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THE FIGHTING NUER: PRIMARY SOURCES AND THE ORIGINS OF A STEREOTYPE

Douglas H. Johnson

INTRODUCTION

In the one hundred and forty years that the Nuer have been known to small audiences outside the Sudan they have almost invariably been presented as truculent and aggressive warriors. They appeared in the nineteenth century exploration literature as archetypal 'savages': naked, stubborn and warlike men who were compared to monkeys, to the monkeys' advantage (Baker 1867:60). In the early twentieth century they were thought to be an intractable problem that impeded the peaceful establishment and efficient running of a new colonial administration. In Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard's monographs Nuer feuds and raiding are described as central to the structural relations between Nuer sections and between the Nuer and their neighbours.

The evidence provided by the exploration, administrative and ethnographic literature seems conclusive, and when beginning my own research on certain aspects of Nuer history I assumed that Evans-Pritchard had, as he claimed, 'understood the chief values of the Nuer' and had presented 'a true outline of their social structure', even if the details were 'scanty and uneven' (Evans-Pritchard 1940a:15, 9). His works were quite naturally the foundation of any new fieldwork, but I very quickly found that the Nuer testimony about their own past was at variance with a number of Evans-Pritchard's statements. In particular the Lou and Gaawar, and some representatives of the Eastern Jikany, Dok and Jagei had a very different understanding from Evans-Pritchard and some of his predecessors about Nuer relations with the Dinka, their conflicts with the government and the social message of their most influential prophets. A detailed examination of written sources revealed surprisingly consistent corroboration of specific points raised by my Nuer informants; modern testimony appeared to reflect more than just the changing times.¹

In piecing together the details of Nuer history for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries I realized that I could not accept Evans-Pritchard's description of Nuer society as a society organized around fighting, whose political stability depended on constant warfare against foreigners (Evans-Pritchard 1940a:134). In examining the evidence he cited for his theory I discovered that he quite candidly admitted his reliance on the written sources of explorers and administrators for his evidence concerning Nuer foreign relations (*Ibid*). The conditions that existed during his fieldwork prevented him from making as detailed enquiries as he would have liked among either the Nuer or their neighbours. The administrative reports he consulted, furthermore, were themselves distillations of more detailed reports to which he had no access; documents which in the fullness of their detail cast doubts on the picture of the Nuer presented by more senior and distant officials.

This article is a critique of primary sources, of the data provided by persons with some direct experience of the Nuer. It tries to explore the foundation of one of the strongest images of the Nuer, how it was built on slender and biased evidence, and how

the repetition of this stereotype affected subsequent observations and research, including the detailed and perceptive studies of Evans-Pritchard. The role of violence in the Nuer political system and their aggressive relations with their Dinka and Anuak neighbours have been the subjects of many articles of varying quality by modern anthropologists. On the whole these revisions have been concerned with theory, with placing Evans-Pritchard's work in the chronology of the theoretical development of anthropology, or with using his data to advance new or different theories. None have made full use of the printed sources Evans-Pritchard consulted, nor have they attempted to examine how these sources may have influenced his conclusions. Equally important, none have had the opportunity that I have had in testing the written statements of past observers against the living memories and traditions of various Nuer. This article is not intended, then, as a critique of recent anthropological theory, nor even a critique of the use made of primary sources by a number of secondary commentaries. It is an introductory investigation, for more can and should be said about the merits of the nineteenth and twentieth century sources. It is also a warning that an examination of the reliability and historical context of the sources on the Nuer is essential before theories can be credibly developed.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The Egyptian conquest of the Northern Sudan in the 1820s brought both Europe and the Middle East into contact with the peoples of the Upper Nile basin. This intrusion coincided with the beginning of the expansion of Nuer society across the Bahr al-Jabal and the Bahr al-Zaraf into the Sobat valley. The first recorded contact between the Nuer and the new foreigners was made by the Egyptian flotilla sent in 1839 to try to discover the source of the White Nile. When the flotilla approached a Nuer village on the east bank of the Bahr al-Jabal late in December 1839, the villagers flocked to the shore to look at this new sight of large sailing vessels on the river. With a gesture typical of the Nuer when faced with anything or anyone new and surprising, they sacrificed an ox before returning to their village. The Egyptians misunderstood this sacrifice and their suspicions were encouraged by a Dinka soldier serving as interpreter who claimed that the slaughtering of the ox demonstrated how the Nuer intended to treat the Egyptians. When the Nuer later returned with gifts of tobacco and goats, the Dinka soldier warned his superiors that the gifts were poisoned. The soldiers opened fire, killing one Nuer, wounding a few and scattering the rest (Selim 1842:82-3; Thibaut 1856:46-8). With the expedition's report of its own fears the Nuer reputation for almost instantaneous hostility to foreigners began.

The Egyptians did not know that their first encounter had been influenced by the recent Nuer eastward expansion. About a decade earlier various groups of Nuer had crossed from the west bank of the Nile and had begun occupying the Sobat and Zaraf, displacing some of the Dinka already settled there. Most of the Dinka then serving in the Egyptian army came from north of the Sobat, a region then being raided by the Nuer, and they naturally regarded the Nuer as enemies. Some thirty years later when the Northern Dinka found protection with the Nuer from government raids, this attitude changed (Wilson 1903a:13, 17), but in 1839 a Dinka soldier would understandably have wished to gain the Egyptian army's support against the enemies of his people.

In the following two decades the Nuer response to various expeditions along the

Bahr al-Jabal, the Bahr al-Ghazal and the Sobat depended largely on the behaviour of earlier ones. The shooting of Nuer in 1839 and the continued casual contempt of members of the second Egyptian expedition up the Nile in 1840-1 fostered a suspicious aloofness among many Nuer communities along the Bahr al-Jabal during the early 1840s (Werne 1849:I:195; II: 118, 203, 208). When merchants later ascended the Nile looking for ivory some friendly contacts were made and the Nuer began actively trading in ivory and foodstuffs. But clashes with earlier expeditions frequently led to problems for those who followed (Pedemonte 1974:58; Petherick 1869:I: 111). Reports of apparently indiscriminate Nuer retaliation against government and merchant boats appeared throughout the 1840s and 1850s (Vinco 1974:75; Kaufmann 1974:148; Lejean 1860:230-1). Such acts of resistance gained for the Nuer a reputation for bravery and fierceness which was the cause of unfavourable comments from merchants whose commercial ventures suffered from Nuer militancy. The Sicilian merchant Phillipe Terranuova d'Antonio, for instance, can be excused for being less than enthusiastic about the Nuer when he learned during his trading expedition of 1854 that they were conspiring with his Dinka porters to kill him and seize his ivory (d'Antonio 1859:17). The unwillingness of the Nuer to co-operate with various commercial ventures contributed to the unfavourable assessment of Nuer intelligence, initiative and moral character which appeared in European journals as proven scientific fact (Gautier d'Arc 1842:382; Massaia 1974:108; Peney 1859:344).

