm to the very essence of the people’s self-understanding, their pride and dignity.

Objectives

Believing that everything starts with education, the project aims to make people conscious of the value of the own culture and language, of its importance for not getting lost in the wilderness of global civilization, it is to strengthen the people’s self-consciousness and self-respect of customs, traditions and knowledge. *It is to protect the cultures’ identity and language and to encourage them to open themselves to a changing world so that they can meet with challenges without losing their traditional values.*

The objectives of this project are: to promote *education*, to spread knowledge and to lead to the awareness of the importance of the cultural diversity in the Sudan. The goal of the project is to promote harmony and understanding between the various ethnic communities, thereby creating cultural and political stability for a lasting peace and sustainable development in the Sudan.

By giving prominence to all people living in the Sudan, the project is make the government aware of the tremendous cultural heritage of the South Sudan and their absolute responsibility to save cultures from disappearance. The book thus is pleading for the people’s human right

⁵⁵ The following description is an extract of the original project-proposal (January 2004).

to keep their identity, values and language, and it reminds the authorities of the state to care for cultural diversity and liberty.

The information on the ethnic communities will concentrate on environment, economic resources, social organisations, traditions, attitudes and beliefs but also show existing modern institutions, hint at potentials of development, stress means of co-operation and peaceful conflict-resolution and, most importantly, give a prominent place to *the role played by women* as the hearth of education, as the care-takers of cultural heritage, as the sources of medical knowledge and as the managers of the family's economic resources. The emphasis put on the women is meant to facilitate the men's understanding of the necessity to give girls access to education.

Finally, the project will build bridges between people and stress the unity of the cultures found in the country, thereby creating the consciousness of sharing a same national identity. It will help to draw communities out of their ideological isolation and inspire them to meet, to start common projects and to feel concerned by problems affecting others: it will enhance possibilities for co-operation across ethnic lines.

In short, the project aims to lead – *through education* – to knowledge and awareness of cultures and shared common values while it is at the same time trying to remove fears and suspicions and to open visions of peaceful co-existence and co-operation.

Background to the project

The background to the project is the recent history of the Sudan with its two major reasons for a civil war which has now lasted for fifty years, and which, if nothing is done, will just continue in other places like Darfur and soon within the South Sudan itself.

The most important reason is found in *racial contempt* which was based on colour and fuelled by religious fanaticism which would not consider anybody as really human except those resembling oneself in colour and who are sharing one's religious beliefs (but beliefs alone would not be enough). We have mentioned before that such basic racism has its own roots in attitudes expressed by neighbouring Arab cultures towards their Muslim brothers in the North Sudan, attitudes which were also based on colour and which were deeply hurting the self-esteem of the proud people in the North Sudan.

Perhaps naively, I like to believe that racism is not based on practical experiences but rather due to *ignorance*, lack of interest and neglect. Whatever the people in the North believe about the people in the South is wrong, absolutely wrong: they are not primitive, they are strong believers, they are highly intelligent and extremely skilful in coping with the harsh environment they are living in. Unfortunately, the people in the North do not know this.

By overcoming ignorance, much of these misconceptions could be removed and attitudes could get changed, interest could result in contacts and knowledge would change a lot of wrong beliefs. And in what concerns the historic relationship between North and South, people could learn that they actually have the same roots, share a same history and live – so to say – in a same skin. When discovering that these people in the South are actually cultivating humanity in a very conscious and rich way, the people of the North would not need to be ashamed of their relationship but could suddenly become proud of their African identity.

Which, in any case, they feel instinctively and admit indirectly whenever they comment on “the Arabs”.

Lack of infrastructure and development was an additional reason for the war: without schools the ethnic groups were bound to remain what the British called “*closed protected areas*”, protection mainly meaning protection from slave-trade; the ethnic communities would meet during clashes, occasional visits and at the occasion of peace- and reconciliation-conference; though there was trade and other type of human exchange between neighbours, these contacts remained superficial and occasional; fundamentally, the ethnic groups remained very much behind the fences of their tribal identities, remaining suspicious of whatever came from outside.

If the people in the South would not know much about themselves, what could they possibly know about the people in the North of the Sudan? Nothing but what they experienced directly when coming in contact with traders, shopkeepers or masters of households – and those contacts were generally so humiliating that the relationship between the two peoples was bound to be negative.

