

## SOME FEATURES OF NUER RELIGION E. E. EVANS-PRITCHARD

I SHALL give you here a brief account of some features of the Nuer concept of God, Kwoth a nhial.<sup>1</sup> The word kwoth<sup>2</sup> is used by Nuer to refer to divers spirits which, though they are of different kinds and of varying significance, are identical in essence. Nuer place them in two categories: kuth nhial, the spirits of the sky or of the above, and kuth piny, the spirits of the earth or of the below, which are principally totemic spirits. I am not concerned here with the spirits of the earth, and I shall only speak a few words about the superior category of spirits in general, leaving a fuller discussion of them for some future occasion. They present a difficult problem of interpretation, which is further complicated by the historical evidence which has to be taken into consideration. The spirits of the above are Kwoth nhial or Kwoth a nhial, the Spirit of the sky or the Spirit (who is) in the sky, who can, for reasons which will I believe appear adequate, be appropriately spoken of as God; the kuth dwanga or gaat Kwoth, the spirits of the air (or of the breezes) or the sons (or children) of God; and the col wic spirits, which are the souls of persons killed by lightning and taken by God to dwell with him in the above. The spirits of the air and the col wic spirits may be regarded, for reasons

1 Other aspects of Nuer religion have been treated in the following articles: Evans-Pritchard (1949a, b, c, d, e, and 1951). These references are listed at the end of this paper.

2 The word has been variously spelt by those who have written about the Nuer or compiled vocabularies of their language. Professor Westermann gives koth (1912a, p. 86); Mr. Jackson (1933, P. 156) gives kosz or kott; Captain Stigand gives kuth (1923, p. 16); Miss Huffman gives kuoth (pl. kuth) (1929, p. 27); Father Crazzolaro gives kot (pl. kuuth) (1933, pp. 6 and 40); and Father Kiggen' gives kuodh (pl. kuth) and also kuoth (pl. kuuth) (1948, pp. 162 and 164). The variations are probably due to dialectical differences as well as to the different ways Europeans hear and write this exceedingly difficult language. I shall throughout use kuoth (pl. kuth), neglecting the genitive and locative forms.

which I do not enter into here, as divers manifestations or hypostases of God.

Consequently the Nuer concept of God cannot be fully treated without taking them into account; but it seems to me desirable to pay attention first to the distinctive features of their concept of God and then to see later how this concept is related to, and influenced by, other aspects of their religion, and also by their culture and social order. It is possible, if difficult, to proceed in this manner, and it is the logical order of procedure because the other spiritual beings cannot be understood except in relation to God.

There are two important characteristics of Nuer religion which have great importance for our present discussion. Firstly, it is throughout concerned with spirits. Indeed, if we want to sum up its most general and characteristic features in one word, it would best be described as "spiritual". Secondly, these spirits are classed into two categories, those of the above and those of the below, the superior and the inferior, the free and the earthbound. In a study of Nuer religion it is necessary, as we will see, to give special attention to this symbolic dichotomy between heaven and earth.

I have translated the word kwoth by "spirit" and I have said that Nuer religion can best be described as "spiritual" because the Latin spiritus, like the Greek pneuma and the English derivatives of both words, suggests, as does the Nuer word, both the intangible

quality of air and the breathing or blowing out of air; though it does not perhaps cover the sense of kwoth so well as does the Hebrew RWH, which like kwoth is an onomatopoeia and denotes violent breathing out of air in contrast to ordinary breathing (the Hebrew neshamah, the Nuer yiegh or yie) (Snaith, 1944, Chap. VII). Kwoth, in its verbal form, is used to describe such actions as blowing on the embers of a fire; blowing into the uterus of a cow, while a tulchan is propped up before it, to make it give milk; to snort, the blowing out of its belly with air by the bulyak or puff fish; and the hooting by steam pressure of a river steamer. The word is also found, and has the same sense, in some of the other Nilotic languages; in Dinka koth, to blow on a fire, to blow the nose, etc; in Shilluk kodho, to blow on a fire or to play on a wind instrument; and in Lango, kuto, and in Acholi, koto, with the same and related meanings. Professor Westermann says that it is the same word as the word for "rain", koth or kot, in the Shilluk-Luo group of languages (Nebel, 1936, pp. 16 and 87; Westermann, 1912a, p. 86, 1912b, p. 263; Driberg, 1923, p. 389; Crazzolara, 1938, p. 261; Diedrich Westermann, "The Nuer Language"). I feel very doubtful whether this is so, but it is not a matter about which I am competent to judge.