After merchants established trading relations with some of the peoples the Nuer raided, they sometimes were drawn into conflicts with the Nuer in order to protect their trading partners (d'Antonio 1859:23-5; Poncet 1937:48-9). As merchants became increasingly opposed to the Nuer for commercial reasons their interest in the Nuer was progressively confined to military matters: Nuer internal divisions, their campaigns against their neighbours, their military reputation among the other peoples of the Nile basin (d'Antonio 1859:23; Brun-Rollet 1855:123; Poncet 1937:21, 30). It was not an altogether unflattering description from those who admired martial virtues (Lejean 1860:231), but it was an indication of the merchants' limited interests and still peripheral contact with the Nuer.

Because these observers remained on the periphery of Nuer society and much of what they learned filtered through biased sources, a distorted and somewhat fanciful picture of the Nuer was created.² The two most perceptive nineteenth century accounts were written by the Poncet brothers and John Petherick.³ From the advantage of over a decade's contact with the Western Nuer's southern Dinka neighbours, the Poncet brothers were able to describe not only the pattern of Nuer intersectional feuds (later quoted in Evans-Pritchard 1940a:120), but also how intermarriage between Nuer and Dinka had a pacifying effect on inter-tribal warfare (Poncet 1937:44, 49-50) (a statement Evans-Pritchard overlooked). Petherick traded directly with the Dok Nuer at Hillet Aliab (Adok) and most of his knowledge came directly from Nuer informants. He was one of the few merchants, perhaps the only one, who had a favourable impression of the Nuer (Petherick 1869:II: 6). He summarized the process that later became known as 'segmentary opposition' and described the conflicts which hampered the land priests in trying to compose feuds (Petherick 1869: I:130, 319-20). He was also alone among European traders in reporting that the Nuer did not always live up to their fearsome reputation and were not always able to defend themselves from passing raiders (Petherick 1869: I:138-9). In this respect Petherick's account stands out from

the others, for through his direct knowledge and sympathy he had a more realistic appreciation than most of his contemporaries of the internal political weaknesses of Nuer society as well as its vulnerability to external aggression.

The conflicts between the merchants and the Nuer began to dominate Nuer relations with other Europeans and Middle Easterners. Schweinfurth described the change along the lower reaches of the Bahr al-Ghazal between 1869 and 1871 when increased clashes with merchant companies along that river turned previous Nuer willingness to trade foodstuffs into outright hostility (Schweinfurth 1874:117-8). By 1880 Nuer antagonism to the Egyptian government there was so taken for granted that Gessi felt no compunction about raiding them for food when his steamer was stranded near the junction of the Bahr al-Ghazal and the Bahr al-Arab (Gessi 1892:400). Near the end of the Egyptian rule in the Southern Sudan the Italian administrator Casati wrote that the Nuer had 'once been a peaceful and amiable nation,' but had since become 'jealous, timid and hostile. The frequent raids made on them by the slave dealers of Khartoum have changed their feelings to hatred and animosity' (Casati 1891:38).

This statement described conditions on the Bahr al-Ghazal to a certain extent, but it was not universally true of all Nuer. There was increased conflict and strife between the peoples of the Upper Nile basin and the merchants and government at this time (Gray 1961:chapter II), but most of the Nuer did not live along the major trade routes and were not as deeply involved in the ivory and slave-trades as some other peoples of the Southern Sudan. They could remain aloof in the unexplored plains north and south of the Sobat, or in the unadministered swamps along the Bahr al-Ghazal, Bahr al-Jabal and Bahr al-Zaraf. Knowledge of the Nuer thus remained incomplete, and the dominant impression was of their animosity towards the foreigners from the north and of their incessant hostility towards their neighbours, the Dinka. Again Casati presented a common view of the feud between the Nuer and the Dinka when he wrote, '... the enmity between these tribes is kept up continually by hatred and a spirit of vengeance, that leads to reciprocal attempts at bloodshed; a struggle ever increasing and without cessation' (Casati 1891:39). Contradictions of Casati's assessment can be found in other authors who reported incidents of co-operation between Nuer and Dinka, especially in the face of mutual threats from the north (Poncet 1937:49-50; Gessi 1892:191, 430; Junker 1890-2: III:251, 285-8; Emin 1922:64), but it was an attractive simplification that later appealed to succeeding generations of administrators.

THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

The obsession with military matters that dominated European thinking on the Nuer during the nineteenth century continued throughout the early years of the Anglo-Egyptian rule in the twentieth century. The British officers who entered the Southern Sudan in 1898 were primarily concerned with obtaining the formal submission of the peoples of the area and establishing structures of administration which would guarantee that submission and maintain security. The practical problems of administration guided the government's assessment of the Nuer, and the first two decades of the new regime were marked by a distinctly biased view of the Nuer.

The officers who began the pacification of the Upper Nile had no specific interest in

the Nuer, and the first official assessment of them, based on old government reports and a limited number of travellers (Werne 1849, Debono 1860, Lejean 1865, Petherick 1869, Baker 1867, Schweinfurth 1874, Marno 1874, Casati 1891 and Junker 1890-2), was that 'the Nuer are a warlike tribe somewhat formidable to the Dinka . . . ' (Gleichen 1898:121-2).⁴ For the next few years administrators echoed some of their predecessors in their attitudes about the Nuer mentality, moral character and low standing in the evolutionary scale (Gleichen 1899:63; 1905:133; Stanton 1903:124). The old stereotype was reinforced by the new government's first contacts with Dinka and Anuak living on the Sobat. The Nuer were presented as despoilers of the country and described as 'intractable and fierce' (Gleichen 1899:62-4, 214), terms fully consistent with the nineteenth century impressions. The new informants convinced the government that the Nuer's gratuitous hostility would automatically extend to the government itself (Sparkes 1899:10), and at this early stage administrators did not realize that, like the Egyptians in 1839, they were being drawn into local quarrels. This was particularly so of their introduction to the Lou and Gaawar.

During the brief period from the mid-1860s to the mid-1870s when merchant camps were established on the Bahr al-Zaraf, a number of Dinka allied themselves to the merchants and their most powerful Gaawar Nuer ally, Nuar Mer. They helped to carry out raids for cattle and slaves against other Dinka as well as the Gaawar, Lak, Thiang and Lou Nuer. Shortly after the withdrawal of the merchants from the Zaraf valley in 1874 some of these Dinka, along with a number of Nuar Mer's Gaawar warriors, attacked the Lou prophet, Ngundeng, and were decisively defeated. This defeat enabled the Gaawar prophet, Deng Lakka, first to overthrow Nuar Mer, and then to chase his Dinka allies from the Zaraf valley. Ngundeng ceased to fight the Dinka after his successful defence, and Deng Lakka's subsequent raids were selectively aimed at those Dinka who had attacked the Gaawar during the days of the merchants. In this he was frequently aided by other Dinka who had suffered similar illtreatment (Johnson 1980a:201-4, 208-23).