I have already mentioned the fact that the people in the North ignored (and still do ignore) the cultures and human values found in the South; they surely know more about the wild animals there than about the people. Reasons for such ignorance and racial contempt was, as just mentioned, lack of interest, ill-feeling about the own blackness and some attitudes of superiority which they would explain by the apparent lack of beliefs in the South; but one should also remind of the fact that the children in the North were never given the opportunity to learn about the cultures found in the own country, except of course those covered by Islam. There were and are no school-books showing the extreme cultural richness of the Sudan, and there are no books which would highlight the fact that cultural diversity is actually the country’s biggest wealth, something to be proud and not to be ashamed of. Nobody would tell these children that a multitude of language and cultural diversity are the motor of development, a treasury of knowledge and skills and a continuous source of inspiration, nobody would make them understand that cultural uniformity is actually a form of poverty which hampers progress and lets cultures dry out. If school-books had been available and shown a positive picture of the many peoples living in the South, the West and the East of the capital, history may have taken another turn, or at least the understanding of this cultural war had been better in educated circles in the North.

Purpose and justification

The more than sixty ethnic groups in the South are not divided by race let alone by hatred but by much more concrete problems such as search for grazing-land, need of water, fishing- and hunting-rights or fighting caused by specific incidents of a local type. Powers outside of the cultures make use of tribal differences and implement the policies of ‘Divide and rule’, arming ethnic groups and encouraging fighting; automatic weapons turning even a small incident into a massacre, tribal wars can spread like bushfires which, as we know, end only once everything is burnt and destroyed.

The project is built on past experiences and the fear that there will be no peace if the ethnic groups of the South Sudan are not given the means to come together and to feel as respected members of one big, multi-cultural community which is led by the State.

The main justification of this project is the need to make a new beginning, to learn the main-lessons from the past civil wars which are the understanding that cultural oppression, ignorance, lack of respect and political manipulation leads to war, hatred, bloodshed and poverty. People who are locked up within the boundaries of their own culture are deprived of the means to change and thus excluded from development; exclusion from national politics makes the cultures to feel unconcerned and does not invite them to participate and to contribute.

Impact

The planned work is expected to show cultural, political and even economic results for the people of the South Sudan *as a whole*. Culture, politics and development are interconnected; they cannot really be considered separately. The following considerations of the book's expected impact are therefore not isolated from other aspects but simply reflect different viewpoints and show the project from different angles. The overlapping of arguments cannot be avoided but is meant to show the multiple interest of the publication.

1. Impact on culture

The book is to provide an overview of all the ethnic communities in the South Sudan, stressing the *equal importance* of each culture. Though most of the people living in the South Sudan have been the object of some study or research, there is no book yet where a Sudanese reader could find in *one place information* about *all* the people living in this part of the country. The book will show the magnificent *cultural diversity* of the South Sudan and will *make people aware* of the tremendous *cultural wealth* all the inhabitants are sharing. Through information, *each culture gets recognized as being of an equal value* and gets strengthened in its very existence; this means that *the book will be of importance for the survival of all individual groups* who will feel both protected and respected.

1.1 Impact on each specific ethnic community

Presuming that the proposed book will become a kind of *manual* which will be consulted not only by individuals but also by the government and NGOs, the sheer importance of the book will allow many ethnic groups to get their identity officially recognized. It will therefore strengthen the self-consciousness of the people, encourage them to get out of their anonymity, allow them to remain aware of the value of their culture and language, and, in consequence, to preserve and to appreciate it. By describing the wider habitat of a people and its potentialities for development, the book wants to provide evidence of existing means of co-operation and shared interest, opening new spaces for common activities and development. Identity is not to be looked at out of a narrow angle but in a wider perspective.

Besides of producing a feeling of security and self-consciousness to the people concerned, the book will support and guide the activities of the governmental authorities. Without such a reference, the concerns and problems of many minor groups tend to disappear amongst the government's many obligations due to lack of knowledge and awareness.

1.2 Impact on the common culture

Even though major ethnic groups may not need to get public support to become visible, the book will also be in their own interest and this simply because no major group, ethnic or social, can live in peace if the smaller and poorer parts of the community do not get their share in the material and cultural wealth of the country. As only ethnic and social peace can give the necessary space for development and

welfare, the aggressive aspects in a people's self-consciousness will be turned into more peacefully competitive attitudes which focus on a people's capacities for change and adaptation to new ecological, economic and cultural realities.

Expecting that the awareness of the importance of culture will be enhanced by the book, the discovery of the great cultural wealth – within the country but even within the own culture – will lead to pride and a new, less aggressive type of self-consciousness.