In the Nuer conception of him, God is kwoth, a being of pure spirit, and he may simply be so called. He is, further, and is often specified as, Kwoth nhial, or Kwoth a nhial, the Spirit of the heavens or the Spirit (who is) in the heavens, the copula a in the second designation being a locative particle. Nhial is the sky and combined with certain verbs the word may also refer to natural processes associated with the sky, as raining and thundering; but it may also have merely the sense of "on high" or "above". We may certainly say that the Nuer do not regard the sky or any celestial phenomenon as God and this is clearly shown in the distinction made between God and the sky in the expressions "spirit of the sky" and "Spirit (who is) in the sky". Moreover, it would even be a mistake to interpret "of the sky" and "in the sky" too literally. They are to some extent to be regarded as metaphors, just as are similar expressions throughout the Old and New Testaments where heaven is represented figuratively as the habitation of God. It would equally be a mistake to regard the association of God with the sky as pure metaphor. It is more than a religious symbolism, even if we regard the symbol as both standing for something and, through this special association, partaking of the thing itself, though without being identified with it. For though the sky is not God, and though God is everywhere, he is thought of as being particularly in the sky, and Nuer generally think of God in a special sense as being on high. Hence anything connected with the firmament has associations with him. Nuer sometimes speak of him as falling in the rain and of being in lightning and thunder. Mgr. Mlakic (1943-4) says that the rainbow is called the necklace of God. I have never heard a spontaneous reference to the sun as a divine manifestation, but if one asks Nuer about it they say that it too belongs to God. They also say that if a man sees the sun at night this is a divine manifestation, and one which is most dangerous for him; but I think that the light they say is occasionally seen is not regarded as an appearance of the physical sun but some peculiar luminous vision. When Nuer see the new moon they rub ashes on their foreheads-the Nuer act of dedication-and they throw ashes, and perhaps also a grain of millet, towards it, saying some short prayer, as "Grandfather, let us be at peace" or "Ah moon, nyadeang (daughter of the air-spirit Deng), we invoke that you appear with goodness. May the people see you every day. Let us be (akolapko)". Mgr. Mlakic

(1943-4) says that they mark their foreheads with ashes in the form of a cross and that it is called ngei Kwoth, God's sign. I must add that the language is here figurative, even playful. They may address the moon, but it is God to whom they speak through it, for the moon is not regarded, as such, as a spirit or as a person.

It would be quite contrary to Nuer thought, as I have remarked, and it would even seem absurd to them, to say that sky, moon, rain, and so forth are in themselves, singly or collectively, God. God is a spirit who like wind and air is invisible and ubiquitous. But though God is not these things he is in them in the sense that he reveals himself through them. In this sense he is in the sky, falls in the rain, shines in the sun and moon, and blows in the wind. These divine manifestations are to be understood as modes of God and not as his essence, which is spirit.

God being above, everything above is associated with him. This is why the heavenly bodies and the movements and actions connected with them are associated with him.

This is why also the spirits of the air are regarded as gaat Kwoth, children of God, in a way other spirits are not, for they, unlike other spirits, dwell in the air and are also thought of as being in the clouds, which are nearest to the sky. This is why also the colwic spirits are so closely associated with God, for he touched them with his fire from heaven and took them to himself. Some birds also are spoken about by Nuer as gaat Kwoth, especially those which fly high and

seem, to us as well as to Nuer, to belong to heaven rather than to earth and therefore to be children of light and symbols of the divine. The feeling that they are in a measure detached from the earth is enhanced in the case of migratory birds by their disappearances and reappearances. I have heard the idea expressed that in their absence from Nuerland they have gone to visit God's country. This is probably no more than poetic fancy, but we can say that the disappearance of these birds strengthens the allegory of God's children which arises from their ability to do what man cannot do, fly towards heaven and God. Twins also, in a very special sense, are gaat Kwoth, for Nuer say that twins are birds, a dogma which is emphasized by many observances concerning them. When a twin dies Nuer never say that he has died, but that he has flown away. The Jikul clan and the Gaanwar clan, whose ancestors fell from heaven, are also ji Kwoth, God's people, for that reason, and are thought to have special powers.

Thus anything associated with the sky has virtue which is lacking in things earthly. Nuer pathetically compare man to heavenly things. Man is ran piny, an earthly creature and, according to the general Nuer view, his soul is also earth-bound: "joah e ran piny", "a ghost is a person of the earth", that is, he is not a ran nhial, a person of the sky.

Between God and man, between heaven and earth, there is a great gulf, and we shall find that an appreciation of the symbolism of the polarity of heaven and earth aids us in our attempt to understand Nuer religious thought and feeling and also sheds light on certain social features of their religion, for example, the greater importance of prophets than of priests, the prophets being inspired by heavenly beings while the leopard-skin priests, although they have received their powers from God, are in themselves wholly of the earth.

Before discussing further the separation of God from man I will mention some of the chief attributes of God. God is in the sky, but his being in the sky does not mean that he is not at the same time elsewhere, and on earth. Indeed, as will be seen, Nuer religious

thought cannot be understood unless God's closeness to man is taken together with his separation from man, for its meaning lies precisely in this paradox.

Nuer say that God is everywhere, that he is " like the wind " and " like the air " .