The Dinka leaders who contacted the new government as early as 1899 with stories of Nuer atrocities and truculence were the same leaders who had been repulsed by Ngundeng and expelled by Deng Lakka. Since they readily submitted to government authority, they became the government's subjects whom it was honour-bound to protect (O'Sullivan 1906). Their largely unfounded reports of Nuer aggression (Wilson 1905:8) forced the government into an early confrontation with the Nuer.⁵ In 1902, goaded by Ngundeng's refusal to answer his summonses, and encouraged by his Dinka subjects, the Governor of Upper Nile Province led a patrol against the Lou. The most important villages of the Gun Lou were burned and much of their livestock captured. Despite the depredations of the government soldiers and their Dinka auxiliaries Ngundeng and most of the Lou refused to give battle; yet the definition of their 'hostility' depended less on actual combat than on their refusal to submit (Blewitt: 10). The existing reputation of the Nuer was reinforced even by their failure to fight; assumed hostility was deemed proven by continued aloofness, the Lou were legally at war with the government.

It was some years before the administrators began to appreciate their mistake, but they never seemed to have realized the full extent of their misapprehension. In 1905 it was discovered from both Dinka and Nuer sources that the Lou enjoyed good relations with the Ngok and Nyarraweng, their Dinka neighbours to the north and south, and

that Ngundeng opposed raiding (Wilson 1905:6,8).⁶ Yet the government showed little remorse at having misjudged Ngundeng; rather it regretted only that the show of force in 1902 had not awed the Lou into submission but had increased Nuer suspicion (Matthews 1902:346; Asser 1913). The lessons learned from the aftermath of the 1902 patrol were merely tactical; they did not produce a subtler appreciation of the Nuer as a people.

The continued use of non-Nuer intermediaries during the first two decades of the century⁷ fostered a number of misunderstandings. The administration had to rely on incomplete and largely one-sided information which presented the Nuer as 'usurpers' of the land, 'enslavers' of the local population and obliterated of whole tribes (Maxse 1899:4; Blewitt 1902:9; Wilson 1904:10). The Nuer were equally misinformed about government intentions and were frequently told by the Dinka that the government wanted only war (Wilson 1905:6; Struvé 1908:7; Jackson 1921). Administrators began to doubt the accuracy of some of their sources and recognized that many accounts were exaggerated (Gleichen 1905:132; Wilson 1905:8; Struvé 1907b:10), but they still were forced to act upon the information available to them, no matter how cautiously accepted. This led to continued government intervention against the Nuer, ostensibly on behalf of other peoples (Johnson 1980a:370-96; 1980b:75-6).

Despite this mutual suspicion many Nuer showed a willingness to meet with government representatives, and from 1905 to 1913 they displayed a strong reluctance to take up arms against the government, surely something remarkable for a people as warlike as they were supposed to be (Johnson 1980a:324-8, 369-78). A change of government policy in 1910 soon halted this progress in mutual understanding. Frustrated by the slow advance of gradual contact with the Nuer, the provincial government adopted a more aggressive system of cattle tribute patrols designed to exert more overt control and gain Nuer acquiescence and respect (O'Sullivan 1910:92-4; Woodward 1913). A 'tribal' boundary was established between the Gaawar and Lou Nuer and their southern Dinka neighbours as an attempt to separate the Nuer from their 'victims'. The failure of these policies was soon evident. Constant demands for cattle which were unaccompanied by any tangible benefit, such as protection from Dinka and Anuak raids, transformed the active friendliness of Gaawar leaders into armed resistance and brought the Lou and Jikany into direct conflict with government troops. The attempted separation of the Gaawar and the Lou from the Dinka was impossible to enforce because of extensive intermarriage and mixed settlements among the peoples concerned. 'Border violations' became a new crime for the government to control. Confiscation of Nuer cattle in tax and fines only provoked raiding as the Nuer sought to replenish their stock from the herds of government allies (Johnson 1980a:367-96, 1980c).⁸ The Nuer were beginning to live up to their reputation.

Not all administrators were convinced that the Nuer were constant aggressors, nor that it was impossible for considerable numbers of them to live with their neighbours in relative harmony. One governor drew attention to the ease with which plausible complaints against the Nuer were manufactured and governmental credulity manipulated (Struvé 1926). The 'tribal' boundary was criticized as an arbitrary separation that interrupted the tendency of border settlements to merge and settle their differences (Wauhope 1913; Stevenson-Hamilton 1918). Casati's reason for Nuer hostility to the government was resurrected and given a brief respectability (Jackson 1923:88; Coriat 1931). Despite the periodic emergence of such doubts, the premise

that the Nuer were aggressive raiders, and the corollary that their neighbours were harried refugees whose social organization was in disarray, continued to dominate the upper levels of administrative thinking and policy.⁹ In the 1920s this view was reinforced by the policy of devolution which directed local administration throughout the Sudan.

THE NUER AND 'NATIVE ADMINISTRATION'

The principle of devolution, as enunciated by the Milner Commission and the Governor General of the Sudan in 1921, encouraged the development of local tribal authority within the administrative structure; 'tribal custom' was to be codified and administered by the chiefs under the guidance of District Commissioners (Cooke 1935:191, 193-4). In practice this policy encouraged the identification of 'true' custom and the elimination of foreign influences. Devolution among the Nuer required the discovery of a customary law that could be modified to meet administrative standards, and political leaders who could be relied upon to administer that law. The identification of political leaders was dependent upon a detailed description of the political groupings within each of the Nuer tribes. The demands of this policy occupied the attention of District Commissioners throughout the remaining years of Condominium rule.¹⁰ Attempts to discover and regulate tribal structure began before pacification of the Nuer was complete, and for a time military interests coincided with administrative policy in the division of the Nuer into smaller, more manageable units.

The first phase of the new administrative policy was 'the hunt for the chief.' It was the government's firm belief that some sort of chief with administrative and executive powers did exist, at least in principle. Where he did not exist, or where his powers were not as extensive as the administration hoped, it was assumed that these powers had existed in the past but had diminished through the impact of the events of the previous century. This view was in part derived from administrative experience in the Northern Sudan where it was found that rural authorities had declined in power under the centralized military and administrative regime of the Mahdists (Cooke:192). In the south the disruption of traditional structures was usually attributed to the slave-raids and Mahdist campaigns of the preceding century. Among the Nuer, however, an additional reason was found to explain the lack of an hereditary and hierarchical executive authority: the usurpation of power by a new generation of religious leaders, the prophets.