Considering the fact that the majority of the people living in the Northern Sudan have their roots in the Southern part of the country, the book will obviously also attract their interest and hopefully contribute to a relationship which is free from racially founded misconceptions.

1.3 Impact on preservation of languages

Language is not only the cultural treasure of one country but indeed of mankind as a whole. Preservation of language and its integration into the modern world is vital for the culture, but this can only happen if there is the necessary awareness of the cultural significance of a language. The book will only indirectly argue for the need to preserve language as the carrier of culture and as the key to development, but it will raise the consciousness of the existence of a multitude of languages and the importance to save them from disappearance. The future government's department of culture and education will surely be keen to find information which can help them develop school-programmes which will protect culture in general and languages in particular.

1.4 Impact on cultural development

Isolated cultures often feel threatened in their very existence. In consequence, they tend to be conservative, rejecting all foreign influence. The most common tool for such a negative survival-strategy is either primitive racism or physical aggression based on slander, rumours, greed or fear. Development presumes the opening of borders, including cultural ones. Cultures which refuse such opening and distance themselves from the realities of the outside world will not only be excluded from development but will remain sterile and eventually collapse and disappear. The planned book will assure all ethnic groups of their place within the larger community, taking away fears and providing them with officially recognized rights to existence and development; it is an invitation to the ethnic groups to join a larger, regional or national community. In consequence, their culture will adapt to the new environment while still keeping its cultural essence, its customs and language. Through cultural contacts and development, the ethnic group will be able to change in a progressive and harmonious way and will therefore survive.

1.5 Impact on harmonious cultural change

The presentation of the peoples living in the South Sudan reflects the strong interest in the preservation of culture and language, the public recognition of a people's existence and rights and in the dignity and respect all people, non-regarding their origins or ethnic affiliation, are entitled to receive. In other words, the book aims to outroot all forms of *inter-ethnic "racism"* and to turn tribesmen into citizens without depriving them of their own pride and dignity. Recognizing the need for change in a number of cultural aspects, the book will avoid both to make the elegy of a condemned culture and to lock up identities in their narrow ideologies. Preservation of culture means to keep it open to change and to show possibilities for development (in cultural, political as well as economical fields). The book wants to seize the opportunity to show a people's capacity to change and to adapt to new circumstances and to encourage

communities to face the future with courage and determination. By opening communities and protecting their cultural essence at a same time, the book aims at facilitating (and indirectly encouraging) change; while preserving the roots, it does not want to give the impression that old flowers will bloom forever. If changes are necessary and cultures can only survive if they preserve their capacities of changing, it is vital that changes occur in a harmonious way and are not imposed from outside, that they are not breaking the backbone of the culture's identity. Self-confidence and self-understanding will encourage the communities to adapt to changes and to face the future without fear.

The book will have failed to reach its objectives if it would not contribute to such change, in particular in the field of *gender-equality*. This is of course a very sensitive point but also a very important one: for the survival of the cultures will much depend on a people's capacities *to recognize the role of the women* in their society. By presenting the women as the "mother of cultures", care-takers of language and cultural education, source of knowledge and hearth of education, the book may be a contribution to the cultural recognition of the women's role and, in consequence, to the development and the survival of language and culture.

2. Political impact

The book will make sure that each and every community becomes *recognizable and gets recognized* by all people and thus also by the state, that all cultural identities are respected and receiving support. By letting all ethnic communities appear *together*, the book will help to consolidate the state by showing the fundamental unity of the people and thus work *against tribalism and separatism*. Besides its purely cultural functions, *the book is therefore to contribute to stability, peace and development*.

2.1 *Impact on an emerging South Sudan*

The book will be of a truly *national interest* as it promotes the understanding between people belonging to different cultures and to sponsor the unity of all people living in the South Sudan, creating the feeling of belonging together and eventually producing the awareness of sharing a same *identity*.

The project aims at creating that mentioned consciousness of belonging together; but the national unity can only last if all parts and communities of the country feel well-treated and if the country's cultural and material wealth is shared equitably. Being a book of reference and a means to guide the government's activities, the book will make the *Governmental agencies to get or to remain aware* of the cultural diversity of the country and will guide them in their decision-making when planning the development of different regions. It could become *a tool for policy-making*, in the field of education and culture but even in the field of development. If the book is succeeding in this task of reminding the government of the importance of cultural issues and of its interest in taking care of all ethnic groups alike, one of the most important political goals of this project would have been reached.