According to Father Crazzolaro (cited by Schmidt, 1949, pp. 10 and 23), God may be spoken of by the epithets jiom, wind, and ghau, universe, but these words only stand for God in poems or in an allegorical sense and are an illustration of the liking the Nilotic peoples show in their poetry for metonymy and synecdoche. God is not jiom, the wind, but cere jiom, like the wind; and he is not ghau, the universe, but cak ghaua, the Creator of the universe. Another poetic epithet by which he may be referred to is tutgar. This is an ox-name, taken from an ox of the kind Nuer call wer, which has wide-spreading horns and is the most majestic of their beasts. The name is a combination of two words: tut, which has the sense of " strength " or " greatness ", and gar, which has the sense of " omnipresent ", as in another of God's titles, " Kwoth me gargar the omnipresent God ". The commonest Nuer way of trying to express their idea of the nature of God is to say that he is like the wind or the air, a metaphor which seems appropriate to us, because it is found throughout the hierological literature of the world and we are particularly familiar with it in the Old Testament, where the RWH of the Hebrew and the pneuma of the Septuagint are variously translated, according to the context, " spirit ", " wind ", and " breath " in the English version (N. Snaith, 1944, Chap. VII, and pp. 179 seq.; Trench, 1871, pp. 260-2). Among the Nuer the metaphor is consistent not only with the absence of any fixed abode of God but also of any special places where he is thought particularly to dwell, for air and wind are everywhere. Unlike the other spirits God has no prophets or sanctuaries or earthly forms, and there are no spots in Nuerland which are thought to be especially his homes. I do not discuss this point further here, but it will be appreciated that the somewhat amorphous, though monotheistic, character of Nuer religion is in harmony with the absence of a developed and politically important priesthood.

God, the spirit in the heavens who is like wind and air, is the Creator and mover of all things. The American Presbyterian

missionaries at Nasir have written in an unpublished manuscript that he is especially the Creator, the giver, and the sustainer of life. This accords with my own conclusions and with those of the Catholic missionaries at Yoahnyang. Mgr. Mlakic (1943-4) has written that the Nuer " believe in one supreme God, Creator of the world, of human beings, and eventually of the spirits ", Father Crazzolaro has said that he is " the Creator, the Almighty, He who rules the destiny of man; He is especially the Lord of life and death " (Schmidt, 1949, P. 29).

Since God made the world he is addressed in prayers as Kwoth ghaua, spirit of the universe, with the sense of creator of the universe. The word cak, used as a noun, can mean the creation, that is, all created things; it can be used in a very special sense to refer to an abnormality, for example, cak Kwoth, a freak; and, though I think rarely, it is used as a title of God, the Creator. As a verb, to create, it signifies creation ex nihilo and when speaking of things can therefore only be used of God. As a phrase quoted by Father Kiggen has it: " Cagh e dung kuodh ke rode ", " to create is proper to God alone ". However, the word can be used, as implied by another example of its use by Father Kiggen (1948, P. 52), " caghe diid ", " a creator of songs ", for imaginative constructions in the same figurative sense as when we say that an actor creates a part. In quoting

these phrases from Father Kiggen's dictionary I am vouching for their genuine ring of Nuer thought and expression, a ring lacking in some of his examples of the use of Nuer words which have a religious significance.

Professor Westermann wrote at the dictation of a Nuer an account of how God created the world and made all things in it. It begins " Me chak koth math, chwo ran thath ", which Professor Westermann (1912a, p. 115) has translated: "When God created the people he created man." Here again I must say that the phrase is genuine Nuer thought and expression, because Professor Westermann's sources might be held to be suspect, having been, in part at any rate, soldiers, and therefore possibly Muslim slaves, and certainly influenced by Islam. It will be observed that he has translated two different words, cak and tath, by " create "; but they have not quite the same sense, for whereas cak means

creation ex nihilo, tath means to make something out of something else, as when a child moulds clay into the shape of an ox or a smith beats a spear out of iron. The sentence would therefore be better translated: " When God created people then he made (or fashioned) man." The distinction is similar to that between " created " and " made " in the first chapter of Genesis, " created" there being a translation of the Hebrew BRH, which can only be used for divine activity.

The complementary distinction made in Genesis between " the heaven and the earth " is made, by implication at least, in a slightly different way by the Nuer. A parallelism often heard in their prayers in " e pinydu, e ghaudu ", " it is thy earth, it is thy universe ". Piny is the down below, the earth in the sense of the terrestrial world as the Nuer know it. Ghau has many meanings-world, sky, earth, atmosphere, time, and weather (Kiggen, 1948, p. 121)-which taken together, as they should be in a context of prayer, mean the universe. Another common, and related, strophe in prayers is " e ghaudu, e rwacdu ", " it is thy universe, it is thy word ". Rwac in ordinary contexts means speech, talk, or words, but when used in prayers and invocations in the phrase " e rwacdu ", " it is thy word ", it means the will of God; and when used in reference to creation it has almost the meaning of the creative word: " He made the world, it is his word."

The Nuer can hardly be said to have a creation myth, though our authorities (Jackson, 1933, PP. 70-1; Fergusson, 1921, pp. 145-9; Schmidt, 1949, P. 13) record some fragmentary accounts of the creation of men, parts of which I have myself heard. These state that men were created in the Jagei country of western Nuerland at a certain tamarind tree, at the foot of which offerings, and according to Mr. Jackson sacrifices, were sometimes made till it was destroyed by fire in 1918. Many details in the versions given by Mr. Jackson and Captain Fergusson are clearly foreign, either Dinka or, in Mr. Jackson's account, Shilluk, and in Captain Fergusson's account, possibly even Atwot or Mandari,<sup>1</sup> and I

<sup>1</sup> This is clear on internal evidence, and Mr. Jackson himself says that he has combined Nuer, Dinka and Shilluk stories to make a more coherent account. I will not here enter into a discussion of the difficulties involved in an attempt regard Father Crazzolaro's version as the closest to Nuer tradition. In this version the tamarind tree (Father Crazzolaro gives the correct Nuer word koat, but incorrectly translates it " Feigenbaum " instead of " Tamarinde "), called Lic, was itself the mother of men who, according to one account, emerged from a hole at its foot or, according to another account, dropped off its branches like ripe fruits.