The Nuer prophets came under the prevailing suspicion Europeans in the Sudan had for any inspired religious figure. The new government was extremely sensitive to the potential of political rebellion led by unorthodox religious leaders, a sensitivity which arose from its experiences during the Mahdiyya and with millennial Muslim movements in the Northern Sudan before World War One (cf. Warburg 1971:95-106; Hassan 1979). The Nuer prophets were equated with these Muslim fanatics (Blewitt 1902:12; Wilson 1903b:9; 1903c:6; Jackson 1923:91); hence they were distrusted from the beginning and, like the Mahdists, were regarded as upstarts who perverted traditional and customary beliefs. It was partly the government's translation of the religious influence of the prophets into purely political terms, and partly its assumption that the Nuer were a military race organized for war that convinced it that traditional leaders could be found who presided over large and united political and

military organizations. These men having been replaced by the prophets, the administration saw its main task as 'recreating' the position of 'chief' among the Nuer in such a way that would diminish the political power of the prophets.

Until the mid-1920s the hunt for the chief was conducted pragmatically, and administrators accepted any man of local importance who was willing to come to an agreement with the government. A number of prophets were recognized as 'government chiefs' among the western Nuer, and both Dual Diu (son of Deng Lakka) and Guek Ngundeng (son of Ngundeng) were approached by and worked with the government to a certain extent. This was, however, recognized as only a temporary expedient until enough government chiefs had been established, and the prophets could be dispensed with entirely (Fergusson 1921; Jackson 1923:107).

The anomalies of this approach were eliminated by C. A. Willis who was appointed Governor of Upper Nile Province in 1927. Willis' career had been spent entirely in the northern provinces of the Sudan and in the Legal and Intelligence departments in Khartoum. He had been an early proponent of devolution in the north, and as Director of Intelligence had been prominent in developing this policy for the whole of the Sudan. He approached the problem of Nuer administration from the point of view of the logic of policy rather than from personal knowledge of the Nuer, and in many important areas he was guided by his experience in the Northern Sudan. In the north it had been found advantageous to work through the leaders of small local groups as this eliminated or weakened large political blocs and 'decreased the danger of rebellion' (Cooke 1935:192-3). This policy was adopted for the Nuer. The possibility of renewed Mahdist uprisings and the importation of Muslim millennialist propaganda and leaders from neighbouring countries had pre-occupied the Intelligence department which Willis had directed for ten years. This fear found its counterpart in this policy towards the Nuer prophets.¹¹

Willis compared the Nuer prophets with 'hedge fikis' (itinerant holy men or charm sellers) of the north and condemned them as reactionary subverters of tribal custom, a foreign import with no deep roots in Nuer society (Willis 1927; 1928b:199-202). Not only should they be removed, but all other 'foreign' elements should be removed from Nuer society, which meant the removal of Dinka living among the Nuer. The purge of foreign excrescences from Nuer society would be accompanied by a similar purge of Nuer influence among the Dinka living south of the Gaawar and Lou, Dinka whom Willis believed had completely lost their 'own tribal organization,' and had 'to imitate the Nuer to find any tribal customs . . . ' (Willis 1928a). These surgical operations would leave the administration with the basic tribal structure which could then be rebuilt along more modern and progressive lines.

Willis' policy forced a confrontation with the Lou and Gaawar prophets, Guek Ngundeng and Dual Diu, in the name of the primacy of government authority and the defence of 'Dinka integrity'. Neither Guek nor Dual had initiated any raids against the Dinka in the last decade, and both had tried in their own ways to accommodate themselves to government demands. Yet Willis chose to believe the old stereotype of the Nuer raider and convinced himself, and the government in Khartoum, that he was faced with a rebellious people who were intent on loosening the bonds of government control for the sole purpose of unrestricted raiding against the Dinka.¹² In the Nuer Settlement of 1928-30 which followed, Guek was killed, Dual Diu and other prophets were exiled, the Gaawar and Lou were forcibly separated from the southern Dinka,

and the Dinka living among the Nuer were forced to 'return' to the homeland of their ancestors.¹³ In the end the attempt to separate the Nuer from the Dinka failed because both resisted separation. By 1937 the No-Man's Land which had been created between them was abandoned, and the government gradually began to accept the fact that the two communities would continue to merge with each other (Johnson 1979; 1980a:424-72).

Pacification allowed administrators to continue their search for the ideal executive chief and discuss theories about the foundations of political authority among the Nuer (Armstrong 1930; Alban 1935; Corfield 1935; Winder 1942). Most of them agreed that the prophets had been an aberration in the Nuer political system (Alban 1935; Corfield 1935; Winder 1942). At first they were glad not to have to work with 'big men' who threatened to take independent action; eventually they found that their efforts were hampered by the multitude of small sectional leaders their administration encouraged (Winder 1942). The needs of peace-time administration, as opposed to pacification, required local leaders with more authority over a wider range of sections than was then allowed. The climate of administrative opinion was changing, and with it assumptions about traditional Nuer society. During the opposition to prophets it had been claimed that small local leaders were the foundation of Nuer political organization. When 'paramount chiefs' were desired, it was possible to suggest that a traditional basis for powerful executive chiefs already existed.

It was the claim of B. A. Lewis, a former District Commissioner among the Lou and Gaawar, that in the past various 'spokesmen' automatically emerged to represent and articulate the views of their respective sections. By a process of natural selection a single leading 'spokesman' emerged from all the others to represent the tribe, presiding over a hierarchy of 'spokesmen' which suspiciously resembled the hierarchy of divisions the government wished to create. It is significant of the extent to which administrative thinking about Nuer leaders had changed since the suppression of the prophets that Lewis recognized the value of those men who had formerly rivalled the government for authority among the Nuer. No longer were the prophets dismissed as usurpers of power with no firm roots in Nuer society; they were instead recognized as true 'spokesmen' of the Nuer and were praised (however mildly) for having been the representative leaders of their time (Lewis 1944 & 1951).

Along with this more favourable appreciation of the prophets came the final overturning of the anti-foreign elements policy in both Nuer and Dinka society. The need to build larger structures for the sake of administrative efficiency was recognized by the District Commissioners of the Nuer, who decided in 1943 that, as a preliminary to the creation of a grand Nilotic confederation within the Southern Sudan, a Nuer confederation should be established, and the small neighbouring Dinka communities of Upper Nile Province should be encouraged to join it (Nuer District Commissioners Meeting 1943).

