

Nuer Politics: Structure and System

E. E. Evans-Pritchard

The political structure of the Nuer can only be understood in relation to their neighbours, with whom they form a single political system. Contiguous Dinka and Nuer tribes are segments within a common structure as much as are segments of the same Nuer tribe. Their social relationship is one of hostility and its expression is in warfare.

The Dinka people are the immemorial enemies of the Nuer. They are alike in their ecologies, cultures, and social systems, so that individuals belonging to the one people are easily assimilated to the other; and when the balanced opposition between a Nuer political segment and a Dinka political segment changes into a relationship in which the Nuer segment becomes entirely dominant, fusion and not a class structure results.

As far as history and tradition go back, and in the vistas of myth beyond their farthest reach, there has been enmity between the two peoples. Almost always the Nuer have been the aggressors, and raiding of the Dinka is conceived by them to be a normal state of affairs and a duty, for they have a myth, like that of Esau and Jacob, which explains it and justifies it. Nuer and Dinka are represented in this myth as two sons of God who promised his old cow to Dinka and its young calf to Nuer. Dinka came by night to God's byre and, imitating the voice of Nuer, obtained the calf. When God found that he had been tricked he was angry and charged Nuer to avenge the injury by raiding Dinka's cattle to the end of time. This story, familiar to every Nuer, is not only a reflection of the political relations between the two peoples but is also a commentary on their characters. Nuer raid for cattle and seize them openly and by force of arms. Dinka steal them or take them by treachery. All Nuer regard them – and rightly so – as thieves, and even the Dinka seem to admit the reproach, if we attribute correct significance to the statement made to Mr. K. C. P. Struvé in 1907 by the Dinka keeper of the shrine of Deng dit at Luang Deng. After recounting the

From *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940, courtesy of International African Institute, London), pp. 125–6, 130–2, 139, 142–4, 147–8, 181.

myth of the cow and calf, he added, 'And to this day the Dinka has always lived by robbery, and the Nuer by war.'

Fighting, like cattle husbandry, is one of the chief activities and dominant interests of all Nuer men, and raiding Dinka for cattle is one of their principal pastimes. . . . Boys look forward to the day when they will be able to accompany their elders on these raids against the Dinka, and as soon as youths have been initiated into manhood they begin to plan an attack to enrich themselves and to establish their reputation as warriors. Every Nuer tribe raided Dinka at least every two or three years, and some part of Dinkaland must have been raided annually. Nuer have a proper contempt for Dinka and are derisive of their fighting qualities, saying that they show as little skill as courage. . . .

We have remarked that Nuer feel Dinka to be nearer to themselves than other foreigners, and in this connexion we draw attention to the fact that Nuer show greater hostility towards, and more persistently attack, the Dinka, who are in every respect most akin to themselves, than any other foreign people. This is undoubtedly due, in some degree, to the ease with which they can pillage the vast Dinka herds. It may also, in part, be attributed to the fact that of all neighbouring areas Dinkaland alone opposes no serious oecological handicaps to a pastoral people. But it may be suggested further that the kind of warfare that exists between Nuer and Dinka, taking into consideration also the assimilation of captives and the intermittent social relations between the two peoples between raids, would seem to require recognition of cultural affinity and of like values. War between Dinka and Nuer is not merely a clash of interests, but is also a structural relationship between the two peoples, and such a relationship requires a certain acknowledgement on both sides that each to some extent partakes of the feelings and habits of the other. We are led by this reflection to note that political relations are profoundly influenced by the degree of cultural differentiation that exists between the Nuer and their neighbours. The nearer people are to the Nuer in mode of livelihood, language, and customs, the more intimately the Nuer regard them, the more easily they enter into relations of hostility with them, and the more easily they fuse with them. Cultural differentiation is strongly influenced by oecological divergences, particularly by the degree to which neighbouring peoples are pastoral, which depends on their soils, water-supplies, insect life, and so forth. But it is also to a considerable extent independent of oecological circumstances, being autonomous and historical. The cultural similarity of Dinka and Nuer may be held largely to determine their structural relations; as, also, the relations between the Nuer and other peoples are largely determined by their increasing cultural dissimilarity. The cultural cleavage is least between Nuer and Dinka; it widens between Nuer and the Shilluk-speaking peoples; and is broadest between the Nuer and such folk as the Koma, Burun, and Bongo-Mittu peoples.