Whether they are speaking about events which happened me walka, in the beginning or long ago, or about happenings of yesterday and today, God the creative spirit is the final Nuer explanation of everything. When asked how things began or how they come to be what they are they answer that God made them or that it was his will that they have come to be what they are. The heavens and the earth and the waters on the earth, and the beasts and birds and reptiles and fish were made by him, and he is the author of custom and tradition. The Nuer herd cattle and cultivate millet and spear fish because God gave them these things for their sustenance. He instituted their marriage prohibitions. He ordained that there should be totems. He gave ritual powers to some men and not to others. He decreed that the Nuer should raid the Dinka and that Europeans should conquer the Nuer. God has made one man black and another white (according to one Nuer account our white skins are a punishment by God for incest committed by our ancestor with his mother), one man fleet and another slow, one strong and another weak. Everything in nature, in culture, in society and in men is as it is because God

made it so. Above all else God is thought of as the giver and sustainer of life. He also brings death. Nuer say that since it is his world he can take away what he has given. It is true that Nuer to determine whether a story found among both Dinka and Nuer has been borrowed by the one people from the other, but I must point out that it is always possible, as in the case under consideration, that an authority has taken down a Dinka story and not a Nuer story, from a Dinka informant in Nuerland. Mr. Jackson's account of the Nuer was written entirely from information supplied by a single informant who was a Dinka who had settled among the Nuer and later resided in Malakal under a Muslim name. Captain Fergusson's immediate entourage was mainly, if not solely, Dinka or Atwot. Even in the case of Father Crazzolaro it must be taken into consideration that not only is the area in which his mission was situated saturated with Dinka influences but also that Dinka as well as Nuer attended the mission.

seldom attribute death-in such cases as death by lightning or following the breach of a taboo-to the direct intervention of God, but rather to natural circumstances or to the action of a lesser spirit, but they nevertheless regard the natural circumstances or the spirit as agents of God; for it is he who causes a man to die and the final appeal in sickness is made to him. Nuer have often told me that it is God who takes the life, whether a man dies from spear, wild beast, or sickness, for all these are "nyin Kwoth", "instruments of God".

In the Nuer conception of God he is thus creative spirit. He is also a person. I have never heard Nuer suggest that he has human form, but though he is himself ubiquitous and invisible he sees and hears all that happens and he can be angry and can love (the Nuer word is nhok, and if we here translate it "to love" it must be understood in the preferential sense of agapo or diligo: when Nuer say that God loves something they mean that he is partial to it). As a person he is the father of men.

A very common mode of address to the Deity is "Gwandong", a word which means "grandfather" or "ancestor", and literally "old father", but in a religious context "Father" or "our Father" would convey the Nuer sense better; and "Gwara" or "Gwandan", "our Father", are also often used in prayers. God is the Father of men in two respects. He is their Creator and he is their protector.

He is addressed in prayers as " Kwoth me cak gwadong God who created my ancestor ". Figuratively, and in conformity with Nuer lineage idiom, he is sometimes given a genealogical position in relation to man: a man of the Jinaca clan, for example, after tracing his pedigree back to Nac, the founder of his clan, may explain that Nac was a son of Gee, who was a son of Ran, man, who was a son of Ghau, the universe, who was a son of Kwoth, God. When Nuer thus speak of God as their remote ancestor and address him as " Father " or " Grandfather ", and likewise when in praying to him they speak of themselves, as they commonly do, as "gaatku ", " thy children ", their manner of speech is no more to be taken literally than are those frequent passages in the Old Testament in which Israel is spoken of as the spouse or son of Jehovah. Also, when Nuer speak of spirits, birds and twins as " gaat Kwoth ", " children of God ", they speak in an allegorical sense. Similarly, when children are named after God or one of the spirits of the air, for example, Gatkwoth, son of God, or Gatdeang, son of (the air-spirit) Deng, all we are to understand is that the child was conceived in answer to prayer to God or to Deng. Even in Nuer family and kinship usages the word gat, son, does not necessarily, or even usually, signify a natural son but a son in one or other of several social senses. That the language is here allegorical is shown by the use of the word cak in the expression " Kwoth me cak gwadong ", " God who created my ancestor ", for cak means to create and not to beget. It is also shown by the fact that the word dieth, to beget, is not only not used in this expression but is never used in reference to God. It is true that Father Crazzolaro records the sentence " Gwandan ce nadh dieth ke diedh nadhe ", which, as he rightly says, means " God did not beget men with the begetting with which men are begotten.", but he adds that the word " dieth " (which he has translated " zeugen ") was only used by his informant because the question he himself had asked required its use (Schmidt, 1949, P. 15). Nuer do not think of God as the begetter of man but as his Creator.