2.2 *Impact on Good Governance and human rights*

Truly, good governance is a "national interest" as the citizens get the feeling that they are treated equally and with justice. *Human rights* are closely linked to the respect of a person's dignity and of his/her cultural identity, making sure that the citizens do not get oppressed, harassed or deprived from development: everybody should have the right to be – culturally – one-self and be treated with dignity and respect. Provided that the authorities in power are aware of the fact that only justice, respect and equal

support can assure peace, the book can become a substantial contribution to the planning of activities as well as to peaceful resolution of conflicts. The feeling that a community is recognised and thus has specific rights (territorial, cultural etc.) as a distinctive group, the peoples concerned will get confidence into the state, a feeling which in turn will facilitate the work of the government and allow it to be efficient even in remote areas of the country.

2.3 Impact on the North-South relationship and peaceful co-existence

As already mentioned, lack of proper information in the North Sudan about the people in the Southern part of the Sudan has contributed to misconceptions, disregard and even to racism. The North-Sudanese' ignorance about the South in general and its inhabitants in particular is considerable, even in highly educated circles. Responsible for such lack of knowledge may be religion (the Northerners' cultural interest lying elsewhere), but lack of proper schoolbooks (at a primary and secondary level) have surely contributed to the general state of ignorance.

It is the modest aim and surely the hope that the proposed presentation of "*The peoples of the South Sudan*" will bring about a minimum of knowledge into the schoolrooms in the North and bridge the gap between the North and the South. Learning being the key to understanding, the book could become a positive contribution to peaceful co-existence. The Northerners' search for their proper identity having started here and there, the book may invite them to look with different eyes at the cultures of their ancestors and allow them to discover, in the shattered mirror of history, pieces of their own identity.

2.4 Impact on individual ethnic communities

Fundamentally, the book aims to give space, substance and volume to peoples and cultures which too often simply hide behind names and which therefore remain invisible. People like the *Suri*, for example, do surely exist and do not need a book to prove their existence, but in the mind and in the eyes of the public, they lack proper identification: only a few people would know where and how they live, how they look like or how they are organized. Who would bother to learn about them, if it was not in a book showing "*all the people of the South Sudan*"?

The book is meant to spread cultural knowledge and, by doing so, to link different cultures and to create a feeling of sharing a same identity.

The book is expected to show beneficial consequences for the political unity and for cultural peace, promoting understanding and leading to development. By "going public", the ethnic groups will look for sympathy, respect and support, - and in the "public interest" and the frame of good governance, they will get it! The book will force the state to recognize the existence of an ethnic community, and there will be no way of denying it its legal and human rights. The book will remind the people that not only individuals but also groups of people must enjoy rights and get the necessary protection and support. Thanks to such official (and mutual) recognition by the state and other communities, cultures and languages will be understood as values shared by and belonging to all people; expansion and development of cultures will be the consequence.

But the book will – hopefully! - not only increase the understanding of the different peoples by outsiders, the so-called tribes themselves will become conscious of the general value of their culture and thus be encouraged to look after it, by preserving traditions and precious knowledge and by protecting their language. The feeling to receive respect and attention may well result in an attitude of tolerance and even sympathy towards other people who suddenly don't appear as foreigners or enemies

anymore but as members of a wider community and a same group of people and cultures.

2.5 Impact on members of the Diaspora

For quite obvious reasons, the book will have a great sentimental value for all people staying in the Diaspora, and the fact that all ethnic communities will be seen in the book will be an additional attraction. Members of the Diaspora will be pleased, perhaps even delighted to read the book. They may get convinced that it is safe and worthwhile to return home and get encouraged to contribute to the rebuilding of the country.

At a time when many young Sudanese boys, girls and families have left for very remote foreign countries (namely the US, Canada and Australia), this book will moreover fulfill the important task of linking these children emotionally to their native country; at a later stage, the book will allow them to provide their children with information about their ancestors' land and culture. As the book surely will be available through the internet and be published on the *Gurtong*-website (www.gurtong.net), even the Sudanese living in far-distant countries will easily get access to the book.

2.6 Expected impact on development

The book is part of a strategy which wants to bring peace, unity and development to the peoples living in the South Sudan.

Cultures which are ignored, left out, and which feel threatened or even oppressed react negatively to everything which is new and unknown. Neglected, isolated or ignored cultures are instinctively hostile to all change and adopt a defensive negative attitude; they feel that any opening would mean the end of their existence as a cultural identity. In consequence, their conservative attitude towards modern education and development is part of their fight for survival.

