

# A GUIDE TO THE NUER OF JONGLEI STATE

By  
Sharon Hutchinson  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### ***Part One: Nuer and Dinka Patterns of Migration and Settlement***

<i>The Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Nuer Expansion into Jonglei State</i>	1
<i>The Organizational Significance of the Assimilator / Assimilated Distinction</i>	2
<i>More Recent Nuer Population Movements</i>	4
<i>Ethnic, Sub-ethnic and Clan Divisions</i>	5
<i>Transhumant Livelihood Strategies</i>	8
<i>Relevant Maps</i>	12

### ***Part Two: Social Organization and Political Institutions***

<i>Colonial Conquest and the Creation of a 'Native Administration'</i>	12
<i>The Colonial Creation of 'Tribal' Homelands</i>	15
<i>Former Administrative Methods for Containing Inter-Community Violence in Jonglei</i>	15
<i>The Wartime Erosion of Chiefly Authority</i>	17

### ***Part Three: Cultural Imperatives***

<i>Life's Entwined Goals: Cattle and Children</i>	18
<i>Regional Linkages of Cattle and Children</i>	22
<i>War-Provoked Processes of Social and Cultural Change</i>	23
<i>Deepening Regional Poverty</i>	24
<i>Widening Generational Cleavages</i>	25
<i>Militarizing Women's Reproductive Responsibilities</i>	27
<i>Unraveling Regional Codes of Warfare Ethics</i>	29
<i>Nuer Ethnicity Militarized</i>	30

## ***Appendices***

*Map 1 Ethnic Groups in South Sudan (c. 1951)*

*Map 2 Seasonal Cattle Movements in South Sudan (c.1951)*

*Map 3 UN Map of Ethnic Groups in South Sudan (c.2009)*

*Map 4 Dinka Patterns of Seasonal Migrations in Kongor and Bor (c.1984)*

*Diagram 1 Contemporary Cieng Structure of the Lou Nuer*

## ***Bibliography***

## **A GUIDE TO THE NUER OF JONGLEI STATE**

### ***Part One: Nuer and Dinka Patterns of Migration and Settlement***

The Dinka (*Jieng*) and Nuer (*Nei ti naadth*) are the two largest ethnic groups in South Sudan. Their traditional homelands extend across the savannas and marshes of the greater Bahr el-Ghazal and Upper Nile regions and are transected by numerous tributaries flowing into the White Nile (see Map 1). Dinka groups inhabit the vast arc of land running north, west, and south of the central Nile basin. Nuer groups occupy the central basin itself, extending eastwards along the Sobat and Baro rivers all the way into southwestern Ethiopia.

Both ethnic groups are closely related, having emerged from a common proto-Nuer/Dinka cultural formation some five hundred years ago. Both speak closely related Nilotic languages, though these are no longer mutually comprehensible. They have also intermarried heavily over the years, and often migrate through and/or reside in one another's home territories. Finally, both groups share an extremely broad sense of kinship and related exogamic norms, which can extend back in time to encompass as many as ten to twelve generations of descendants on the father's side and six to eight generations on the mother's side.<sup>1</sup>

### ***The Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Nuer Expansion into Jonglei State***

Beginning in the early nineteenth century, small groups of Nuer began migrating out of their original homelands on the west bank of the Nile eastwards across the Bahr el-

---

<sup>1</sup> There is, however, considerable evidence among Nuer that the transgenerational scope of their kinship connections has contracted significantly over the past forty years. Young couples wishing to marry but thwarted by decrees that they are distantly related can elope and try to bear a healthy child. The presumption is that a child born of an "incestuous" relationship would show its immoral origins through early death, sustained illness or some other misfortune. However, exogamic and incest prohibitions are ultimately determined by God (*kuoth*). Consequently, if God blesses a couple with a healthy child, their relation is revealed as "non-incestuous" and the wayward couple can return to their families confident that a marriage will be arranged.

Jebel into Dinka- and Anyuak-occupied lands. According to Nuer traditions, the Gaawar and Lou were the first groups to cross the river, where they settled on the peripheries of Dinka communities then located on Zeraf Island. The Lak and Thiang Nuer followed in the 1840s, pushing Lou and Gaawar Nuer invaders further east and displacing Dinka groups entirely from the Zeraf region. Groups of Jikany Nuer took a different route across the Nile, passing further north through Shilluk country before settling along the banks of the Sobat and Baro rivers. By the beginning of the twentieth century, these invading Nuer groups had reached the Ethiopian escarpment, more than tripling their original land base and assimilating tens of thousands of Dinka and Anyuak residents, captives, and immigrants in their wake.

### ***The Organizational Significance of the Assimilator / Assimilated Distinction***

While aggressive cattle raiding and violent intimidation were fundamental elements of this territorial expansion, invading Nuer groups generally used less confrontational means of absorbing displaced Dinka and Anyuak—principally, rites of adoption and marriage. In fact, ambitious Nuer *diel* actively competed amongst themselves for positions of local power and leadership by gathering around themselves as many Dinka and Anyuak clients as possible. The loyalty of attached clients, captives, and immigrants was secured primarily through the generous provision of cattle and Nuer wives.

Over time, this rapid series of Nuer invasions crystallized into a marked distinction between descendents of the original Nuer settlers/ ‘first comers’ (*diel*) and their assimilated Dinka and Anyuak immigrants (*jaang* meaning ‘Dinka’ in the Nuer language) and by extension all other ‘foreigners,’ including later arriving Nuer (*rul*) from other localities.<sup>2</sup> For many reasons, however, it was structurally advantageous for ambitious Nuer men to attach Dinka and Anyuak clients as ‘wife-takers’ rather than ‘wife-givers.’ In other words, it was better for *diel* to allow their sisters and daughters to be married by *jaang* clients than to marry co-resident Dinka women themselves. This

---

<sup>2</sup>The term *yien*, “tied” can also be applied to the descendants of assimilated “late comers.”

was because the deference, cooperation and respect the ‘wife-takers’ side was supposed to exhibit towards the ‘wife-givers’ did not end with the completion of bridewealth payments. Rather it extended for as many as six to eight generations after the original marital union. During this period intermarriage between the descendants of the two families were prohibited—maintaining an asymmetrical relationship between them for the duration. This debt was symbolized by the payment of additional bridewealth gifts (in the form of cattle, goats, or spears) to the descendants of the ‘wife-givers’ on the marriages of the daughters, granddaughters and great-granddaughters of the initial woman provided. In these ways, Nuer residential groupings were commonly built up through the interplay of these asymmetrical yet more intimate social ties forged through marriage on the one hand, and by the competitive symmetry characterizing descent ties binding patrilineal half-brothers, cousins, uncles, and more distant agnates on the other.

Another advantage of attaching clients as “wife-takers” or cognates—known in Nuer as ‘children of girls/daughters’ (*nyier nyiet*)—was that their *diel* patrons could actually give them cattle to marry wives on their behalf. A far-sighted *diel*, in other words, could increase his own procreative potential or that of a close kinsmen by enlisting a ‘son of a daughter’ to marry on his behalf, bear children in his name and thereby, extend his ‘patrilineage’ (*thok dwiel*). Consequently, many Nuer residential communities in Jonglei today consist of relatively small patrilineal clusters of *diel*, surrounded by much larger congeries of attached ‘children of girls.’ With the passage of time, an ambitious ‘daughter’s son’ can create his own assemblage of attached Nuer or Dinka clients and, eventually, breakaway to found his own village—where his patriline will provide the social framework for further growth. In these ways, Nuer lineage and residential groupings are geared toward perpetual expansion, followed by internal splits, and the founding of new residential communities.

Not everyone who migrated together across the Nile during the nineteenth century was related to one another. Group leaders often gathered adventurous Nuer men from many different families and homeland communities. Nevertheless, after they succeeded in conquering a particular area, they needed to present a united front before the Dinka. So, they invented an entirely new form of kinship, called ‘relationship/kinship of the diel’ (*maar diila*)—a concept completely unknown among “homeland Nuer” located west of

the Nile. This concept prohibited intermarriage among *diel* even when no identifiable kinship or descent tie existed. For had they begun to marry each other's sisters and daughters, they would have appeared weakly united before co-resident "Dinka"—who shared similar notions of the transgenerational limits of kinship and related incest/exogamic prohibitions. In this way, the *diel* effectively masked descent divisions to create the illusion of greater social cohesion. Ultimately, these pragmatically 'fudged' connections among *diel* invaders provided the 'segmentary lineage structure' around which higher order Nuer territorial and residential grouping in Jonglei state today are originally organized.