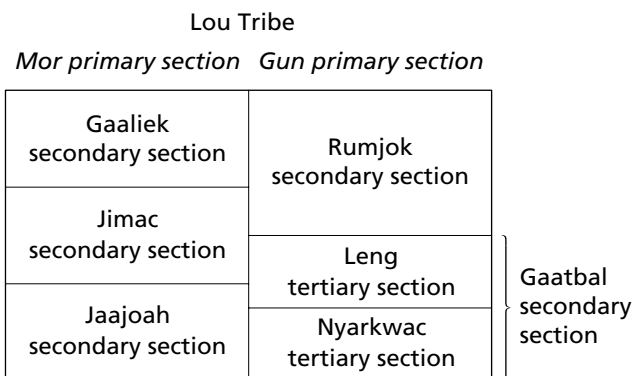
Nuer make war against a people who have a culture like their own rather than among themselves or against peoples with cultures very different from their own. The relations between social structure and culture are obscure, but it may well be that had the Nuer not been able to expand at the expense of the Dinka, and to raid them, they would have been more antagonistic to people of their own breed and the structural changes which would have resulted would have led to greater cultural heterogeneity in Nuerland than at present exists. This may be an idle speculation, but we can at least say that the vicinity of a people like themselves who possess rich

herds that can be plundered may be supposed to have had the effect of directing the aggressive impulses of Nuer away from their fellow-countrymen. The predatory tendencies, which Nuer share with other nomads, find an easy outlet against the Dinka, and this may account not only for the few wars between Nuer tribes but also, in consequence, be one of the explanations of the remarkable size of many Nuer tribes, for they could not maintain what unity they have were their sections raiding one another with the persistence with which they attack the Dinka. . . .

The Political System

Nuer tribes are split into segments. The largest segments we call primary tribal sections and these are further segmented into secondary tribal sections which are further segmented into tertiary tribal sections. . . . A tertiary tribal section comprises a number of village communities which are composed of kinship and domestic groups.

Thus, the Lou tribe, as shown in the diagram below, is segmented into the Gun and Mor primary sections. The Gun primary section is segmented into the Rumjok and Gaatbal secondary sections. The Gaatbal secondary section is further segmented into the Leng and Nyarkwac tertiary sections. . . .

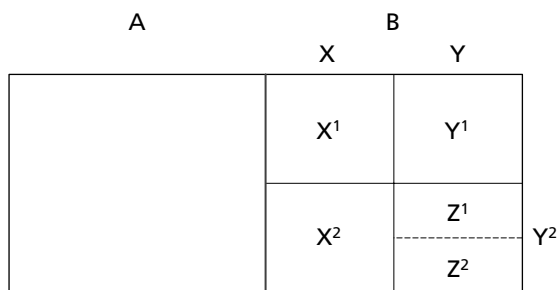


The smaller the tribal segment the more compact its territory, the more contiguous its members, the more varied and more intimate their general social ties, and the stronger therefore its sentiment of unity. As we shall see, a tribal segment is crystallized around a lineage of the dominant clan of the tribe and the smaller the segment the closer the genealogical relationship between members of this clan fragment. Also the smaller the segment the more the age-set system determines behaviour and produces corporate action within it. Political cohesion thus not only varies with variations of political distance but is also a function of structural distance of other kinds.