Public recognition, linked to public support, respect and sympathy, is the only way to assure a people that modern society is not meant to destroy their identity, beliefs and traditions, their livelihood and their language, that their children because of education would not become strangers to the own culture. Societies can only afford to be open-minded and positively progressive if they do not feel threatened in their existence.

In short, through public recognition and cultural support, the project will strengthen the self-consciousness of the ethnic groups, take away their fears and encourage them to open their cultural borders to education and other forms of modern development. The book will make the people feel safe and comfortable, both at home and in the modern world.

Through information and encouragement, the economic and personal relationship between neighbouring communities will get enhanced. People do not only meet to fight and cultures do not only clash, there are always links between villages and between people, there are long periods of peace when the inhabitants of a region meet, discuss and sometimes work together. At a time when centres and towns get increasingly important, people of different origins are bound to stay together and to share a same life, at the place of work, in the churches, at market-places, in boarding-schools and at places of leisure. The book should not only give evidence of such existing forms of social or economic relationship but even contribute to develop them: this will be possible through the provision of proper information which is not based on prejudices but on positive, non-emotional facts.

While the book may help the ethnic groups to open themselves and to co-operate without fearing for their identity, it will encourage the government to pay attention to the needs of these people: in the context of good governance, the cultural and

economic situation of an ethnic group will become almost automatically part of the planning and of the budget. In short, it will be much more difficult to leave out any community from development and support.

On the other hand, contacts and co-operation between communities will enhance the understanding of the necessity of regional development where a project situated on the territory of one community will be seen as profitable for all (and not just as a support of another group of people).

3. Impact on education

The planned book's importance for education and its significance for the cultural life of the people are so evident that it hardly needs to be underlined.

Everybody understands that modern education depends on the availability of school-books and that these books greatly influence the future behaviour of the school-children.

The book would be part of *Civic education* and thus a source of information about the peoples in the South Sudan; it would also play a big part in the process of nation-building by enhancing the creation of a national identity and contribute to unity and peace.

Though the book would be used mainly by students and teachers, it would surely also find the interest of (even illiterate) adults who would be happy to learn the information from their children.

4. Importance for NGOs, political institutions, Sudanese in the Diaspora and foreigners

Even though the book has no scientific pretensions, it is planned to provide enough culturally significant information to be useful and interesting for all readers who - for professional or personal reasons - want to learn about the fascinating cultures of the people living in the South Sudan. Because of its particular approach (that is: to understand the communities both as separate entities and as socio-economic players in a wider context), the book could produce new ideas to organisations which are eager to help the people but unwilling to support only specific groups.

For all organizations promoting the education of South Sudanese children, the book will be instrumental as it will provide the teaching with cultural substance. Obviously, the book will be part of the syllabus as a manual of civic instruction.

For organs dealing with questions of good governance, political stability and inter-cultural harmony, this book could become an easily accessible source of information and at the same time an argument for the unity of the South Sudan.

For the Sudanese living in the Diaspora in far-distant places, this book will be of a great emotional importance, stimulating and encouraging the people to stay at least in spiritual contact with the country they left; for their children, this book will help them to know more about their cultural origins.

For foreigners, finally, this book will be a source of information and an invitation to learn more about Sudanese cultures by reading the scientific books available.

Urgency

As there cannot be any long-lasting peace without it, respect of Human Rights is an absolute priority in the building of a Nation and indeed afterwards.

Education is the only path leading to the respect of human rights and to development

Education is *always and everywhere* a matter of urgency, but in a country plagued by fifty years of war, this urgency becomes truly a life-saving *emergency*. The war going on, destruction continuing and resources lacking, there is little hope to find the kind of normal life

which is the condition to regular school-education. During times of war, priorities lie somewhere else; instead of pursuing education, many children were called to participate in the armed struggle; but even the children who are lucky enough to stay in their village and go to school may never learn more than basic English; the few functioning schools lack material and qualified teachers and therefore do not fulfil the functions expected from a school.

As hopes for a peace-agreement are getting more substantial, the chances for opening schools in all parts of the South Sudan are increasing. Preparations for a life after the war have started; many NGOs investing in the building of schools and teachers' training-programmes. But future teaching does not only need qualified persons and solid structures, it also needs educational material of a cultural significance. The planned book would enable the Sudanese to become conscious of their own culture and, at a same time, of the value of other cultures and eventually of the unity of all the different peoples of the South Sudan : it is urgent to see the own culture in the mirror of all other cultures.