### ***More Recent Nuer Population Movements***

The definitive conquest of the Lou Nuer in 1929-30 by British colonial forces of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium regime (1898-1956) ended the rapid nineteenth century Nuer advance into formerly Dinka and Anyuak occupied lands. However, the eastward movement of Lou and Jikany Nuer did not cease completely. Although forceful large-scale movements were largely contained during subsequent periods of peace, some Nuer groups attempted to "purchase" the rights to occupy specific areas from neighboring Anyuak and Murle groups with payments of cattle. Nuer oral history and archival records suggest that the Lou gave 300 head of cattle to the Murle sometime during the 1930s or 1940s for the right to dry-season their cattle around Biem, on Khor Geni—although the Murle had moved back into the area by the mid-1950s.

So, too, Lou oral history recounts cattle payments made to neighboring Anyuak for the right to graze their herds and later, settle more permanently south of Akobo. Both the Anyuak and Lou lived together in that region until 1980-81, when an Anyuak chief reportedly told local Lou elders to vacate the area. Initially, this request was not taken seriously by Lou residents. But in 1982, a serious war broke out over the issue, which eventually drew in some eastern Jikany Nuer from Upper Nile and some Anyuak from across the river in Ethiopia. Without knowing how these events were perceived by relevant Anyuak and Murle groups, it would seem that these particular land conflicts may have been rooted in part in different cultural interpretations of what was actually being

‘purchased’: temporary residential and/or grazing rights as opposed to the permanent rights of occupation and ownership anticipated by Lou leaders.

This eastward creep of Nuer groups received renewed impetus during both Sudanese civil wars (1955-72; 1983-2005), as a result of the establishment of a southern opposition military base camp in southwestern Ethiopia, together with the thousands upon thousands of primarily Nuer and Dinka refugees that soon followed. Both eastern Jikany and Lou Nuer populations in Sudan pressed hard against Anyuak communities along southern bank of the Sobat River and on the Sudanese side of the Pibor River, squeezing them further to the south and east and into Ethiopia. War-disrupted Nuer groups also pushed against Anyuak territories inside Ethiopia, eventually establishing themselves as the largest ethnic group in the Gambella region.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Ethnic, Sub-ethnic and Clan Divisions***

Many outside observers refer to the Nuer and Dinka as separate ‘tribes,’ even though both ethnic groups are united through many shared social histories, cultural values and bonds of intermarriage. Moreover, both ethnic groups are sub-divided into many ‘tribal’ units, as the concept of ‘tribe’ was originally applied by British colonial administrators during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>4</sup> At that time, the boundaries of a ‘tribe’ were defined by the social limits within which acts of intra-ethnic homicide could be peacefully resolved through transfers of cattle compensation payments (bloodwealth) under the direction of hereditary ritual experts known as ‘earth priests’ (*kuar muon*). The Nuer people as a whole are commonly subdivided into eleven to thirteen major, named, sub-ethnic groups, while Dinka are subdivided into more than twenty.

---

<sup>3</sup> Both Dereje Feyessa and Eisei Kurimoto have documented important dimension of this Nuer/Anyuak competition for coveted riverine lands and pasturage in southwestern Ethiopia.

<sup>4</sup> The term “tribe” is no longer considered a useful label by most contemporary anthropologists, owing to connotations of static social structures, closed territorial boundaries and ethnically homogeneous populations within them. Basically, the term “tribe” is considered an ill-fitting category overlain with colonial preconceptions about how “Africans” lived. It has been applied to a great diversity of social formations, all of which were reshaped to facilitate their integration into an imposed system of administrative overrule. Anthropologists tend to use a variety of linguistic circumlocutions to avoid using this term—one being “sub-ethnic” group and another “clan.” For the moment, I will ignore these theoretical concerns and define the term as British colonialists originally applied it in South Sudan.

Contemporary Dinka tribes inhabiting Jonglei state are divided into a northern and a southern cluster. The northern cluster lies south of the White Nile and its juncture with the Sobat and includes the Ruweng, Rut, Thoi, and Luaich Dinka. These Dinka are sometimes labeled collectively as the Padeang Dinka. Their territories currently extend westwards from Khor Fullus across the Atar tributary to near the town of Fangak. They share borders with Nuer groups and with the Shilluk on the north bank of the White Nile. The (eastern) Ngok Dinka lie immediately to their east across Khor Fullus in present-day Upper Nile state. These Dinka groups are fortunate in that the distances separating their wet-season settlements from critical dry-season grazing is minimal, though their lands are highly vulnerable in high flood years.

The southern Dinka cluster is separated from their northern cousins by a large expanse of Lou and Gawaar Nuer territories carved out during their nineteenth century invasions. This cluster includes the Ghol (Hol), Nyarweng, (eastern) Twic and Bor Dinka. These groups inhabit a series of ridges at varying distance westwards from the Bahr el-Jebel, which provides them with ample river-flooded *toic* pasturage used during the height of the dry-season. However, years of high flood can cut them off from some *toic* pasturage, forcing the Bor Dinka to push southwards into Mundari territories. These southern cluster Dinka have been forced to abandon some isolated areas of higher ground suitable for wet-season occupation as the result of recurrent Murle cattle raids beginning during the early early 1960s and continuing into the present.

Contemporary Nuer tribes located in present-day Jonglei state include the Lak and Thaing Nuer, occupying the northern reaches of triangle of land known as Zeraf Island. The Lak, sub-divided into the Kwacbor and the Jongyang, have a few settlements on the right bank of the river around old Fangak. Their homelands are considered poor for cattle grazing, owing to the fact that flies carrying trypanosomiasis are present. The Gaawar Nuer, sub-divided into the Rath and Bar, are located immediately south and east of the Thiang and Lak. The Gaawar live partly east of the Zeraf river and are spread widely across the heavily forested areas of Falugh, on part of the Duk Ridge and along scattered knolls near the river. They suffer intensely during high flood years.



The Lou Nuer, by far the largest Nuer group in the area, are sub-divided into the Gun and Mor primary sections and occupies the north-central region of the state. The Lou Nuer share a border with the (eastern) Jikany Nuer, who are sub-divided into the eastern Gaajok, Gaagwang and Gaajak primary sections. Eastern Jikany Nuer territories straddle the upper Sobat and Baro Rivers in the Upper Nile and extended northwards into the Machar swamps and eastwards across the river into southwestern Ethiopia. The Lou Nuer also share borders with the Gaawar and Thiang Nuer to their northeast and with the Pibor Murle and various Anyuak groups to the southeast. The Lou also share borders with many Dinka groups—namely, the Luaic and (eastern) Ngok Dinka in the north and the Ghol, Nyarweng and Twic Dinka located to the southeast. Since 1983, the Nuer have pushed into some former Dinka villages near the confluence of the Sobat and Bahr el Jebel. Nuer also now live in areas south of these two rivers that were formerly occupied by Shilluk, who retreated northwards across the White Nile.

The homelands of the Lou Nuer do not contain sufficient *toic*-land to support their comparatively large herds and population. Consequently, they must migrate annually in multiple directions, passing through and into the territories of neighboring groups on a semi-annual basis in order to survive. Many Gun Nuer, inhabiting the western half of Lou Nuer territories, migrate through Gaawar lands to reach *toic* flood plains on the Bahr el-Zeraf. This has sometimes resulted in eruption of major conflicts, involving much loss of life.

Some Gun also migrate northwards to Khor Pullus. The Mor Lou migrate during the dry-season northwards across the Jonglei state border into Jikany (principally, Gaajok) Nuer territories along the southern bank of the Sobat, eastwards to Khor Nyanding, southeastwards into contested Anyuak territories along the Pibor River and, sometimes, across the Ethiopian border as far as the Gila River. Owing to continual insecurity along their southern borders with the Murle, the Lou have retreated from a large swath of lands immediately to their south that were formerly used for both wet-season and dry-season settlements. As a result, they, in turn, have gradually pressed deeper into Anyuak lands south of Akobo since at least the mid-1970s. There has been a steady infiltration of Lou Nuer into this region during peaceful periods, accomplished often through marriages with the Anyuak. This can be a very tense border, especially

because Anyuak resent the fact that their land rights have not been adequately defended by the state government. Many former Anyuak residents have been squeezed out of this area entirely, retreating across the river into Ethiopia.

In principle, individual Nuer and their families can migrate and settle anywhere in rural Nuer regions, provided that they do not infringe on the homesteads of others and first discuss their settlement plans with local leaders. During periods of regional peace, Dinka and Nuer have also created blended settlements within each other's lands.