Each segment is itself segmented and there is opposition between its parts. The members of any segment unite for war against adjacent segments of the same order and unite with these adjacent segments against larger sections. Nuer themselves state this structural principle clearly in the expression of their political values. Thus they say that if the Leng tertiary section of the Lou tribe fights the Nyarkwac tertiary

section – and, in fact, there has been a long feud between them – the villages which compose each section will combine to fight; but if there is a quarrel between the Nyarkwac tertiary section and the Rumjok secondary section, as has occurred recently over water rights at Fading, Leng and Nyarkwac will unite against their common enemy Rumjok which, in its turn, forms a coalition of the various segments into which it is divided. If there is a fight between the Mor and the Gun primary sections, Rumjok and Gaatbal will unite against the combined Mor sections: Gaaliek, Jimac, and Jaajoah. If there is fighting against the Gaajok or the Gaawar the primary sections, Gun and Mor, will, at any rate in theory, combine and a united Lou tribe will take the field, since both sections belong to the same political group and since their dominant lineages belong to the same clan. Certainly they used to unite in raids on the Dinka. . . .

This principle of segmentation and the opposition between segments is the same in every section of a tribe and extends beyond the tribe to relations between tribes, especially among the smaller Western Nuer tribes, which coalesce more easily and frequently in raiding the Dinka and in fighting one another than the larger tribes to the east of the Nile. . . . It can be stated in hypothetical terms by the Nuer themselves and can best be represented in this way. In the diagram below, when Z^1 fights Z^2 no other section is involved. When Z^1 fights Y^1 , Z^1 and Z^2 unite as Y^2 . When Y^1 fights X^1 , Y^1 and Y^2 unite, and so do X^1 and X^2 . When X^1 fights A, X^1 , X^2 , Y^1 , and Y^2 all unite as B. When A raids the Dinka A and B may unite. . . .



We may use the diagram above to emphasize the principle of contradiction in political structure. A member of Z^2 tertiary section of tribe B sees himself as a member of Z^2 in relation to Z^1 , and all other members of Z^2 see themselves as members of that group in relation to Z^1 and are so regarded by members of Z^1 . But he regards himself as a member of Y^2 and not of Z^2 in relation to Y^1 and is so regarded by members of Y^1 . Likewise he regards himself as a member of Y and not of Y^2 in relation to X, and as a member of the tribe B, and not of its primary section Y, in relation to tribe A. Any segment sees itself as an independent unit in relation to another segment of the same section, but sees both segments as a unity in relation to another section; and a section which from the point of view of its members comprises opposed segments is seen by members of other sections as an unsegmented unit. Thus there is, as we have pointed out earlier, always contradiction in the definition of a political group, for it is a group only in relation to other groups. A tribal segment is a political group in relation to other segments of the same kind and they jointly form a tribe only in relation to other Nuer tribes and adjacent foreign tribes which form part of the same political system, and without these relations very

little meaning can be attached to the concepts of tribal segment and tribe. We make here the same point as we made in discussing the word *cieng* [residence]: that political values are relative and that the political system is an equilibrium between opposed tendencies towards fission and fusion, between the tendency of all groups to segment, and the tendency of all groups to combine with segments of the same order. The tendency towards fusion is inherent in the segmentary character of Nuer political structure, for although any group tends to split into opposed parts these parts must tend to fuse in relation to other groups, since they form part of a segmentary system. Hence fission and fusion in political groups are two aspects of the same segmentary principle, and the Nuer tribe and its divisions are to be understood as an equilibrium between these two contradictory, yet complementary, tendencies. Physical environment, mode of livelihood, poor communications, a simple technology, and sparse food-supply – all, in fact, that we call their oecology – to some extent explain the demographic features of Nuer political segmentation, but the tendency towards segmentation must be defined as a fundamental principle of their social structure. . . .

The lack of governmental organs among the Nuer, the absence of legal institutions, of developed leadership, and, generally, of organized political life is remarkable. Their state is an acephalous kinship state and it is only by a study of the kinship system that it can be well understood how order is maintained and social relations over wide areas are established and kept up. The ordered anarchy in which they live accords well with their character, for it is impossible to live among Nuer and conceive of rulers ruling over them.

The Nuer is a product of hard and egalitarian upbringing, is deeply democratic, and is easily roused to violence. His turbulent spirit finds any restraint irksome and no man recognizes a superior. Wealth makes no difference. A man with many cattle is envied, but not treated differently from a man with few cattle. Birth makes no difference. A man may not be a member of the dominant clan of his tribe, he may even be of Dinka descent, but were another to allude to the fact he would run a grave risk of being clubbed.