The administration of the Nuer after 1930 was characterized by a more detailed, sympathetic and humane understanding of Nuer society. That the Nuer appeared to these administrators as almost a different people from those who had earlier seemed so truculent was attributed to the success of administrative policy. The role of the early government in increasing the level of violence in the province and of forcing confrontation was overlooked or forgotten. Changes in policy brought about by a more realistic appreciation of the Nuer were thought possible because of an assumed change

in the Nuer character. Shortly before the independence of the Sudan a government publication concluded of the Nuer Settlement:

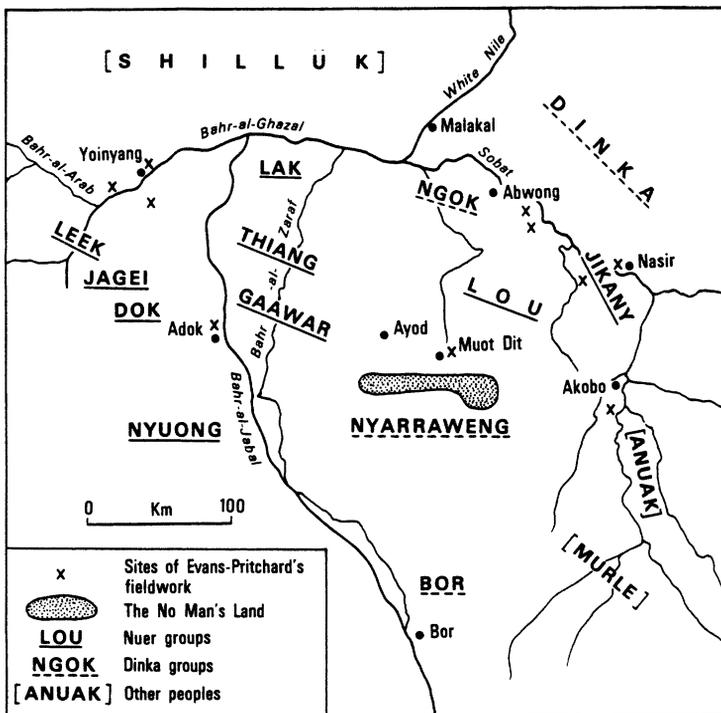
. . . the Nuer learnt a lesson which they have not forgotten. The means have been justified by the end, since there was no lasting resentment and the Nuer responded whole-heartedly to the period of pacification which followed. From a suspicious and intractable people they quickly became what they are now; still proud, still essentially independent in spirit, but friendly and on the whole progressive in their outlook (Jonglei Investigation Team:208).

The cycle was complete. From being a 'peaceful and amiable nation' made 'jealous, timid, and hostile' by one foreign intrusion, they had been made proud, independent, friendly and progressive by another. The administrators' judgement of the Nuer became their own judgement of Nuer administration. The stereotype remained intact.

EVANS-PRITCHARD AND THE NUER

By 1929 the Sudan government had become dissatisfied with existing sources of information on the Nuer. Only two administrators had learned the language, and the missionaries in the province were more concerned with translating their own message to the Nuer than interpreting the Nuer to others. In order to build Nuer administration on a firm and permanent foundation the government decided that a thorough study of the Nuer by an anthropologist must be made. In urging support for such a study the Civil Secretary admitted that the administration's lack of detailed knowledge of Nuer leaders and social organization had contributed to the recent

The Nuer and their neighbours, c. 1930



conflict (MacMichael). This admission established a specific point of reference and an implicit set of questions to which the study of the Nuer had to address itself.

Evans-Pritchard was in the Sudan at this time finishing his work on the Azande. When asked to study the Nuer he accepted, expressing his admiration for the administration in the Southern Sudan, stating as his only reservations doubts about the timing of the work and the desire to finish his Zande study properly.¹⁴ Pressure was exerted from Khartoum to begin work on the Nuer as soon as possible, and throughout the early part of his research the demands of various officials frequently conflicted with his own plans.

Evans-Pritchard has given a full account of the initial difficulties of his fieldwork (1940a:5-17). His attempt to learn Nuer in the vicinity of the Catholic mission station at Yoinyang was hampered first by a lack of willing informants and then by Willis's insistence that he go to the Lou country before he had sufficient grasp of the language. The military operations of the Nuer Settlement were still in force among the Lou, and the appearance of troops at Muot Dit while Evans-Pritchard was there forced him to abandon his research after a total of only three and a half months. Over the next six years he toured the northern Lou, Eastern Jikany, Dok, Jagei and Leek in visits that were often brief in duration and widely separated in time. With the exception of his short stay at Muot Dit he was forced to confine his research to areas easily accessible by river (1951:17) and was never in the heart of Nuerland for long.

Evans-Pritchard was acutely aware that the conditions of his research prevented him from fully investigating many important aspects of Nuer society¹⁵, and he expressed in his later writings reservations about the completeness of his findings (1933:2-4; 1935:76; 1940a:9, 15). The disjointed nature of his fieldwork and the reluctance of the Nuer to speak openly about a number of topics restricted his observations. The government's attitudes and expectations forced him to refer to the questions it most wished answered, but the very conditions it created made it impossible to find complete answers to those questions. In many areas of investigation Evans-Pritchard found himself thwarted first by government actions and then by the Nuer response to those actions.

In forcibly separating Nuer from Dinka in the areas where he worked, the government prevented Evans-Pritchard from observing the Nuer engaged in normal relations with any large group of neighbouring Dinka.¹⁶ Having subjected the Lou to a harsh campaign, ostensibly on behalf of the Dinka, the government increased Lou resentment by the elevation of some of their Dinka neighbours at their expense. The bitterest Nuer denunciations of the Dinka that Evans-Pritchard records all come from Lou informants who, in 1930, were vigorous in their denials that the Dinka were the equal of the Nuer in either courage or fighting skill. Thus Evans-Pritchard was told how one Nuer could easily defeat four Dinka, how the Dinka never raided the Nuer, and was even asked, ' "How could a Dinka kill a Nuer?" ' (1934:2) So insistent were the Lou about their raiding abilities before government intervention that Evans-Pritchard was able to conclude that the Nuer name for the Dinka, *jaang*, 'has almost come to mean "anyone whom we Nuer raid" '. (*Ibid*). He illustrated the attitude of all the Nuer to all the Dinka by relating an incident that occurred on the day after he arrived at Muot Dit. He was with some Lou on the government road and watched a Dinka drive by a cow he had bought in Malakal.

The whole incident filled the Nuer with bitterness. To them it was grotesque. The cow by all that was right should not have been safe from them even in the heart of its owner's country while its passage through their own villages was certainly contrary to what had been ordained by God (*Ibid.*).

What Evans-Pritchard did not mention was that the cow was probably a Lou cow confiscated by the government the year before. The road the Nuer were sitting on, and on which the Dinka passed, had also been one of the issues of the recent war, for Lou refusal to provide labour for road work was taken as an act of open rebellion by the government. The incident illustrates Lou bitterness over recent events, but it cannot be used to illustrate a general attitude they always held, or the Nuer always held.