However, large-scale population movements across ethnic lines and even intra ethnic clan borders have been actively discouraged since British colonial times. Nevertheless, two lengthy civil wars and countless other crises have resulted in significant movements and mixtures of people throughout the entire region, as well as tense periods of polarization and territorial retreats in response to violent inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic conflicts.

For all these reasons, contemporary Nuer and Dinka groups (as well as their respective sub-divisions) have never formed neatly circumscribed 'tribes'. Rather both ethnic groups have held overlapping and sometimes competing loyalties to an ever-broadening spectrum of social and political units over the past 200 years, including patrilineal clusters, shared residential units, seasonal resource sharing groups, regional court systems, town groupings, temporary confederacies, military zones of command, state and county administrative institutions, and so on—all of which are undergirded by cross-cutting networks of kinship ties.

### ***Transhumant Livelihood Strategies***

Most Nuer and Dinka living in present-day Jonglei state are fully engaged in a mixed agro-pastoralist economy centered on cattle husbandry and sorghum growing, supplemented by seasonal fishing and gathering activities. Moreover, this economic strategy necessitates that most people to move semi-annually between relatively permanent, wet-season settlements—scattered across small outcroppings of slightly higher ground—and larger, more condensed, temporary dry-season cattle and fishing camps located along major tributaries of the Nile or alongside permanent inland pools. This movement is governed by the hydrology of major rivers, with periods of higher than

normal dry-season flows reducing *toic* pasturage and, often, generating tensions as people are forced to gain access to alternative areas.

Although most major Nuer and Dinka named divisions include all types of land resources required for this livelihood strategy, some people are fortunate enough to have their wet-season settlements located not far from their dry-season grazing lands. Others have to migrate seasonally for distances of up to 150 kilometers. But not all necessary land types are adequately represented in all 'tribal' territories. Critical river-flooded pasturage is widely scattered and some groups (e.g., Lou Nuer) must pass through the territories of others in the course of their seasonal migrations.

The rainy season in Jonglei state usually begins slowly in April, gains momentum through August and September, and ends sometime in late October or early November. With the rains, rivers rise rapidly and soon burst their banks, creating vast pools and inundating much of the region. Everyone retreats to higher ground, which is relative scarce in many areas and usually found along isolated ridges and outcroppings some distance away from major river networks. There people plant their wet-season crops, consisting primarily of sorghum and maize, complemented by small plots of tobacco, ground nuts and other more minor crops. Small plots of fast maturing maize stem people's hunger until their slower maturing sorghum fields are mature. In the past, it was common for Nuer groups to produce two harvests annually, but this practice was abandoned in most areas before the start of the second civil war. However, some riverine lands are capable of producing abundant maize during the height of the dry season with only the moisture that rises from the river. This is especially true of comparatively narrow strips riverine lands in eastern Jikany Nuer along the upper Sobat and Baro Rivers, and extending northward into the Machar swamps in eastern Jikany Nuer country.

Among Nuer, the wet-season village (*cieng*, pl. *ceng*) is the smallest corporate group whose members share strong feelings of solidarity. The word *cieng* in Nuer (pronounced 'chieng'), has the general meaning of 'home,' and may be used to identify a residential collectivity of any size, ranging from a single homestead to very large clan

divisions.<sup>5</sup> All members of a Nuer village consider themselves to be ‘kin’ (*teke ke maar*). While some families are close kin by blood or marriage, others become ‘kin’ through ties of co-residence, commensality, labor exchange, mutual defense and other common forms of cooperation. A wet-season village holds collective rights in its immediate water sources, fishing pools and grazing grounds. Individual families hold more exclusive rights in their homesteads and fields.

Nuer wet-season villages are not concentrated settlements. Rather, individual families tend to space out their homesteads as far as the local landscape permits. It is common to find Nuer homesteads forming long chain of byres and houses, extending sometimes for long distances across isolated ridges or large outcroppings of higher ground, which may be only a meter or two higher than the surrounding flood plains.

Once the dry season begins (around November), the rivers and pools contract, forcing people to move into lower lying lands near permanent pools and waterways to find sufficient pasturage. First, the youth (both younger men, boys and girls) set off in small groups with their herds, following well established migration routes through intervening rain-fed grasslands, which is often burned to provoke fresh green shoots. Eventually, the youth of many villages coalesce to form large cattle camps (*wei/wic*, in Nuer) near critically important, river-flooded pastures that provide the sole source of grass during the height of the drought. Such land, known as *toic*, is collectively owned by named Nuer sections and is carefully guarded against uninvited trespassers. Rights of access to specific fishing pools are also controlled by named Nuer sub-ethnic and/or clan groups. Access to fishing pools and *toic* lands may be shared with non-group members, but only with the express permission of local leaders. Perceived transgressions remain at present, as in the past, triggers for intra and inter-communal fighting and feuding during the dry-season. Compared with village settlements, dry-season cattle camps are usually more densely populated, often bringing together many hundreds of people and thousands of cattle from the extended area. However, cattle camps located in the *toic* lands are

---

<sup>5</sup> Linguistically, *cieng* is closely related to other Nuer nouns for “demeanor”, “behavior,” “character ” “custom,” “culture” (*ciang*) and conveying the more general image of “people living together in harmonious ways.”

impermanent in most instances, since whatever traces of human habitation are left behind wash away when the river floods again.

In summary, all Nuer and Dinka groups in Jonglei that currently pursue transhumant agro-pastoralism require access to a variety of land types and water sources to survive. No one facet of their economy—be it cattle husbandry, horticulture or fishing and gathering—can support human life unassisted. The rains are far too unpredictable and extreme to enable Nuer and Dinka to entrust their lives to sorghum and maize production alone. On average any particular village will experience optimal conditions for their crops once every six years (Howell, Lock, et al., 1988). And most people are not wealthy enough in cattle to dispense with hard agricultural labor. Consequently, should any particular community be denied access to any part of this required mixture of critical resources and land types, it can rapidly fall into extreme hardship and famine.

Because drought and floods are constant features of life in extended region, a regional, peacetime, economic network developed over the generations across ethnic and political boundaries to help even out agricultural surpluses and deficits in difficult years. Because rain patterns vary unpredictably over short distances, it has been possible during periods of peace for many Nuer and Dinka to use their extended kin-networks to mitigate localised famine conditions. During periods of especially high flood waters in the Jonglei region during the early 1930, late 1940s and early 1960s, the Twic Dinka, (eastern) Ngok Dinka and the (eastern) Jikany Nuer were often turned to by neighboring groups to secure extra sorghum in times of famine in exchange for cattle and other resources. Shilluk have crossed the White Nile for Lak Nuer surpluses; and the Jikany Nuer regularly produced agricultural surpluses, up until Northern Sudanese merchants began importing large amounts of sorghum in their territories from expanding agricultural schemes in Renk and Melut into Jikany areas during the latter 1970s and early 1980s, up to the renewed outbreak of civil war in 1983. This informal regional network of cattle and grain exchange was utterly disrupted both by the war itself and, more directly, by the WFP's importation and free distribution of sorghum and maize relief supplies that followed.

### ***Relevant Maps:***

I am including in the appendices with this report a series of maps that document past and present locations of relevant ethnic groups and associated patterns of transhumance. Maps 1 and 2 (circa 1951) identify the rough territorial homelands of all major Nuer and Dinka sub-groups at that time and their seasonal migration routes. Map 3, created by UN personnel in 2010, is supplied for purposes of comparison. If accurate, it suggests identifiable shifts in the ethnic composition of certain territories over the past 60 years. Note an apparent Murle push northwards into formerly Nuer and Dinka territories and a complementary movement of Lou Nuer groups south and eastwards from Akobo along the Pibor River into formerly Anyuak-held lands. Map 4 (circa 1984) offers a more detailed image of seasonal migration patterns among the southern Jonglei Dinka cluster as well as of specific wet season settlement areas that were abandoned by that time due to recurrent cattle raiding.

## ***Part Two: Social Organization and Political Institutions***

### ***Colonial Conquest and the Creation of a ‘Native Administration’***

Prior to the imposition of British colonial conquest, Nuer and Dinka groups were devoid of institutionalized political leaders, such as chiefs and kings—with the sole exception of the (western) Ngok Dinka in the Abyei region who developed more centralized political structures by that time as a result of their extensive contacts with Baggara Arab groups to their north. These societies did contain many types of spiritual leaders and ritual experts at that time, but they did not wield institutionalized political power. Rather, these spiritual leaders were respected or feared on the basis of their divinely demonstrated powers to cure the infertile, curse the guilty, bring rain, repel crocodiles, reconcile feuding parties or fortify warriors before a battle. While some spiritual leaders, such as the first and most powerful of all Nuer prophets, Ngundeang Bong (1846-1906), galvanized huge numbers of followers including members of neighboring ethnic groups, their powers were predominantly charismatic. Lesser Nuer prophets often gained regional fame for shorter or longer periods, only to have their spiritual powers fade, whereupon they rapidly returned to ordinary lives.