In a rapidly changing world in which languages and cultures disappear or are absorbed by other more powerful civilizations, it is *urgent* to become aware of the importance of culture and to *save cultures from disappearance*. Culture does not only “belong” to one people, it “belongs” to the entire humanity; the planned book may make people aware of the fact that Sudanese cultures are “belonging” to all Sudanese, not just to the carrier of one specific culture and language.

Last but not least, it is urgent to overcome the so-called “tribalism”. Peace-building within the South Sudan is crucial for any future co-existence between ethnic groups; it is *urgent* to bring people together and to increase knowledge and understanding. This cannot only be done through meetings and talking, there is need *to see, to feel and to understand*. The planned book will be a substantial element when trying to bridge the gap between communities; it will be a concrete step towards inter-ethnic communication, to co-operation in fields of development and culture and, last but not least, to an enhancement of human rights, for the individual but also for a whole group of people.



Summary and Perspectives

In this paper, I used my personal experiences in the South Sudan as a basis for the discussion of cultures in the light of human rights.

I emphasized the fact that cultures have human rights of their own and that their understanding of human rights has deep, strong and metaphysical roots. As examples, I highlighted the absolute value of the human person, the complexity of cultural identity, religious and cultural liberty, freedom of speech, child-protection, a person's social values, the respect shown to vulnerable people, to animals and even to the environment, the vital significance of language as the carrier of consciousness and cultural identity, and, above all, the dignity of the human person as the foundation of all constructive relationship.

I have also explained how ignorance, oppression of culture and racial contempt are bound to lead to unrest, civic disobedience, rebellion and not seldom to armed conflicts, and I argued that only respect of the dignity and the recognition of cultural values of all ethnic identities can lead to peace, harmony and development. When insulted, cultures react very similarly to people who feel hurt in their personal integrity. Cultures share with people the human right to exist, to be recognized and to receive respect. I emphasized the fact that academic and verbal recognition of cultures is not sufficient for the protection of cultural values and language but that the state must give them official recognition and provide them with a platform where they can express their concerns, resolve conflicts in a peaceful manner and prepare the ground for change and progress.

Addressing the issue of cultural change, I stressed that change can only occur when the people's cultural values and language are respected and when the cultures' human rights are officially recognized. Change must be allowed to grow from within; in order to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the concerned people, it must build on existing values. Pressure on cultures leads to resistance, seclusion, and often to hostility, aggression or war. Recognizing that education is, in the long term, the surest means to produce cultural change, I expressed however doubts about the immediate positive effects of education and suggested that cultural change could get facilitated and speeded up through discussions between traditional leaders, ideally in an institution such as the 'House of Nationalities'. Considering the importance of the women's role in the preservation of culture and language as well as the urgent need to improve the women's social status by giving them access to human rights and education, I expressed the view that women will be the real promoters of cultural change and stand up as the leaders for human rights. The women's courage and their determination to overcome the ethnic obstacles to change while preserving essential values were arguments for believing that the fight for the human rights of cultures in general and the rights of women in particular will eventually be successful.

Believing that education is the key to the universe and one of the best means to promote cultural change without breaking a culture's backbone of identity, I eventually presented a research-project entitled '*Footprints to the future*' which is expected to overcome ignorance, to promote understanding and to facilitate cultural harmony. Cultural diversity was understood as an asset and not as an obstacle to progress and development.

If my previous remarks on the human rights of cultures were much of a general kind, I would like to conclude with some words on the prospects of peace in the so-called New Sudan.

Though the peace-agreement is not concluded in all its details yet, it appears that the liberation-war led by the SPLA and its supporters has not been in vain: the Government of the Sudan was forced to recognize the people of the South Sudan, to accept the sharing of power and resources and even to agree to hold a referendum which is to decide about the country's unity or its separation into two parts. A new chapter in the history of the Sudan has started, the Southern part of the country getting the chance to shape its own destiny. How will they do it? Will the leaders respect the cultural diversity of the country or will they rather try to keep the country together by force? The reply to these questions will decide upon war or peace, bloodshed or prosperity, poverty or development, oppression or cultural liberty. Who will help the military leaders to respect democracy and human rights? While there is still time for preventing new, terrible conflicts, the danger of a new dictatorship is looming. The challenge to the civil society in general and to human right groups in particular is tremendous.