God is also the Father of men in that he is their protector and friend. He is " Kwoth me jale ka ji God who walks with you ", that is, who is present with you. He is the friend of men who helps them in their troubles, and Nuer sometimes address him as " maadh ", " friend ", a word which has for them the sense of intimate friendship. The frequent use in prayers of the word nom in reference to the lives, or souls, of men indicates the same feeling about God, for it has the sense of the care and protection parents give to a child and especially the carrying of a helpless infant. The Nuer habit of making short supplications to God outside formal and ritual occasions also suggests an awareness of a protective presence, as does the affirmation one hears every day among the Nuer, " Kwoth a thin ", " God is present ". Nuer say this, doubtless often as a merely verbal response, when they are faced with some difficulty to be overcome or some problem to be solved. The phrase does not mean " there is a God ". That would be for Nuer a pointless remark. God's existence is taken for granted by everybody. Consequently when we say, as we can do, that all Nuer have faith in God the word " faith " must be understood in the Old Testament sense of " trust " and not in that modern sense of " belief " which the concept came to have under Greek and Latin influences. There is in any case, I think, no word in the Nuer language which could stand for " I believe ". A Nuer either knows (ngac) or he does not know (kwic). Kwoth a thin means that God is present in the sense of being in a place or enterprise, the a being here again a locative particle. When Nuer use the phrase they are saying

that they do not know what to do, but God is here with them and will help them. He is with them because he is spirit and being like wind or air is everywhere, and, being everywhere, is here now.

But though God is sometimes felt to be present here and now, he is also felt to be far away in the sky. However, heaven and earth, that is, God and man, for we are justified here in treating the dichotomy analogically, are not entirely separated. There are comings and goings. God takes the souls of those he destroys by lightning to dwell with him and in him they protect their kinsmen; he participates in the affairs of men through divers spirits which haunt the atmosphere between heaven and earth and may be regarded as hypostasizations of his modes and attributes; and he is also everywhere present in a way which can only be symbolized, as his ubiquitous presence is symbolized by the Nuer, by the metaphor of wind and air. Also God can be communicated with through prayer and sacrifice, and a certain kind of contact with him is maintained through the moral order of society which he is said to have instituted and of which he is the guardian, a matter I discuss briefly later. But in spite of these communications and contacts the distance between heaven and earth is too great to be bridged. In a sense, therefore, but not, I think, in the sense in which some writers have used the word-of being functionless and of serving no purpose-but in his separateness and uniqueness, his "holiness" in the Old Testament sense of the word. Kwoth a nhal is otiose.

God's separation and remoteness from man are accounted for in a myth recorded by Father Crazzolaro which relates that there was not always a complete separation of heaven and earth and that there might never have been but for an almost fortuitous event. I did not myself hear this myth, and I judge it to be of Dinka origin, partly because it occurs among the Dinka but more because I think it is very probably only current among Nuer to the west of the Nile, which would indicate recent introduction into Nuerland from Dinka sources; but, whether it is Dinka or not, it accords well with Nuer religious conceptions in general. The myth relates that there was once a rope from heaven to earth and how anyone who became old climbed up by it to God in heaven and after being rejuvenated there returned to earth. One day a hyaena-an appropriate figure in a myth relating to the origin of death-and what is known in the Sudan as a durra-bird, most likely a finch, entered heaven by this means. God gave instructions that the two guests were to be well watched and not allowed to return to earth, where they would certainly cause trouble. One night they escaped and climbed down the rope, and when they were near the earth the hyaena cut the rope and the part above the cut was drawn upwards towards heaven. So the connection between heaven and earth was cut and those who grow old must now die, for what had happened could not be made not to have happened ("Aber was geschehen war, konnte nicht mehr ungeschehen werden"). A variant of this myth has been recorded by Captain Fergusson (Schmidt, 1949, PP. 17-18; Fergusson, 1921, Pp. 148-9).

It is in the light of their feeling that man is dependent on God and helpless without his aid and that God, though a friend and present, is yet also remote, that we are to interpret a word the Nuer frequently use about themselves when speaking to or about God: doar. The meanings of this word given in Nuer-English dictionaries (Stigand, 1923, p. 7; Huff-man, 1929, p. 13; Kiggen, 1948, P. 78), "idiot", "stupid", "fool" and "weak-minded", do not adequately convey the sense of the word, especially when it is used to

refer to man's relationship to God. Then it means rather " simple " or " foolish " or " ignorant "-" idiot " in the sense the word used to have in the English language and which the word from which it is derived had in Greek. Nuer say that they are just ignorant people who do not understand the mysteries of life and death, and of God and the spirits and why things happen as they do.