Age, wealth and descent were also powerful means by which people organized themselves. The social circulation of cattle wealth was one of the primary means by which they determined and actualize relations of mutual dependence, independence, authority and respect. The ritual of initiation at scarification (*gaar*), for example, which marked the coming of manhood, was symbolized by a radical transformation in an initiate's relations with cattle from that of human dependence as cattle as sources of milk, meat and dung to that of cattle's superior as their protector, exchanger and sacrificer. Named age-set groups (*ric*) in the past as well as the present encompassed a variable number yearly initiates and determinant in general ways expectations of equality, commensality, competition and collective deference to one's 'fathers.' Nevertheless, age-sets were never the organizational basis for defensive or offensive action. Rather, rural (civilian) Nuer fighters were always organized by village and by tribal section, never by age-sets.<sup>6</sup>

Formally acephalous when the British arrived, all major, named, Nuer tribal groups and their respective clan sub-divisions (*cieng*, *pl. ceng*) were dynamically organized around an interrelated and hierarchically organized set of nested lineage and clan groupings, each of which was associated with specific territories and with the descendents of either original Nuer settlers or attached communities of 'children of girls'—as earlier explained. Conceptually, the dominant lineage of each area was connected through real or putative ancestral ties with others from the surrounding region, thereby providing a conceptual framework for organizing what were in reality highly dynamic political alliances and oppositions among communities of varying territorial scope. The founding logic of this 'segmentary lineage organization' was that brothers should unite against cousins, unless faced with a broader threat, whereupon cousins should all unite to face their common enemy. If there was no immediate external threat, every Nuer man considered himself the ruler of his homestead and household. Nuer men and women were—and still are—intensely egalitarian and democratic in this way.

---

<sup>6</sup> The declining importance of the age-set system in more recent decades has been generated in part by the abandonment of scarification by some and in part by forces of the militarization experienced during both civil wars. Moreover, named *ric* set divisions have also blurred over the years, owing to the abandonment of a former practice of separating named age-sets by a period of one or more years in which no boys were initiated.

In reality, the segmentary structure of Nuer society was in the past as well in the present more complex and fluid than this synopsis suggests. Most Nuer patrilineal kinsmen are territorially dispersed—including many *diel* descendents. Moreover, *diel* are only *diel* when they reside in territories where their clan or lineage is considered dominant. A Gaawar *dil* who migrates into Lou Nuer country would not be *dil* in his new home. Although patrilocal marriage and patrilineal co-residence remain deeply shared cultural ideals, most Nuer men and women—in the present as in the past—are cemented to their immediate rural community (*cieng*) through a wide-variety of cross-cutting and complementary kinship connections (*maar*). There also exist numerous smaller lineage clusters that have managed over the generations to establish their dominance in a particular area. They, too, may someday become *diel* for purposes of organizing broader political relations of alliance or opposition beyond immediate village and/or cattle camp clusters (*wec*).

Initially ignorant of such complexities and entranced by the elegance of Evans-Pritchard's 1940 diagrams of the segmentary lineage structure of various Nuer tribes, British colonial officers struggled to superimpose a viable system of indirect rule. After eliminating all major Nuer prophets, the British tried to identify a *diel* leader who could serve as government chief for each of the hierarchically nested clan/territorial divisions associated with, what Evans-Pritchard defined as, primary, secondary, tertiary and smaller clan divisions. But it was not long before the British discovered that this was an impossible task, since the effective density of political relations in daily life rarely extended beyond what Evans-Pritchard called a tertiary tribal section. So in the end, they simply filled the upper slots of Native Administration with chiefs whose authority was often tenuous over some constituent groups.

Gradually, once fluid political alliances gave way to rickety tribal hierarchies of government courts and chiefs, who were responsible for the collection of taxes, suppression of feuding, and enforcement of a newly standardized body of Nuer customary law. Although these administrative hierarchies were an artifice of colonial rule, they soon became accepted and, indeed, valued aspects of Nuer community life. There were many reasons for this. 'Government chiefs' (*kuaar kuma*) provided communities with a potential voice within the system, and thus, with a degree of



protection against complete political and economic marginalization. The earliest Nuer chiefs were appointed arbitrarily. Eventually these were replaced through elections, in which any tax-paying male resident could stand for chiefly offices.

### ***The Colonial Creation of ‘Tribal’ Homelands***

Under this administration, each Nuer and Dinka ‘tribe’ had designated homelands, complete with wet-season settlements, dry-season grazing grounds and associated fishing pools. At first, the British tried to sort out Nuer and Dinka residents, ordering them to live within the newly rigidified ‘tribal’ homelands. A swath of no-man’s land was initially created and patrolled in an effort to suppress cross-ethnic population movements and cattle raids. Some British officials even advocated the burning of homesteads found in the wrong district, while others recognized that the artificiality of forcibly sorting intermixed peoples who had intermarried and lived side by side for generations.

Eventually, these bureaucratic barriers fell, and Nuer and Dinka began to move more freely into and out of each other’s home territories. The sole condition was that immigrating individuals submit to the chiefly authority and court network of the area in which they lived. If it did nothing else, this imposed system of ‘tribal’ rule minimized competition for political office among neighboring ethnic groups. The British also instituted annual chiefs’ meetings along tense borderlands in the hope of defusing violent conflicts and competition over scarce resources, particularly *toic* lands.

### ***Former Administrative Methods for Containing Inter-Community Violence in Jonglei***

Interestingly, the last British Commissioner of ‘Lou Nuer District’ described in his 1955 how he struggled to defuse three troublesome boundaries between the Lou Nuer and their neighbors—namely, the borders running between the (Gon and Mor) Lou Nuer and the Murle of Pibor, between the Gon Lou of Cieng Jaak and the Nyarweng Dinka of Bor, and between the Mor Lou and the Gaajok Jikany Nuer on the south bank of the Sobat. Regular chiefs meetings, overseen by the District Commissioner, were held on all these borders during the every dry-season.

At that time, the Akobo court and the Cieng Jaak Lou tribal court at Biem met with neighboring Murle chiefs every January in Akobo to resolve accumulated incidents

of cattle raiding and associated homicides. Interestingly, Murle and Nuer kept very different breeds of cattle at that time—something that often made it possible to sort out stolen beasts after cattle raids. The border region between these two groups was also closely monitored and seasonally patrolled by government police officers.

The Lou/Bor/Zeraf Valley region was tense between the Lou of Cieng Jaak and the Nyarweng Dinka of Bor at that time. There were constant migrations between these groups in both directions. This continual inter-ethnic movement enabled some people to avoid paying taxes, which irked the government. The regular annual meetings for this border area were held either in Duk Padiet or Duk Paiwil in February and usually involved, only Cieng Jaak and the Dak Rumjiok courts at that time.

Simmering tensions between the Mor Lou and their Jikany Nuer neighbors were caused by growing numbers of Lou moving seasonally into Jikany *toic* lands running between Dengjok and Nasir on the Sobat river and along the lower reaches of Khor Nyanding. Some Mor Lou at that time also spent the dry season along the Gila river in present-day Ethiopia. With little *toic* lands in their own region, the Lou Mor required seasonal access to Jikany riverine lands, as was explained. The fact that there was remarkably little friction in these areas at that time was attributed by the British D.C. to the ‘excellent relations’ maintained by the Mor Lou Chief, Cuol Weitwor and his Jikany counterparts, particularly Chief Purdet Buop of Cieng Gaaguang.<sup>7</sup> The Gaatbal section of the Gon Lou also dry-seasoned between the mouth of Khor Nyanding and Wegin, in the territories of Cieng Lang of the Gaajok Jikany. Annual chiefs meetings for that area were held in two halves at Ajungmir and Ulang in March and April, respectively.

Throughout the colonial era, Nuer chiefs within the same ethnic group also met regularly to standardize the ‘customary laws’ they enforced in local Chiefs Courts. In these ways and other ways, Nuer and Dinka chiefs became the official peacekeepers of their communities. So much so that by the 1980s, some Nuer communities strove to temper particularly feud-minded individuals from exacting violent retribution by drafting them into positions of chiefly authority. “If he wants to fight, we make him a chief,” was

---

<sup>7</sup> Significantly, this Mor Lou/Gaaguang Jikany alliance has perpetuated into the present. In dangerous times, the Mor Lou can take refuge among the Gaaguang and be welcomed.

their motto. Beyond maintaining the peace, government chiefs also collected government taxes from every adult man and held frequent court hearings.