Evidence for such a general attitude seemed to be provided by the records of various travellers. Citing Werne, d'Antonio, Lejean, Poncet, Petherick, Schweinfurth, Casati and Gessi, among others, Evans-Pritchard found ample references to warfare between Nuer and Dinka, 'the dominant position of the Nuer among their neighbours, the awe they inspired in them, and their bravery and chivalry' (1940a:26). It is mostly on the authority of these writers (Poncet in particular) that he concluded, 'Every Nuer tribe raided Dinka at least every two or three years, and some part of Dinkaland must have been raided annually' (*Ibid.*). The reports he referred to are specific to only a few areas of all the territory occupied by the Nuer, representing a span of only about forty years in Nuer history. They do not and cannot provide us with a comprehensive survey of Nuer-Dinka relations throughout that period. Some of the reports also contained references to co-operation between Nuer and Dinka, but Evans-Pritchard appears to have overlooked these references in favour of the dominant impression of Nuer victimisation of the Dinka which is present in almost all of these nineteenth century accounts.¹⁷

Additional evidence for Nuer aggressiveness appeared in early government intelligence reports, and this evidence Evans-Pritchard also cited while overlooking reports of more peaceful activities.¹⁸ After summarizing government accounts of its difficulties contacting the Nuer he concluded, 'The truculence and aloofness displayed by the Nuer is conformable to their culture, their social organization, and their character' (1940a:134), but not, apparently, to their experience. This conclusion became a central theme in his analysis of the Nuer political system, and he added, 'Their political structure depended for its form and persistence on balanced antagonisms that could only be expressed in warfare against their neighbours if the structure were to be maintained.' (*Ibid.*). He relied on and accepted the government version of its relations with the Nuer when he described in an earlier article the effect of Nuer raids on the Dinka:

Nuer persistently raided the neighbouring Dinka tribes, slowly depriving them of their herds and occupying their grazing lands. Several Dinka tribes have disappeared as a result, and all those in contact with the Nuer were being systematically plundered when the Anglo-Egyptian administration took control of their country . . . It was this persistent plundering that finally compelled the Government to assume a more systematic control over Nuerland since the plundered peoples had accepted the Administration and had a claim on its protection (1937:239, 242).

With the weight of the documentary evidence and the forceful reassertion of Nuer

contempt for the Dinka by the Lou in their defeat, the old stereotype of the aggressive Nuer conqueror became a fixed 'ethnographic fact.'

Evans-Pritchard's acceptance of what amounted to the government's case against the Nuer did not blind him to the plight of the Nuer as newly conquered subjects. In his sympathy for the Nuer he criticized some government interpretations of Nuer society that had a direct bearing on its policy. He deplored the fact that local leaders, 'often men of considerable ability and character,' had been removed by administrative necessity (1938:76-7). He evoked the dilemma of modern Nuer society when he reminded an audience of anthropologists and administrators in 1938:

To understand native feelings we have to bear in mind that the Southern Sudan was conquered by force and is ruled by force, the threat of force, and the memory of force . . . The moral relations between natives and Government provide the most fundamental of administrative problems, for the natives have to integrate into their social system a political organization that has no moral value for them (1938:76).

He rejected one policy which had been fundamental to the administration at the time of his fieldwork, the policy of 'tribal purity.' The government claimed that Nuer traditions and customs were endangered by the foreign influences, but Evans-Pritchard denied that there had been any significant alteration. His estimate that 50% of all Nuer east of the Nile (considerably more for a group like the Lou) were descended from Dinka (1933:5; 1935:87), his detailed discussion of the adoption of Dinka into Nuer lineages (1940a:221-9; 1951:chapters I & II), and his much later description of the Dinka totems and divinities in Nuer religion (1956:chapter III) are evidence of a potentially profound impact on Nuer society. He did concede that mass adoption of foreigners had weakened the reality of kinship-based tribal unity (1935:87), but he continued to describe Nuer social and political organization as in opposition to the Dinka. The characteristics of 'aloofness' and hostility to foreigners which he claimed helped define Nuer society seemed by extension to operate internally. His conclusion appears to be that Nuer social values and ideas dominated the Dinka in their midst just as the Nuer dominated the Dinka generally.

Part of his denial that Nuer society was in danger of losing its integrity included his criticism of the government's ideas about 'traditional' leaders. He saw in the government's attempts to create chiefs a most untraditional activity, and he emphasised the irony of its own part in destroying the one type of Nuer leader who conformed the nearest to its own conception of an administrative chief (1935:86). He further stressed the opposition between the government appointee and the traditional chief throughout the Southern Sudan:

The functions of a native chief are to represent the unity of the tribe, maintained and expressed by warfare which he initiates; to store and distribute wealth, generally food, which he receives as tribute and dispenses in gifts and hospitality; to embody in his person the sanctity of law and custom, which are exacted in his name; and to be the symbol of his people's purpose and the pivot of their system of values . . . A Government chief, by contrast, acts as the bureaucratic agent of an alien administration . . . [He] derives his authority not from tradition and the moral backing of his people, but from the support of the Government . . . (1938:77).

This description of the 'native chief' follows very closely the powers and functions

of the Zande king who levied tribute in labour, food and military service, who dispensed justice at his court, and who regulated raids and warfare. He had been co-opted into local administration and was the prototype of the 'paramount chief' administrators had wished to raise among the Nuer.¹⁹ Evans-Pritchard noted the absence of any such Zande-like leader among the Nuer in the 1930s (1935:82), but he then went on to describe the political role of the prophets in precisely these terms (1940a:188-9; 1940b:295). Guek was made to look like his father's contemporary, the Zande king Gbudwe, who died in 1905 fighting a government patrol, and among whose people Evans-Pritchard worked in the 1920s.

Evans-Pritchard developed his criticisms of the government's opposition to the prophets by using the government's own arguments against it. He strenuously denied that the prophets had perverted Nuer customs and beliefs (1933:50; 1956:304-5), though he recognized them as a recent, rather than 'traditional' development. For Evans-Pritchard the prophets were the personification of Nuer values. 'As we understand the situation, the prophets were inevitably opposed to the Government because it was this opposition among the people which led to their emergence and was personified in them' (1940a:186). The government had created the very 'subversive' forces that it was later obliged to destroy to return the Nuer to their original condition.