A favourite Nuer expression is yie wicda, " my head goes round" or " I am bewildered ". They are at a loss because they are just foolish people who do not understand the why and the wherefore. In saying that they are simple or foolish or ignorant Nuer are not being modest in respect to other peoples, though I have often had the impression that they regard themselves as guileless compared with other peoples, especially compared with the Dinka, whom they regard as cleverer and more cunning than themselves, a difference dramatised in one of their myths. The story, which reminds us of that of Esau and Jacob, is cited by Nuer to explain why they have always raided the Dinka. Nuer and Dinka-the peoples are personified in the myth-were both sons of God, who had promised to give an old cow to Dinka and its young calf to Nuer. Dinka came by night to God's byre and deceived him by imitating Nuer's voice and God gave him the calf. When God found that he had been deceived he charged Nuer to raid the herds of Dinka to the end of time. In other words, the Nuer may be robbers but the Dinka are thieves. Another story relates that God offered men the choice between cattle and guns. Nuer and Dinka chose cattle and Arabs and Europeans chose guns. Here both Nuer and Dinka are figured as simple compared with Arabs and Europeans. Nuer regard themselves as having manly virtues exceeding those of other peoples, but compared with them they are artless. However, when they use the word doar in a religious context they are speaking of themselves being foolish in comparison with God and in his eyes. I think that the same idea is expressed in speaking of themselves as cok, small black ants, in their hymns to spirits of the air, that is, they are God's ants, or in other words what a tiny ant is to man, so man is to God. This is a conscious and explicit analogy. Thus Father Kiggen quotes the phrase " Kondial labne cuugh, ke min kueine ke Kwoth", which I would translate " We, all of us, have the nature of ants in that we are very tiny in respect to God ", and " Kondial gaad cuughni ke Kwoth ", which I would translate " All of us are like little ants in the sight of God ". The same metaphor has been recorded for the Dinka by Archdeacon Shaw (1915).

In speaking about themselves as being like ants and as being simple people the Nuer show a humbleness in respect to God which contrasts with their proud, almost provocative, and towards strangers even insulting, bearing to men; and indeed humbleness, a consciousness of creatureliness, is a further element of meaning in the word doar, as is also humility, not contending against God but suffering without complaint. Humbleness and humility are very evident on all occasions of religious expression among the Nuer; in the manner and content of prayer, in the purpose and meaning of sacrifices, which are generally made to avoid, stay, or restrict misfortunes, and, perhaps most evidently, in their sufferings. Here I want only to say that when misfortunes happen Nuer accept them with resignation. Whatever the occasion of death and other misfortunes may be, whether they be what the Nuer call " dung cak ", " the lot of created things ", or whether they be the result of what they call " dueri ", " faults ", they come to one and all alike, and Nuer say that they must be accepted as the will of

God. The best that can be hoped for is that God will hear the prayers and accept the sacrifices of those who suffer and spare them any extra burden. Nuer do not complain when misfortunes befall them. They say that it is God's will (rwac Kwoth), that it is his world (eghaude), and-I have often heard Nuer say this in their sufferings-that he is goagh, good. When a child dies women lament, but only for a little while, and men are silent. They say that God has taken his own and they must not complain; perhaps he will give them another child. This is a common refrain with the Nuer, especially in their invocations at mortuary ceremonies. They say of the dead man that God has taken him and that he was in the right in the matter, for it was his man; he has taken only what was his own. Also, when a byre is destroyed by lightning Nuer tell him that they do not complain. The grass of the thatch is his, and he has a right to take what belongs to him.

Likewise if a cow or an ox of your herd dies Nuer say that you must not complain if God takes his own beast. The cattle of your herd are his and not yours. If you grieve overmuch God will be angry that you resent his taking what is his. Better be content therefore that God should do what he wishes, seeing not that he has taken one of your cows but that he has spared the others. If you forget the cow God will see that you are poor and will spare you and your children and your other beasts. I cannot convey the Nuer attitude better than by quoting part of the verse in the Book of Job: "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." Father Crazzolaro records much the same of the Nuer in this respect as I have done. He says, for example, that if God kills a man or destroys property by lightning, Nuer say: "Grandfather, that which you have taken was your property. You were right" (Schmidt, 1949, P. 40). God is always in the right, always, as the Nuer say, has cuong, a word I discuss later. Nuer also say, when some calamity has happened to them, "thile me lele", which means that there is nothing which can be done about it and that therefore it does not matter. It does not matter, not because it is unimportant for the person concerned, but because it is the will of God and therefore determined and beyond man's control.

People comfort a man who has lost cattle by telling him these things, but they find it hard to comfort a youth who has lost his dil thak, his favourite ox, for he is young and the ox was perhaps his only ox and has been his companion. He has cared for it and played with it and danced and sung to it. He now sits by himself and pines and his friends try to cheer him up and they tell him that he must not be tearful or God will be angry: "God is good, he might have taken you, but he has taken your ox instead." Here we have a further and very common reflection in adversity. God has been gracious and he has taken something belonging to the man and has spared the man himself. What appears to

1 This quotation is also given by Professor and Mrs. Seligman (1932, P. 230)• It was, however, like the rest of their account of the Nuer, except where they have stated to the contrary, taken from my notebooks. I mention this fact because I have found that Professor and Mrs. Seligman are often quoted, for example, by P. W. Schmidt in his *Die Ursprung der Gottesidee*, as independent authorities. This is no fault of Professor and Mrs. Seligman, but it makes nevertheless for confusion.

be misfortune is therefore really fortune. Nuer here use the word gang, to shield or protect, saying that the thing has shielded the man.

I was told that in spite of these encouragements a youth who has lost his favourite ox has to be pressed to partake of its cooked flesh, his friends saying to him, " What? Are they not all the cattle of God? And if he has taken one of them you must not refuse its flesh. Why do you sit moping? " I have also heard it said that if the owner refuses its flesh and puts his spear away in the rafters of his byre, the spear may cut his hand or leg some later day because it was put away as though useless. In any case, in the end no Nuer can resist meat. A Nuer once told me wistfully that a man's eye and heart are mournful at the death of his beast but his teeth and stomach are glad. Nuer say that the stomach prays to God independently of the heart.