Respected government chiefs could use their executive and judicial powers to build up loyal followings. Nuer chiefs had strong incentives to promote the peaceful resolutions of local disputes, if only to maintain paid positions of privilege and power as government agents. Their followers could also hope to avoid some measure of taxation and legal punishment by respecting the chief's authority. Interestingly, the descendent of *diel* often stood back, allowing 'sons of daughters' or even recently immigrated Dinka to be elected to government chiefly offices. The idea was that, thus tied, ambitions *diel* clients would put down deeper roots in the area.

The regional court system that developed in tandem with chiefly offices, eventually became the administrative backbone and nexuses around which district and county administrative units coalesced.

### ***The Wartime Erosion of Chiefly Authority***

During the first and second civil wars, however, the scope of authority and action wielded by elected government chiefs was gradually contracted by the superimposition of series of military hierarchies and opposition groups. Both the SPLA and its spin-off southern oppositions relied initially on local chiefly hierarchies to extract resources from surrounding civilian populations, as well as new recruits. Some of the most respected Nuer and Dinka chiefs were brutally killed either by rival southern opposition groups or by security forces of the Government of Sudan. While chiefly hierarchies continue to operate in both groups, their relations with the new government of South Sudan are in flux. Consequently, one important area for future investigation revolves around the status of leading Nuer and Dinka chiefs with respect to the state government, regional administrative authorities and their own constituencies, especially the Nuer White Army and their defensive equivalents among the Dinka.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere I have documented the volatile history of the creation of government chiefs in Nuer regions, together with and subsequent shifts in their responsibilities and organization from the early 1900s through 1994 (Hutchinson 1996).

***Relevant Appendix:***

I am including a preliminary diagram of the current clan/community organization or *cieng* structure of the Lou Nuer. This diagram also indicates the relative size, locations, and other information relating to specific Lou community.

***Part Three: Cultural Imperatives***

***Life's Entwined Goals: Cattle and Children***

Rural Nuer men and women today, as in the past, view cattle as quintessential sources and symbols of life, health, fertility, status, and prosperity. People see themselves as bound to their herds in an intimate symbiosis of survival. Whereas cattle depend on human beings for protection and care, people depend on cattle as insurance against ecological hazards and as vital sources of milk, meat, leather and dung. Cattle, however, are valued above and beyond their material contribution to human survival: Cattle are the principal medium through which Nuer and Dinka create enduring social bonds among themselves and forge new alliances with outsiders. Without access to cattle, a man cannot procreate. Transfers of bridewealth cattle alone ensure a man heirs who will carry on his name and line. Without access to cattle, moreover, a man is effectively barred from participating in the negotiation of extended political alliances through cattle exchange. It is the payment of bloodwealth cattle that enables people to resolve violent conflicts peacefully. Furthermore, the ever-present possibility of translating human values into cattle values enhances people's abilities to negotiate material compensation for wrongful acts (such as adultery, theft, personal injury, etc) and thereby, promote social harmony amongst themselves. Although cattle are certainly subjects of dispute among kinsmen, there is a well-known saying in Nuer that runs: "No [human] error exceeds the cow." In other words, cattle are the conflict resolvers par excellence.

While cattle are essential for the promotion of both human and social life, they are valued most by men, at least, as the gateway to progeny. Procreation is, indeed, the

---

paramount goal of life for every Nuer and the only form of immortality universally valued. Everyone fears the ‘true death’ or the ‘complete death’ – which is to say, a death without surviving children to ‘stand one’s head,’ remember one’s name, and more generally revitalize one’s influence in the world. For men, the immortality sought is motivated in part by strong collective interests: without heirs, a man acquires no permanent position within the patrilineal chain of ancestors from which he emerged. For a woman, childbirth is the threshold to adulthood and to future security and independence within her husband’s home.

Children are considered first and foremost blessings from ‘God’ (kuoth). Consequently, it would be wrong for a parent to count his or her children numerically. For to do so suggests a definitiveness of ownership that belies the ever-present powers of God not only to give but to take away. This dependence on the life creating and life protecting powers of God is a pressing reality in a war-blighted world where many couples experience long periods of infertility and where rates of maternal and child mortality are among the highest in the world today. Children are valued for themselves but, also, for the future material benefits parents and relatives hope to receive through them. “We eat our children,” people say quite bluntly. Children are the only form of long-term social security known. A man knows he has a son, when the boy begins to fish and hunt, returning with gifts of food for his family. Daughters, in contrast, are said to be ‘eaten’ upon marriage, when their families rejoice in the abundant milk and meat their bridewealth cattle ideally provide. It is thus only when a child matures and actualizes the unique kin bonds acquired through birth with counter gifts of food that he or she becomes a true relative among relatives.

Owing to procreation’s primacy, Nuer have developed over the generations highly creative ways of overcoming individual experiences of infertility, infant mortality and premature death so as to ensure that every man and woman has a fighting chance to acquire progeny. And it is primarily through exchanges of cattle wealth that these ‘gains on life’ are achieved. Indeed, Nuer social and cultural life is founded on a fundamental equation between human vitality and fertility and those of cattle. And it is this symbolic equation that enables Nuer to overcome some of the profoundest of human frailties. For example, were a man to die without heirs, his relatives are able--indeed obliged—to

collect cattle and marry a 'ghost wife' (*ciek joka*) in his name. All children born to the 'ghost's wife' are the patrilineal heirs of the deceased. Likewise, should a woman prove infertile, she is 'free' in Nuer culture to gather cattle and marry a wife to produce children for her. It is also possible to marry in the name of an uncle, brother or cousin who died either without children or was never born into the family at all. For example, it is possible for a father without sons to refuse to marry a daughter for bridewealth cattle, thereby grafting her children onto his own patriline, as if his daughter had been born as a son. Moreover, a widow can continue to bear children for her deceased husband in 'the levirate,' provided she has the procreative and economic support of a designated pro-husband, who is, most commonly, a close relative of the deceased.

Creative solutions such as these are founded a sharp distinction being drawn between 'social paternity' (based on cattle wealth transfers) and 'physical paternity/genitorship' (based on human blood/semen transfers). In situations where both forms of paternity are not held by the same person, social paternity always takes precedence in determining a child's true descent line. From a man's perspective, it is cattle, not women, that produce children.

In representing potential rights to the fruit of a woman's womb, cattle also serve to gather the procreative power of both sexes and place them in the hands of senior, cattle wealthy men. These cross-generational male bonds of cattle interdependence are biased strongly in favor of agnates – it being generally agreed that paternal half brothers, as distinct from maternal half brothers, alone hold collective rights in the cattle passed down the patrilineage. Bridewealth exchange also shields Nuer men from the full-impact of procreative misfortunes experienced within marriage, since he can, in principle, always reclaim his bridewealth cattle and marry a different woman, if necessary.

In brief, the procreative powers of men in Nuer society are essentially collective: a man's reproductive potential merges with that of his patrilineal/agnatic kinsmen through shared rights in the 'ancestral herd' upon which, ideally, each man draws in turn to marry, bear sons, and extend the patriline. Male corporate solidarity and continuity are founded on the principle of communal fertility through shared cattle rights. Cattle are in a very real sense the currency of power and procreation among men.

Unlike a man, a woman does not depend upon a release of family cattle to achieve full parental status. Physical maternity and social maternity are inseparable in the eyes of Nuer. A foster mother who merely cares for, but never suckles, another's child establishes no permanent bond of *maar* or kinship with that child. Individual fertility, not cattle wealth, is principal route to adulthood, self-fulfillment, security, and independence. The cow is, nevertheless, a powerful feminine ally, because nearly all the vital nutrients it produces must pass through women's hands before reaching men's stomachs. "Food is a very dangerous concept in the hands of women," I have been told. But cattle cannot shield women from the full tragedy of procreative misfortunes. Instances of infertility, miscarriage and/or child mortality thus weigh much more heavily on women than on their husbands.

What deserves special emphasis here is the reconstructive potential of these diverse marriage forms. Cattle wealthy Nuer families heavily ravaged by warfare and illness can, in principle, regenerate themselves by having a younger male kinsmen (or, often, some related to the deceased as a 'child of a daughter/girl') marry a 'ghost-wife' in the name of a deceased or childless 'father,' older brother, maternal or paternal uncle, or even in the name of the man's own genitor, when he is different from his social pater. The existence of this pater/genitor distinction also means that a marriage does not necessarily end upon the death of the husband.