In my introduction, I mentioned briefly that I have been working for a few years on a peace-project which aims at bringing harmony and peace to the many tribes of the South Sudan: the "*House of Nationalities*", as it is called, is a project focusing on *nation-building* and consists in a kind of forum where all the ethnic groups of the South Sudan would meet on a regular basis in order to discuss issues of common interest such as culture, education, development-projects and, most importantly, inter-cultural co-operation and conflict-prevention. The idea is that the State would officially recognize the existence (and thus the political importance) of the various ethnic groups and protect their cultures and languages; the ethnic communities would meet in an assembly where they could make their voices heard and contribute to decision-making, either in advisory or in legislative capacities. Through such an institution, the South Sudan would find its political identity and be able to avoid conflicts along ethnic lines; the national unity of the people⁵⁶ would enhance development, cultural democracy and human rights.

The 'House of Nationalities'-project found enthusiastic support from South Sudanese women, from youth-groups, from lawyers, intellectuals, chiefs and kings as well as from a few SPLM-officials; some members of the political leadership, however, were more reluctant to endorse the concept, apparently believing that an African nation must be build on the principles of one language and one people.⁵⁷ With growing popular support for the '*House of Nationalities*'-concept, the official SPLM became more and more suspicious and very defensive, occasionally even aggressive and threatening. Considering the emotional reactions by some of the figureheads of the liberation-movement, it is doubtful if their attitude would have been much different if the 2004-UNDP-report on "*Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World*"⁵⁸ would have been available earlier; but this extremely rich report on cultural diversity could surely have helped the SPLM as well as the NGOs to adjust their policies and to think not only of economic development but also of the importance of cultural diversity and of human rights for the country's stability and prosperity.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ A country is like a family: only if all the sons, daughters and relatives are recognized, the family will stay together and form a unit able to play a role in the socio-political context; *inclusiveness* is the key to progress and peace.

⁵⁷ Amongst the few concrete arguments put forward against the peace-project was that it is a foreign idea (though some sponsors are foreigners, the very concept is the result of discussions amongst South Sudanese only), that it is backed by the wrong people (some supporters are known for their SPLA-critical views), that time has not come yet (?) or that the chiefs are backward, anti-democratic and in any case unable to adapt to modern times.

⁵⁸ HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2004, *Cultural Liberty in Today's World*, UNDP 2004 (Director and Lead Author *Sakiko Fukuda-Parr*, Editors *Cait Murphy* and *Bruce Roos-Larson*); see <http://hdr.undp.org>

⁵⁹ The idea of giving a voice to ethnic communities seems to be understood by some either as a direct challenge to the state, as a danger to the political power of some individuals or simply as a threat to the biggest ethnic group (the Dinka) which claims to possess the privilege to rule.

When preparing my project “*Footprints to the future...*”, I was sure that at least the objective of uniting cultures through a project of education would be well received and understood as a contribution to the future South Sudan. What could one do more than give peace, prosperity and cultural liberty a chance? I was naïve enough to believe that a project which aims at rooting out the seeds of ignorance and hatred as the main-causes to conflict would be welcomed and supported by all.

Do I really surprise anybody when telling you that my hopes did not materialize yet? Potential sponsors prefer to invest in concrete projects, the building of banks, roads, pipelines and railroads, in the construction of hospitals and schools, nobody seems to like to invest in culture and in human rights. In the absence of war, nobody thinks of stabilizing peace. At the approach of self-governance in the South Sudan, former commanders get trained in administration, matters of police, in banking or the management of resources, but no courses are offered on cultures and human rights. For the donors, it is the short term which counts, not the long-term investment in ideas, structures or the rehabilitation of democratic institutions. In consequence, the majority of South Sudanese will be ignorant about their own people and their cultural values. The history of misunderstandings will continue.

I can understand that Sudanese intellectuals and commanders are not much interested in projects which aim at enforcing the people’s human rights, at claiming respect for identities and at providing space to cultural liberty; such humanitarian programmes do not lie in the egoistic interest of individuals. What is much more enigmatic to me is the apparent lack of interest and support which one could expect from the side of NGOs and governmental organisations, and in particular from human rights groups; they seem to ignore deliberately how serious the situation in the South Sudan at the end of the North/South-conflict is, how close we are to a new area of internal civil wars and how urgent it is to give protection to the many cultures of the country and to assure their survival in dignity. Without such a basic human support, all the efforts to bring development and prosperity to the people will be in vain. Once cultures and peace have collapsed, it will be too late to complain about the abuses of human rights and about the fact that cultures apparently fail to change.