In taking things God, as we have noted, takes only what is his, but he is compassionate and, as we have also noted, spares a man if he sees that he is poor and miserable (can). In talking about these matters with Nuer, I received the impression that, while of course they like to be rich, they think it safer for a man not to have too much good fortune. Pride in the number of his children or cattle may cause God to take them away. For this reason Nuer show great uneasiness if their good fortune is so much as mentioned. It is proper to praise a man's moral qualities, to say that he is brave, generous, or kind, but it is more than rude to remark on his physical well-being, the size of his family, or the number and quality of his beasts and other possessions, for evil consequences may follow. It is what the Nuer generally call yop. Thus to say to a man, " Well, you are fat ", may make him thin; and it is the ambition of every Nuer to be fat, though I have never seen one who achieved it. It is also very bad to praise a cow, especially to remark on its exceptional milk yield, because it will then cease to give milk. I was told that " only when her husband has married a wife with a cow will a woman praise it", that is, after it has ceased to be her cow. It is also most dangerous to tell a lad who has recently been initiated that the cuts on his forehead are healing well, or indeed to make any allusion to them, because a favourable comment may result in an unhealed spot festering anew. I was often in trouble with Nuer on counts of this kind. I was always reprimanded if I counted children, saying, for instance, " Let me see, so-and-so has four children, has he not? So-and-so, so-and-so, so-and-so, and so-and-so." On one occasion I was eating porridge with Nuer and complimented my host on the size of the meal. Everyone was most embarrassed and I was later taken aside by a Nuer friend and told that I must never make such comments. On another occasion I got into trouble for asking a man in jest, and, I admit, in rather bad taste, whether it was food or beer inside him, for his belly was as tight as a drum. I was told that my question might well make the man sick, and one of those present said that once a man had remarked to him " Well, you are full ", and shortly afterwards he was violently sick. The worst offence is to praise a baby. In referring to it one should use some such expression as " giekeme ", " this bad thing ". When blessing children by spitting on them, which is the Nuer manner of showing favour to a child, kinsmen, and especially kinswoman, utter some opprobrious remarks, sometimes a string of obscenities, over them.

The idea here is not that of the evil eye (pthe), though the two ideas may in some ways resemble one another and also overlap.' In Nuer opinion the evil eye is an act of covetousness or envy, whereas here, I think, the emphasis is on the danger of rejoicing in unusual good fortune lest it should be taken away. There is a feeling that God evens things out, so that if he helps the needy he may take away from those with superfluity.

As I understood their view it expresses a certain uneasiness at attention being drawn to possessions lest pride should bring about retribution. That this is their view is further suggested by a number of their stories which relate how God punished hubris. I mention only one in this place, a short myth which reminds us of the story of Elijah and the priest of Baal, and which is obviously either taken over from some foreign people or is a very recent creation of Nuer imaginative thought, because it is about the "Turuk", "Turks", 1 Yop is presumably the same word as the Shilluk ywop which Wilhelm Hofmayr (1925, p. 221) translates by "bose Blick".

a word which among the Nuer, as among the black peoples of the Southern Sudan in general, includes all lighter-skinned northerners with whom they have had dealings, that is, Turks, Egyptians, Arabs and Nubians of the Northern Sudan, and ourselves and other Europeans. The "Turks" compared their guns to God's thunder, and there was a trial of strength between them and God. God made a huge mud image of an elephant and told the "Turks" to shoot at it, which they did to no effect. God then brought clouds and darkness and thunder and lightning and smashed the image to dust and killed many of the "Turks" as well because they had compared the gun he had given them to his power. The point of this story is not merely that God was stronger than the "Turks" but that he was in the right and the "Turks" were at fault.

This brings me to an extremely important Nuer concept, an understanding of which is very necessary to a correct appreciation of their religious thought and practice. This is the concept of cuong. This word can mean "upright" in the sense of standing, as, for example, in reference to the supports of byres. It is also used figuratively for "firmly established", as in the phrase "be golle cuong", "may his hearth stand", which has the sense of *stet fortuna domus*. It is most commonly employed, however, with the meaning of "in the right" in both a forensic and a moral sense, and when used in a religious content is perhaps best translated "righteousness" in the Old Testament sense of the word.<sup>1</sup> The discussion in what we would call legal cases is for the purpose of determining who has the cuong, the right, in the case, or who has the most right; and in any argument about conduct the issue is always whether a person has conformed to the accepted norms of social life, for, if he has, then he has cuong, he has right on his side. We are concerned with the concept here both because it relates directly to man's behaviour towards God and other spiritual beings and the ghosts and because it relates to God in a more indirect way, in that he is regarded as the founder and guardian of morality. Up to this point I have been describing

<sup>1</sup> Where it is a rendering of the Hebrew *SDQ*. Vide W. Robertson Smith (1902 ed., pp. 71-2), and Snaith (1948, Chap. III and pp. 165-7).

Nuer ideas about the nature of God. I shall now describe their ideas about what God requires of them.