The willingness of a young man to prioritize in these ways the unfulfilled procreative ambitions of a deceased senior kinsmen depends in part on his feelings of indebtedness for having received cattle through them and in part on his faith in the willingness of his genealogical juniors to perform the same procreative service for him, should it become necessary. This obligation is most compelling in situations where an initiated youth dies before marriage while defending the family homestead and herd. Otherwise viewed, marriage as far as Nuer men are concerned is "really a matter of names"—that is, ideally a matter of keeping alive through progeny the names of all males born into a particular family.

In diminishing men's sense of personal dependence on the procreative powers of women, cattle also serve to reinforce alliances among men, especially fellow patrilineal kinsmen or agnates. Just as cattle stand firmly between a man and his desire to achieve

personal immortality through the birth of progeny, so, too, do all those men whose cooperation and consent are necessary for the release of sufficient cattle for him to marry. Just how far these male bonds of cattle interdependence extend depends on many factors, including the age, personal wealth, birth order of the man concerned; the number of sisters he has; the number of kinsmen to whom he can legitimately appeal for bridewealth contributions; prevailing rates of bridewealth; the size of the bride's family; and the number of kinsmen who are seen to have rights in his family's herd.

One important major shift in this bridewealth exchange system that occurred over the past fifty years is associated with emerging opportunities for Nuer men to acquire individually owned cattle for marriage from sources outside of the circle of kin, including cattle acquired through wage labor and, sometimes, through raiding. To the extent that cattle are acquired as individual property by Nuer youth, the abilities of senior men to amass power over their juniors through the control and manipulation of collectively held cattle wealth has declined. Consequently, the cultural entwining of cattle and children as the fundamental axiological foci of social life is not only deeply gendered among Nuer but also is a pivotal axis of relations between senior and junior men.

### ***Regional Linkages of Cattle and Children***

This universally valued life-goal aimed at securing social fulfillment and advancement through the birth of children among Nuer is shared by all of the pastoralist and agro-pastoralist groups inhabiting present-day Jonglei state, including both the northern and southern Dinka clusters and cattle-keeping Murle communities in Pibor. Although most rural Dinka and Nuer communities in Jonglei depend—calorie for calorie—far more on sorghum and maize production, and other horticultural and piscine pursuits for daily survival than on the milk and meat provided by their herds, cattle's value remains the dominant for them, as well as all the reasons outlined above. In contrast, most Anyuak groups and those Murle inhabiting the southern region of Boma are more agriculturally focused and generally possess comparatively few, if any, cattle.

But for pastoralist groups in Jonglei, this entwined child/cattle procreative equation not only has facilitated intermarriage among diverse pastoralists during peaceful periods but, also, has spurred more violent and/or unusual patterns of exchange among



them. More entrepreneurial exchanges of children for cattle have occurred over the years between Murle and Dinka families seeking to rid themselves of ‘incest’ children or those otherwise considered to have been conceived outside ethical norms. (No such exchange has been documented to the best of my knowledge among Nuer, who, as we have seen, view a healthy child as by definition blessed by God and thus, ‘incest-free’). More recently, Young (2009, 2010) reports hearing about some unscrupulous Dinka youths who kidnap Dinka children in the hope of selling them for cattle to Murle. More violent forms of cattle/children exchange, including both cattle raiding and child abductions, have been an element of between Murle and Dinka, Nuer and Dinka, and, indeed, between different Nuer groups. Instances of the kidnapping of both women and children have occurred, for instance, between Lou and Gaawar Nuer groups over the generations. Normally, such children are adopted into their new families as an social equal—or, at least, that has been the case of Nuer.

An intriguing note uncovered in the archives suggests that during the 1940s and early 1950s some Lou Nuer and Murle established yet another form procreative exchange:

Information was received of a new way by which the young cattleless men of Lou [Nuer] can make a living, namely by going into stud in Murle country. Murle men have difficulty in begetting children [due in part to widespread venereal diseases among them] and the Lou are notably proficient in this respect. Therefore elderly Murle widows who have not borne children and have become disillusioned as to the progress of their own menfolk, entice the Lou across to oblige. A “ghost” marriage is performed and the Lou man is given a young Murle girl by whom to raise children in the name of the childless widow (similar to Nuer “ghost” marriage). As though this was not enough, the Lou man receives five cattle at the time the agreement is made and another ten after the birth of the third child, after which he is free to return to Nuerland plus his cattle. (Annual Report, Lou Nuer District, 1954/55, WND 57.A.3)

It is hoped that a deeper understanding of this intricate intertwining of cattle and children has shaped and reshaped relations of cooperation as well as hostility among all three pastoralists groups. For here in lie some of the root motives behind large-scale cattle raiding and child kidnapping in Jonglei today.

### ***War-Provoked Processes of Social and Cultural Change***

Two decades of civil war have battered every dimension of people’s lives. Some of the war’s most detrimental effects have been the widespread disruption of family life and the dispersal of communities, the collapse of the pre-war regional economy and

civilian administrative structures, the loss of essential health and educational services, accelerated ecological degradation, cultural damage, and the psychological consequences of trauma, identity loss, and mounting despair.

### ***Deepening Regional Poverty***

Throughout the war, southern military leaders expected local civilians to bear the costs of feeding and housing their unpaid troops, no matter how difficult the burden. Very little energy was devoted to explaining the political reasons for renewed warfare. The willingness of ordinary Nuer and Dinka villagers to sacrifice the necessary human and material resources was simply assumed. At first these resource demands were channeled through local Nuer and Dinka chiefs, who were responsible for making their own arrangements with their rural constituents. However, as the war expanded and troop discipline declined, many SPLM/A soldiers took it upon themselves to satisfy their material needs on an individualized, ad-hoc basis. When the war was low-key, this looting of civilian resources was limited. But as the banditry of spinoff southern field commanders and warlords gained momentum after the 1991 split in the SPLA leadership, so, too, did the individual commandeering of civilian resources.

By the end of the war, local military officers also monopolized much of the region's cattle wealth. This was especially true in Nuer and Dinka borderland regions subjected to recurrent attacks by rival SPLA military factions between 1991 and 2002. Some civilian cattle were collected as forced contributions to the war effort. The majority was acquired through inter-ethnic cattle raids carried out by rival military factions for the alleged purpose of recapturing civilian cattle lost in previous attacks. Recaptured cattle, however, were not returned to their original civilian owners. They were treated, instead, as 'military/government property' to be redistributed as the local military commander saw fit. The end result was a steady siphoning of civilian cattle wealth into the hands of the byres of their nominal military protectors.

As regional poverty has deepened, people's survival efforts became more individualistic and/or household oriented. Consequently, their abilities to sustain the community-wide institutions and practices that formerly restrained gross abuses of power declined dramatically. The end result has been a progressive marginalization of civilian

leaders from what remains a deeply fragmented southern political/military ruling state elite.

One consequence of the military's stripping of civilian assets was that many key social institutions normally greased through the social circulation of cattle began to seize up. The ability of the senior (non-military) men to amass power over their juniors through controls over cattle wealth rapidly collapsed, as gun-wielding youths of all military stripes began to acquire cattle through force. Tragically, this insecurity of civilian cattle wealth continues to deepen into the present, as the result of large-scale, militarized cattle raids sweeping back and forth across Jonglei state. With each cow forcibly extracted, the social histories it carried on its back and all the social relations through which it passed are devalued.

### ***Widening Generational Cleavages***

For many Nuer families, growing wartime hunger was aggravated by a gnawing sense of 'broken promises' between husbands and wives, parents and children, young and old. Many women experienced their marriages as little more than illusory, since they so often struggled alone to feed their children. Sharpening generational cleavages of value and perspective that developed during the war continue to be noted by just about everyone. Members of the senior generation who survived now complain that the wealth of cultural knowledge and historical experience they accumulated over a lifetime is often dismissed by disrespectful youth "who had been driven crazy by the smoke and roar of guns." Instead of receiving the deference and 'retirement' support they believe that they earned, many older Nuer women and men have been reduced to rags and feel that they are treated with open disdain by their gun-wielding 'sons.'

Many parents are rapidly losing confidence in their children's abilities and willingness to provide material support for them in the future. Not only were children dying during the war at previously unimaginable rates, but parents were often unable to benefit during the from the labor potential of surviving children, owing to critical shortages of livestock, seed, and agricultural implements as well as to the collapse of former markets for charcoal, timber, grass mats, gum Arabic and the like. A badly-bruised bridewealth system skewed increasingly toward the military monopolization of

cattle wealth meant that fewer parents were able to “eat” their daughters. As one exasperated Nuer father explained this wartime dynamic: “First the soldiers steal your cattle, then they try to marry your daughter with cattle stolen from you!”