The fact that Evans-Pritchard was required to address himself to government assumptions about Nuer society when discussing the Nuer political system affected his analysis of Nuer religion. His denial that the inclusion of Dinka in Nuer society fundamentally altered the Nuer social system was echoed in his underestimation of the impact of Dinka ideas on Nuer practices and beliefs. He asserted that Dinka totems could be shed over time, and that Dinka magic, divinities and nature sprites arose *outside* Nuer society and entered into it (1956:86, 99-100, 115). He did not consider that there might have been a continuity of beliefs in a population which was once Dinka but had become Nuer. His description of the leopard-skin chiefs' role in mediating social disputes was given a religious counterpart in his description of their apparent mediation between God and man. Yet the Nuer priests are rather more like the Dinka spear-masters than he could have known at that time. The spiritual basis of their authority, *kuoth rieng* (divinity of the flesh) functions in much the same way as the spear-master's clan divinity *Flesh*, making the priest's person in both Dinka and Nuer societies a representative of Divinity rather than neutral arbitrator.²⁰ That Evans-Pritchard's data on religious matters were limited is again the result of the conditions of his research. He was required to concentrate on social and political organization (1956:v), he was unable to observe prophets in Nuer society (1940a:295; 1956:305), the government's known antipathy to various Nuer spiritual beliefs made them 'embarrassed and taciturn when asked about their spirits' (1956:28-8), and his disjointed and brief visits all over Nuerland made it impossible for him to make a systematic and comprehensive study of the significant regional variations in practices and beliefs. It is a measure of his perseverance and insight that he obtained the data that he did.

Government assumptions about the Nuer helped to structure Evans-Pritchard's analysis of Nuer society. His acceptance of the assertion that Nuer society was fundamentally aggressive had a marked effect on his own description of the Nuer political system, Nuer leaders and certain aspects of Nuer religion. Even when disagreeing with some interpretations of specific aspects of Nuer society he argued by

reference back to this shared assumption. Administrators saw Nuer aggression as a threat to the survival of Nuer customs and traditional organization. Evans-Pritchard recognized the impact of Nuer expansion on their social life (1935:76), but external aggression helped to maintain the political order, and resistance to change was the internal expression of that aggressiveness. His answer to what was originally an administrative question found its way into his description of other, seemingly unrelated aspects of Nuer life.

CONCLUSION

From 1839 to 1930 the Nuer were engaged in a series of conflicts of progressive intensity with a number of colonial invaders. It was the experience of those who wished to subdue and dominate them that the Nuer were a violent and warlike people. Their reports on Nuer society expressed the opinions of persons whose projects were frequently thwarted by Nuer resistance or non-cooperation. The violence that occurred with increasing frequency was attributed to Nuer truculence, not to the pattern of relations between the Nuer and the colonial representatives, nor to the increasing intransigence of colonial demands. The evidence drawn from the contemporary sources of this long conflict can tell us little beyond the Nuer reaction to repeated attempts at subjugation, and almost nothing about the structure of Nuer society and the principles upon which it operated.

The image of the Nuer as almost mechanically aggressive warriors was an illusion which was periodically criticised by experienced observers, but these criticisms were persistently forgotten. The dominant impressions of earlier observers either formed or reinforced the attitudes of the European participants in this colonial episode of Nuer history, and influenced their selection of evidence from the record of the past. The colonial era produced the same stereotype of automatic truculence for other East African pastoralists, and for many of the same reasons. It was based on the deliberate propaganda of neighbouring rivals who wished to obtain the aid of colonial powers in their local struggles, or it became a justification for colonial conquest (Lamphear 1976; Jacobs 1979). Whatever form it took, it was produced by the pattern of relations between subjugator and subjugated created by the colonial period.

The Sudan government's image of its Nuer adversaries has had a long life. It influenced the work of Evans-Pritchard, and it was even accepted as true of an earlier period by later generations of administrators among the Nuer whose own experience was at variance with that of their predecessors. It is an image that is supposed to be based on historical experience, and as such the historical evidence must be analysed. Evans-Pritchard was unable to do this in part because of the paucity of detail in the published historical literature, in part because he did not have complete access to government files, and in part because the Nuer seem to have been reluctant to discuss historical events with him. The contrast between his Azande and Nuer material in this last respect is striking. He was able to publish and analyse a number of Zande historical texts (1955-7; 1971b), but his published Nuer texts amount to only a few hymns (1956:45-7, 99) and scattered conversations.

Evans-Pritchard frequently urged anthropologists to adopt the historian's duty of analysing and criticizing their written sources (1962a & b; 1971a). To this critique of sources must be added the criticism of the ethnographic record. A noted historian of

Africa has recently commented that anthropology has 'accorded absolute and total respect to ethnographic data reported by anthropologists from the field. Anthropologists roundly criticize each other's interpretations, but they rarely call into question the raw facts, the ethnographic reports.' The historian on the other hand, feels that his primary obligation 'is to criticize such reports, to examine the processes by which the "facts" were collected, to search for additional, possibly contravening information' (Miller:44). Such an analysis of the Nuer material, including that of Evans-Pritchard, is long overdue. To criticise Evans-Pritchard's presentation and interpretation of certain 'facts' about Nuer society does not devalue the originality and perception of his work. It is, rather, part of the necessary process of placing his research in its historical context; a precondition for the evaluation of the written sources of Nuer history.

NOTES

¹ The research on which this article is based was undertaken for a Ph.D. in history at UCLA and included consultation of archives in the Sudan and Britain in 1972, 1974-8 and 1980, as well as fieldwork among the Nuer and Dinka of Upper Nile Province in February-August 1975 and March-September 1976.

² See Brun-Rollet's curious account of Nuer criminal justice, the Nuer 'king,' the Nuer 'Pope,' and Nuer 'Lent' (1855:223-4, 240-1), some of which was repeated by Lejean (1865:69).

³ Evans-Pritchard was highly critical of Petherick (1971a:132-3, 135-7) in an attack which was rather more personal than scholarly. Many of Petherick's observations on the Nuer compare favourably with Evans-Pritchard's discussions on the same topics.

⁴ The Nuer of the Sobat were labelled 'harmless' (Gleichen 1898:27), but this would seem to be an impression gained from Junker's description of his uneventful journey on the Sobat in 1876 (Junker 1890-2: I:213-24) rather than from Debono's reports of Nuer fights with the Shilluk, Dinka and Anuak in 1855 (Debono 1860:348-51).

⁵ Administrators recognized that persistent fighting between 'administered' and 'unadministered' peoples sometimes forced the government to intervene on the side of its subjects to justify with tangible protection the more onerous demands of administration, often before an investigation could be made of the rights of the matter. Administered subjects often made use of this to their advantage. In 1912 the government felt obliged to attack the Murle who had been raiding the Bor Dinka, in part to justify its own administration and taxation of the Bor (Collins 1960:43-4). Some years later it was discovered that the Murle raids had been a response to considerable Bor Dinka provocation (Johnston 1934).

⁶ This has been confirmed by my own research among the Gaawar, Lou and Jikany Nuer, and the Nyarraweng Dinka (Johnson 1980a:291-5). See also Deng 1973:208.

⁷ The medium of the Dinka language and the use of Dinka intermediaries continued for some years (O'Sullivan 1906; Woodward 1907:6; Jackson 1923:59). Captain V. H. Fergusson, the first administrator of the Western Nuer, used Atout and Dinka interpreters until his death in 1927.