At the moment of a peace-agreement, one ought to be optimistic, and yet it would be naïve to believe that the South Sudan will fare well just because there will be a lot of money, from well-intentioned donors or from the new oil-resources; one does not need to be pessimistic when trying to remain realistic, cautious and sensitive to the people’s right to keep their identity. When listening to the latest declarations by some people, when observing the lack of democratic structures or when witnessing the collapse of traditional institutions in the South Sudan, one has good reasons to fear that the roots to the past conflict have already been forgotten and that new, big troubles may well lie ahead. I know that I am repeating myself when I state that *there is an urgent need for an institution on the level of the state* which would guarantee the people their rights on cultural liberty, which would protect the cultures from political manipulation and military oppression and which would help the people of all origins to find some self-interest in the support of a nation which is still struggling for the recognition of its own identity. Words and good intentions are not enough; promises, hopes and dreams must be translated into solid structures and strong institutions which alone can provide political stability to the state. The civil society must participate and sponsor the building of institutions which will make sure that cultures don’t get violated by the state; it is the only way to make a smooth transition from past to modern times possible and to avoid that the cultures’ human rights get violated.

Annex:

Short elucidations regarding the book's title "*Footprints to the future...*"

Footprints are the Carriers of Identity

Medical science insists on the importance of the feet as indicators for the spiritual well-being of the human person. Feet-massage has a great impact on a person's entire physical and mental constitution. Feet *carry* a person during the entire time of its earthly existence.

Superficially, footprints are of a practical importance: Hunters and fighters perceive them as symbols for the passage of a person or an animal and thus understand not only their specific identity but also their size, their well-being and physical constitution, even their age, sex and mood... Because footprints stand for the identity of an animal or a person, they are of a great spiritual significance in practically all cultures: witnessing of the passage of the human person on earth, they show both fulfillment and eventual emptiness, indicate presence while showing absence.

Because of such fundamental existential significance, one of the Nilotic people of the South Sudan (the Anyuak) locate their physical and earthly soul (the more spiritual one is transported by the spittle) under the feet or more precisely in the feet's lower parts, in the soles of the feet: foot-soles lie at the intersection between human existence and the earth and thus stay in permanent communication between the more stable and the more temporary forms of existence, between the earth and the human person. Being an absolutely transparent matter, the soul can of course not be grasped, and this is why the earthly soul of the Anyuak actually does not lie in the soles of the feet but in their shadow (Shadow being understood to be the transparency of human existence). In that sense, footprints are nothing but the physical containers of the soul, the visible expression of a person's spiritual essence.

What may sound rather sophisticated and abstract has in fact very substantial practical consequences for daily life: as footprints stand for the spiritual and physical identity of another person, people have to fear possible contamination when stepping in/on the footprints of someone else; therefore, they will avoid to step in/on the footprints of a person considered to be infected or to be the carrier of some disease: the footprints of sick persons, of sterile individuals and even of starving people are, for example, not to be stepped on...⁶⁰ But footprints are also a kind of container which can get filled with feelings of love and affection: Anyuak history shows young women filling the footprints of a beloved person with grains, leaving those of his rival empty...

When it happens that the soles of the feet are – because of long walking or heavy loads – red-hot, the Anyuak would consult a diviner who would surely conclude that “the soul has been taken” and send the patient for treatment to a specialist for spiritual matters; eventually, that “soul-doctor” would succeed in bringing the soul back to its place – the soles of the feet – by using fire and smoke...

All human movements start and end with the feet. Footprints are symbols for departure and arrival and therefore not mere signs of past presence: they are reflecting both a physical and a spiritual movement. Emerging out of the past while heading to the future, footprints indicate progress and power, open the perspectives of both past achievement and future fulfillment.

The understanding of footprints as a series of physical and spiritual steps towards the future and, more profoundly, as a symbol for the transmigration of the human soul, is so beautiful, inspiring, encouraging and promising that we thought it to be a perfect graphic description of the Sudanese cultures' continuous movement from deeply rooted traditional consciousness to the challenging conditions of modern times. The project "*Footprints to the future...*" wants to ensure that this movement from the past to the future occurs without rupture, without loss of identity and without causing cultural damage, that the peoples' footprints will eventually reach their shared vision of a prosperous life in a united and peaceful South Sudan.

⁶⁰ The *Atuot*-people urge their children not to step on the footprints of „those bad and dirty people“ (which are their neighbours!).