The younger generation often felt abandoned as well. Many Nuer children were orphaned during the war and thus forced to survive by their wits from an early age. Thousands more served, voluntarily or involuntarily, in the SPLA, the SAF, or a host of other southern militia groups that valued neither their lives nor their futures beyond their immediate military usefulness. The continual conscription of underage boys also constrained the survival potential of many rural families. On SPLA-Nasir side of the southern divide, local headmen were responsible for handing over a specific number of youth each year. Had they failed to meet these quotas, the headmen were themselves threatened with the draft.

The end result was the creation of tenuously connected groups of armed youth, who were brutally trained to kill on command. When some of these traumatized youths later returned to their home communities, they often experienced difficulty fitting back in. Some discovered family members dead or missing. Many had few alternatives other than continuing to follow a life of forceful expediency revolving around the gun. For some, cattle raiding became the only means of securing the resources necessary for physical survival and for social advancement through marriage and wealth. Many of these eventually drifted towards the White Army.

This broadening generational gap also eroded opportunities for the younger generation to learn many of the coping skills and practical knowledge formerly acquired through their parents and families. Many younger Nuer women do not know how to fashion clay cooking pots and water jugs, and thus are dependent upon imported substitutes requiring access to cash. Many young girls today are untrained in the weaving of winnowing trays and other forms of basketry. So, too, metal-working, a widely practiced masculine art before the war, is being lost to the younger generation in many areas, owing in part to a lack of basic tools (e.g., solid anvils and hammers).

Mass conversion to Christianity on the part of thousands of Nuer youth during the war also drove an ideological wedge between them and many of their seniors. While Christianity bore a powerful message of hope, communal peace, forgiveness, and

redemption in the life yet to come, it also undercut the former religious and sacrificial authority enjoyed by Nuer elders. Christianity directly challenged the social acceptability and ‘regenerative potential’ of many Nuer marriage forms. Local Christian leaders commonly condemn indigenous practices of ghost marriage, the levirate, and polygyny, together with public dancing, animal sacrifices, and the spiritual powers of indigenous Nuer prophets. While indigenous Nuer spiritual leaders are often supportive of Christianity’s central ideals and see no contradiction between their prophetic powers and those of the Christian church, local Christian evangelists have been less tolerant and inclusive in this regard. There is also growing confusion among Nuer Christians over newly introduced denominational differences, which sharpened and multiplied during the war years through the proselytizing and relief efforts of southern refugees and expatriate church officials with strong connections to Kenya, Europe, and the United States.

### ***Militarizing Women’s Reproductive Responsibilities***

Like military movements worldwide, southern military factions sought to inculcate a kind of hyper-masculinity in their recruits, equated with demonstrations of aggressiveness, competitiveness and the censure of emotional expression. During their military training, young recruits were instructed to turn away from their mothers and fathers in the interests of a superior cause. They were told that they were fighting for something that their parents and grandparents failed to achieve – namely, the definitive liberation of their homelands from northern ‘Arab’ domination.

A growing sense of entitlement to the sexual and procreative services of women and girls also pervaded this militarized masculine worldview. Just as Nuer and Dinka soldiers during the height of the war saw themselves as responsible for maintaining the war front, so, too, they reasoned that women should be responsible for keeping up the ‘reproductive front.’ Pressures for women to disregard the ‘weaning taboo’ (which prohibits lactating women from having sexual relations) steadily mounted, as husbands and lovers on short unpredictable military leaves returned home determined to conceive another child. Women were similarly pressured by their husbands, lovers and in-laws to reduce the ‘fallow period’ between pregnancies by weaning their infants at younger and younger ages.

Whereas before the war, infants were suckled for 18 months or more, many Nuer men now argue that a period of nine months is sufficient. And because most women do not feel free to refuse their husbands or lovers sexual access for fear of a beating, many are forced to make choices that no woman should have to make. Nuer women have not accumulated generations of experience in physically or medicinally provoking abortions. Consequently, it is not surprising that the frequency of maternal deaths caused by 'excessive bleeding' rose rapidly during the war. Rape, another obvious consequence of this masculine attitude, is surrounded by a protective wall of feminine shame and silence. A young Nuer girl, I was told, will even attempt to hide the fact that she was raped from her own mother.

In these ways, women's attempts to participate in the war effort were brutally turned against them. Uprooted by recurrent raids and harassed by local military demands for food, shelter, and sexual services, women were often denied the protections enjoyed by their gun-toting male counterparts. Unfortunately, men's respect for women's contributions to the war effort declined together with men's abilities to defend and support their families. A severely skewed sex ratio and increasing rates of polygyny further constrained women's abilities to rely on the protection and economic support of their mates. From these perspectives, the militarization of Nuer and Dinka social life in Jonglei was especially hostile to women and girls.

Nevertheless, women were more than passive victims of these militarization trends. Many Nuer and Dinka women actively reinforced men's militarized mentality by encouraging their brothers, husbands and sons to join the military or to participate as civilians in collective cattle raids and vengeance attacks on neighboring ethnic groups. Women are also capable of banding together to restrain eruption of inter-community violence, particularly those in which local military units are not directly involved. Both Nuer and Dinka women retain considerable influence over patterns of inter-community violence through their well-recognized abilities 'to shame' their husbands, brothers and sons into either participating or not in specific military campaign. As one young Nuer women explained:

Men say that 'women are women' but men do a lot of listening to us! Women are good at persuasion; we can convince men in a quiet way. Men pretend not to listening but it [the women's message] is already recorded!

Understanding the complex and paradoxical ways women are implicated in regional processes of militarization can open up novel possibilities for rolling back these same processes—or that is my hope.

### ***Unraveling Regional Codes of Warfare Ethics***

The progressive abandonment of former ethical restraints on regional patterns of warfare and raiding during the war constitutes the gravest threat to the procreative ideals lying at the heart of Nuer, Dinka and Murle societies as well as to the future well-being of all men, women and children living in Jonglei today. Before the war and, indeed, up until the 1991 split of the SPLA, Nuer and Dinka men did not intentionally kill women or children during inter-ethnic confrontations. Acts of intra-ethnic homicide were governed by an even stricter set of ethical codes aimed at ensuring the immediate identification of the slayer and the payment of bloodwealth cattle compensation to the family of the deceased. The purposeful slaying of a child, woman or elderly person was universally perceived not only as cowardly and reprehensible but, more importantly, as a direct affront against God as the ultimate guardian of human morality. Such acts were expected to provoke manifestations of divine anger in the form of severe illness, death, and/or other misfortunes visited on the slayer and/or members of his immediate family. The ethical code of warfare at that time further precluded the burning of houses and the destruction of crops during Nuer/Dinka community confrontations. Cattle, of course, were fair game. It was not uncommon for raiders to carry off young women and children to be absorbed as full members of their families.

This gradual unraveling of the regional code of warfare ethics stems in part from the conscious efforts of military strategists within the SPLA and in part from a technological revolution in local weaponry. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, local SPLA commanders sought to persuade their recruits that homicides carried out under conditions of civil war were entirely devoid of the social, spiritual and material liabilities associated with homicides generated by more localized fighting and feuding. In essence, the military leadership argued that the overarching political context of a ‘government war’ should take precedence over the personal identities and social interrelations of combatants in people’s assessments of the social and spiritual ramifications of homicide.

The fact that these arguments were introduced when the frequency of violent deaths was rising and local cattle stocks were falling meant that people's abilities to ensure the 'procreative immortality' of relatives slain in battle were severely strained.

Furthermore, as guns burned deeper and deeper into regional patterns of warfare, many people began to wonder whether the spiritual and social consequences of intra-ethnic gun slayings were identical to those realized with spears. Whereas the power of a spear issues directly from the bones and sinews of the person who hurls it, that of a gun is eerily contained within it. Moreover, unlike individually crafted spears, the source of a bullet lodged deep in someone's body cannot easily be traced. Often a fighter did not know whether or not he had actually killed someone. As a result, homicide became increasingly depersonalized and secularized in these societies. Together with increased recourse to surprise attacks, night-fighting and the destruction of local food supplies, the willful killing of women and children rapidly became standard practice between rival southern military movements, as well as between them and forces of the Khartoum government. God, it seems, was no longer watching.