⁸ The extension of violence to neighbouring peoples in response to government confiscation of cattle was not confined to the Nuer. Government seizure of Murle cattle in 1908 led to Murle retaliation against the Dinka (Collins 1960:42). More recently government confiscation of Taposa herds has only led to armed conflict between the Taposa and the government and the Taposa and the Latuka (Akol 1980:11, 14).

⁹ The conclusion most senior government officials in Khartoum formed from the provincial reports forwarded to them was that the constant threat of war between the Nuer and Dinka was averted only by the strenuous efforts of local administrators. This impression, derived from the same documents, is repeated in Collins (1971: 200-1). A more thorough criticism of this interpretation can be found in Johnson 1980c.

¹⁰ Howell's book on Nuer law (1954) was the product of a resolution made by District Commissioners in 1943 to codify Nuer customary law for use in all Nuer courts and in cases between Nuer and neighbouring Dinka courts (Nuer District Commissioners Meeting).

¹¹ Willis had advocated a more conciliatory and lenient approach towards the Mahdist leadership, but his policy was discredited when a British official was killed in the neo-Mahdist uprising at Nyala in 1921 (Hassan 1979:468-9). His attitude towards the Nuer prophets followed more closely orthodox government suspicion of inspired religious leaders.

¹² In the dry season of 1928 Willis sent a column of soldiers and Dinka auxiliaries into Gaawar territory to impress the Gaawar with government strength. The behaviour of the soldiers and the Dinka provoked

Gaawar retaliation during the following rains. A number of Lou, whose cattle had recently been confiscated by the army, joined them in their raids (Johnson 1979:14; 1980a:chapter VIII). Willis did not see this outbreak of hostilities as a reaction to his own provocative policy. He explained to the central government that it arose from the Nuer's 'inborn conviction that Dinkas existed merely to be raided. War is a form of sport to the Nuer and he does not see why he should not indulge it at the expense of the despised Dinka . . .' (see 'Police Operations Subsequent to Patrol S.8 (Meeting held at the Palace, 6.11.28)' CRO Civsec 5/3/12).

After the decision to campaign against Guek and the Lou had already been taken in 1927, Captain V. H. Fergusson, District Commissioner of the Western Nuer in Bahr al-Ghazal Province, was murdered by two Nyuonng Nuer. It was at first assumed that this murder was instigated by a Nyuonng Nuer prophet, and Willis used this as further proof of the subversive character of prophets. It was only after both the murderers were captured and tried that it was learned that a seemingly 'loyal' government chief with a personal grudge against Fergusson had instigated the murder and then circulated rumours blaming the prophet (see the proceedings of the trial of one of the murderers in CRO Civsec 5/4/15).

¹³ Willis' policy of eliminating prophets and 're-creating' Nuer and Dinka societies applied specifically to the Lou, Gaawar and their southern Dinka neighbours. The transfer of the Western Nuer from Bahr al-Ghazal Province to Upper Nile Province in 1928, while undertaken mainly to bring uniformity to the administration of the Nuer, also interposed a province boundary between the Western Nuer and the Western Dinka.

¹⁴ Where reference is not made to Evans-Pritchard's published account of his fieldwork information in this section is taken from the correspondence regarding his work in the Sudan in CRO Civsec 112/1/1-3. Evans-Pritchard's initial reluctance to undertake a study of the Nuer is more forcefully expressed in his later accounts (1940a:7; 1973:19) than in his letters found in the government files.

¹⁵ In a letter from Lou country to MacMichael dated 27.3.30 (CRO Civsec 112/1/2) Evans-Pritchard stated that the Lou 'are too unsettled and too resentful and frightened to make good informants and the breakdown of their customs and traditions too sudden and severe to enable an anthropologist to obtain quick results . . .'

¹⁶ The only neighbouring Dinka he observed were a small group of Ngok on the Sobat, and he recorded many aspects of close relations between them and the Nuer (1934: 2, 22; 1936:236).

¹⁷ Evans-Pritchard was frequently critical of nineteenth century writers (1940a: 1; 1965; 1971a). His main criticisms concerned their ethnographic descriptions, the quality of their observations, their misattribution of material culture and their ignorant and frequently bigoted accounts of African religions and beliefs. He did not evaluate them as historical sources for the Nuer.

¹⁸ He cites Struvé 1907a on the 'immemorial' raiding pattern of the Nuer (E-P 1940a: 125-6), but he seems to have overlooked Wilson's account of Ngundeng's good relations with the Ngok and Nyarraweng and his prohibition against raiding (1905:6, 8) and of Nuer intermarriage with the Northern Dinka (1903a: 13, 17).

¹⁹ As early as 1928 Willis suggested introducing 'paramount chiefs' to the Nuer and Dinka, an idea which was 'inevitably preconceived from the more organized and less individualistic peoples both North and South' (1928a), an oblique reference to the Azande, among others.

²⁰ This criticism of Evans-Pritchard's study of Nuer religion is offered only tentatively and requires more research, but these are some of the main differences that are apparent from a study of religion in modern Nuer society. There may have been developments since Evans-Pritchard's time, but many of the differences seem basic to Nuer religious concepts.

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Résumé

Les Nuer, peuple belliqueux: causes originales et naissance d'un stéréotype.

Les Nuer étaient connus des Européens bien avant que les travaux d'Evans-Pritchard ne les rendent célèbres auprès des anthropologues. Ce fut d'ailleurs en raison de leur importance au cours de la pacification du Soudan méridional que le gouvernement du Soudan reconnut la nécessité d'entreprendre une étude anthropologique de ce peuple. Au cours du siècle qui précéda la pacification finale des Nuer, la situation politique qui régnait dans le Soudan méridional était celle d'un conflit croissant entre les Nuer d'une part et les envahisseurs coloniaux et leurs alliés d'autre part. C'est dans le contexte de ce conflit qu'on en est venu à décrire la société Nuer et à définir le 'caractère' Nuer. Il en découla toute une série de stéréotypes que l'on appliquait à ce peuple: l'administration agissait en fonction de ces clichés sur lesquels reposait sa politique et ce fut cette politique administrative qui servit de point de départ aux travaux d'Evans-Pritchard sur les Nuer. En raison des restrictions que l'administration de l'époque avait imposée à ses recherches et de celles qui étaient liées à l'agitation de la société Nuer soumise militairement par le gouvernement, Evans-Pritchard ne fut pas en mesure de procéder à des enquêtes détaillées sur plusieurs aspects de la vie de ce peuple. Ceci eut un effet considérable sur son analyse de la religion Nuer, des rapports entre Nuer et groupes étrangers et de la structure politique Nuer. Bien qu'Evans-Pritchard ait critiqué de nombreux aspects de la politique gouvernementale à l'égard des Nuer et qu'il n'ait pas accepté certaines des affirmations de ses prédécesseurs sur ces derniers, il finit par inclure dans son analyse les conclusions de plusieurs des observateurs qui l'avaient précédé.