### ***Nuer Ethnicity Militarized***

These widely lamented trends were also linked to more subtle shifts in people's perceptions of ethnic identities more generally. In complex historical situations such as these, one's ethnic identity remains mobile and processual. The questions that need to be asked, then, are: In whose image and whose interest have these ethnic labels been most recently forged? And when and why did these two groups' politicized sense of their own identities begin to pit their respective 'ethnic warriors' against each other's entire populations?

One key to unlocking these complex issues begins with an appreciation of contemporary differences in Nuer and Dinka understandings of the social-physical bases of their ethnic identifications. For reasons that date back to the early nineteenth century, Nuer today consider themselves to be more open than their Dinka counterparts to the assimilation of outsiders as full and equal members of their communities. Indeed, it was the rapidity and completeness with which invading Nuer groups transformed Dinka and Anyuak outsiders into Nuer insiders that underwrote their extraordinarily rapid expansion



east of the Nile. In principle, anyone can become ‘Nuer.’ Language skills, a love of cattle, co-residence, community participation and moral conformity are all crucial in ways that biological heritage is not. As one contemporary eastern Jikany Nuer laughingly summed up this long-standing assimilative capacity: “There are no [real] Nuer. We are all Dinka!”

In contrast, most Dinka tend to stress the importance of human blood bonds of patrilineal descent when determining who is and is not ‘Dinka.’ The primordialist thrust of Dinka ethnic concepts make eminent sense when viewed in light of their nineteenth century experiences. Many Dinka men and women came under heavy pressure to jettison their Dinka identity and become Nuer. Consequently, one way Dinka could resist the sticky grasp of expanding Nuer neighbors was to affirm the fundamental indissolvability of their ethnic identifications by elaborating blood-based metaphors of procreative descent (Hutchinson 1998).<sup>9</sup>

Before the war, women and girls were less firmly rooted in these ethnic divisions than were Nuer and Dinka men. This is because women and girls could potentially confer any ethnic or lineage identity upon their children, depending on who married them. Both of these societies are exogamic – meaning that women and girls can only be married by men who are, by definition, ‘strangers’ or ‘outsiders.’ Both are biased towards patrilineality – meaning that under normal circumstances, children take their lineage affiliations and ethnic identities from their fathers, not their mothers. Third and finally, both groups are predominantly patrilocal – meaning that wives generally take up residence in their husband’s homes after marriage. Adding these factors together, one begins to understand why most Dinka and Nuer took the attitude before the war that “A woman has no [fixed] cattle camp.” Similarly, people stated that “A girl belongs to everyone” – meaning, she is a potential marriage partner for all unrelated men.

What appears to have happened during two decades of war, however, was a gradual sealing off of this formerly permeable inter-ethnic divide, a transformation that

---

<sup>9</sup> A similar opposition distinguishes Anyuak from Nuer notions of ethnicity (c.f. Feyissa 2011). Nuer pressures on Anyuak communities inside Ethiopia have intensified in recent decades, owing to massive in-flows of eastern Nuer populations during both civil wars. Indeed, one reason Lou and eastern Jikany Nuer groups have shown greater reluctance than their western Nuer cousins to abandon male initiation rites involving scarification is rooted in their competition for land rights with the non-scarifying Anyuak. Abandoning male scarification rites (*gaar*) might create an opening, some Nuer fear, for more recently assimilated Anyuak and their descendents to reassert their cultural and ethnic independence.

has had particularly disastrous consequences for women and children. Whereas during prior periods of inter-ethnic turmoil younger women and children were more likely to be captured than slain by Nuer, Dinka, and even Murle raiders. The reverse became true once rival SPLA factions began turning their guns against each other's entire civilian populations. Although commanders on both sides of this militarized divide justified their increasing viciousness as retaliation for abominations earlier experienced at the hands, there was more to this conscious ethnic targeting of women and children for elimination. People's concepts of ethnicity were themselves rapidly mutating in ways that continue to bode ill for the future. Nuer SPLA fighters in particular appear to have adopted a more primordialist, if not racist, way of thinking about their ethnic 'essence' in recent years. And it is precisely this kind of thinking that can so easily be twisted into military justifications for killing women and children belonging to 'enemy groups.'

## **Bibliography of Relevant Resources for “A Guide to the Nuer of Jonglei”**

El Sammani, Mohamed Osman. 1984. *Jonglei Canal: Dynamics of Planned Change in the Twic Area*. Khartoum: University of Khartoum.

Evans-Pritchard, E. 1940. *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Intervention of a Nilotic People*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1951. *Kinship and Marriage among the Nuer*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Feyissa, Dereje. 2011. *Playing Different Games: the paradox of Anywaa and Nuer Identification Strategies in the Gambella region*. New York: Berghahn Books.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2009. Conflict and Identity Politics: The Case of Anywaa-Nuer Relations in Gambella, Western Ethiopia. In *Changing Identifications and Alliances in North-East Africa: Sudan, Uganda, and the Ethiopia-Sudan borderlands*. Gunther Schlee and Elizabeth Watson (eds). New York: Berghahn Books.

Gatwoth, James. 1988. ‘Dinka Bor–Murle Relations Since 1900: A Study of Ethnic Conflicts in the Southern Sudan.’ M.A. Thesis. Khartoum: Institute of African and Asian Studies.

Gough, K. 1971. Nuer Kinship: A Re-examination in T. Beidelman (ed.), *The Translation of Culture*. London: Tavistock Publications.

Howell, Paul; Lock, Michael; and Stephen Cobb. 1988. *The Jonglei Canal: Impact and Opportunity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Human Rights Watch. 2003. *Sudan, Oil, and Human Rights*. Brussels.

Hutchinson, Sharon E. 2009. Peace and Puzzlement: Grass-roots Peace Initiatives between the Nuer and Dinka of South Sudan. In *Changing Identifications and Alliances in North-East Africa: Sudan, Uganda, and the Ethiopia-Sudan borderlands*. Gunther Schlee and Elizabeth Watson (eds). New York: Berghahn Books.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2005. “Food Itself is Fighting With Us”: A Comparative Analysis of the Impact of Sudan’s Unresolved Civil War on South Sudanese Civilian Populations Living in the North and the South.” In *Violence and Belonging: The Quest for Identity in Post-Colonial Africa*. Vigdis Broch-Due (ed.). New York & London: Routledge: pp. 131-152.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2005. Spiritual Fragments of an Unfinished War. In *Religion and African Civil Wars*. N. Kastfeld (ed.). London: C. Hurst & Co.: pp. 28-53.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2002. Gendered Violence and the Militarization of Ethnicity: A Case Study from South Sudan. (Co-authored with Jok Madut Jok.) In *Postcolonial Subjectivities in Africa*. Richard Werbner (ed.). New York & London: Zed Books: pp.84-108.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2000. Nuer ethnicity militarized. *Anthropology Today* 16(3): 6-13.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1996. *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War, and the State*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Johnson, Douglas H. 2009. The Nuer Civil Wars. In *Changing Identifications and Alliances in North-East Africa: Sudan, Uganda, and the Ethiopia-Sudan borderlands*. Gunther Schlee and Elizabeth Watson (eds). New York: Berghahn Books.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2003. *Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars*. Oxford: Currey.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2001. The Nuer Civil War. In *Sudanese Society in the Context of Civil War*. In Maj-Britt Johansen and Niels Kastfelt (eds). Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1994. *Nuer Prophets: A History of Prophecy from the Upper Nile in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1982. Tribal boundaries and border wars: Nuer-Dinka relations in the Sobat and Zaraf valleys, c. 1860-1976. *Journal of African History* 23(2): 183-203.

Jok, M.J. and S. Hutchinson. 1999. Sudan's Prolonged Second Civil War and the Militarization of Nuer and Dinka Ethnic Identities. *African Studies Review* 42(2): 125-45.

Jonglei Investigation Team. 1954. The Equatorial Nile project and its Effects in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, vol. 11, Khartoum.

Kurimoto, E. 2001. Capturing Modernity among the Anywaa of Western Ethiopia. In *Rewriting Africa: Toward Renaissance or Collapse*. E. Kurimoto (ed.). Osaka: Japan Centre for Area Studies.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1996. People of the River: Subsistence Economy of the Anywaa of Western Ethiopia. In *Essays in Northeast African Studies*. S. Sato and E Kurimoto (eds.). Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1992. Natives and Outsiders: The Historical Experience of the Anywaa of Western Ethiopia. *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 43: 1-43.

Nyaba, Peter Adwok. 1997. *The Politics of Liberation in South Sudan: An Insider's View*. Kampala: Fountain Publishers.

Southern Development Investigation Team. 1955. Natural Resources and Development Potential in the Southern Provinces of the Sudan. London: Sudan Government.