I do not want to suggest that God is thought to be an immediate sanction of all right and wrong-doing, but I must emphasise that the Nuer are of one voice in saying that sooner or later and in one way or another good will follow right conduct and ill will follow wrong conduct. People may not reap their rewards for good acts and punishments for bad acts for a long time, but the consequences of both follow behind (*gwor*) them and in the end catch up on those responsible for them. You give milk to a man when he has no lactating cows, or meat and fish to him when he is hungry, or you befriend him in other ways, though he is no close kinsman of yours. He blesses you, saying that your age-

mates will die while your children grow old with you. God will see your charity and give you long life. Those who have lived among the Nuer must have heard, and received, their blessings. My lamented friend, Miss Soule, of the American Presbyterian Mission at Nasir, once related to me how a Nuer woman had told her that her husband wished to throw her monorchid child into a river and how she dissuaded him by saying to him, " Maybe if we take care of this baby God will do great things for us." Miss Soule was herself often blessed by Nuer, being told that she would have a long life because she cared for orphans and babies whose mothers were unable to suckle them. I have myself had similar experiences during my illnesses in Nuerland. Nuer, who appeared to be unsympathetic at other times, would visit me then and say gently, " You will drink Nile water ", that is, " You will return to your home"; or " Well, pray to God and tell him that you have come on a journey to the country of the Nuer and that you have not hit anyone or stolen anything or done any bad thing there, and then he will leave you alone "; or " It is nothing. You will not die. This is our earth and you shall not die on it. Why should you die? You have not wronged us, and you are friend to all our children. It [the sickness] is nothing. If you call on God it will finish. Let it blow there, and there, and there [pointing in different directions], let it go to the ends of the earth." As these admonitions imply, if a man does wrong God will sooner or later punish him.

The Nuer have the idea that if a man keeps in the right-does not break taboos, does not wrong others, and fulfils his obligations to spiritual beings and the ghosts and to his kith and kin-he will avoid, not all misfortune, for some misfortunes come to one and all alike, being " dung cak ", " the lot of created things ", but those extra and special misfortunes which come from " dueri ", " faults ", and are to be regarded as castigations or corrections. The word duer means " a fault " and the verbal form dwir means " to be at fault ". Like the Hebrew word hata and the Greek word hamartia (Smith, 1902, pp. 102-3; Trench, 1871, pp. 226-35) and similar words in other languages, dwir has both the sense of missing a mark aimed at-in throwing a spear, and today also in firing a rifle-and also of a dereliction, a fault which brings retribution. Nuer class as faults not only breaches of taboos, most commonly of the incest taboo, but also wrong conduct towards persons. Any failure to conform to the accepted norms of behaviour towards a member of one's family, kin, age-set, a guest, and so forth, is duer, the commission of a fault. A failure to respect them brings about evil consequences through either an expressed curse or a silent curse contained in anger and resentment, but the misfortunes which follow are regarded by Nuer as coming ultimately. from God, who supports the cause of the man who has the cuong, the right in the matter, and punishes the person who is at fault (dwir), for it is God alone who makes a curse operative. Nuer are quite explicit on this point. What then Nuer ideas on the matter amount to is, in our way of putting it, that if a man wishes to be in the right with God he must be in the right with men; that is, he must subordinate his interests as an individual to the moral order of society. A man must honour his father and his father's age-mates, a wife must obey her husband, a man must respect his wife's kin, and so on. If an individual fails to observe the rules he is, Nuer say, yong, crazy, because he not only loses the support of kith and kin but also the favour of God, so that retribution in some form or another and sooner or later is bound to follow. Therefore Nuer, who are unruly and quarrelsome people, avoid, in so far as they can restrain themselves, giving gratuitous offence. Therefore, also, a Nuer who is at

fault goes to the person he has offended, admits the fault, saying to him " ca dwir ", " I was at fault ", and he may also offer a gift to wipe out the offence. The wronged man then blesses him by spitting or blowing water on him and says that it is nothing and may the man be at peace. He thereby removes the curse and any resentment he may have in his heart. Nuer say that God sees these acts and frees the man from the consequences of his fault. Similarly, the consequences of faults which are more directly of a religious order like the breach of a ritual prohibition or the neglect of some spirit, may be avoided by a timely sacrifice, though Nuer say that sacrifice without contrition will not avail. But-and this is the point I want to bring out here-the fact that the consequences of a fault, whether it be a wrong done to another or a transgression in the eyes of God or of some spirit, can be stayed by contrition and reparation shows that the consequences of wrong-doing are not what we would call mechanical cause and effect. That this is so, and there is a moral, and therefore uncertain, element involved is further shown by another fact. In estimating the likelihood, or degree, of misfortune that may be expected to follow from an act, Nuer take deliberation into the reckoning. They distinguish between duer and gwac. The word duer, as we have seen, means a fault, and it normally implies that the fault was deliberate, though, as will be seen later, this is not always or entirely so. Gzvac means a mistake, an unintentional error and generally one of no great consequence, one in which a serious breach of religious or moral precepts is not involved, such as an unintentional lapse in manners or a slip of the tongue. It implies that the action was incorrect but inadvertent; and the man asks to be excused. In a certain sense, however, in the sense that the act was not deliberate, a more serious fault may be regarded as a mistake, even though it is at the same time a fault, and the fact that it was not a deliberate fault is held to some extent to alter the circumstances. This is very evident in affairs in which damage and compensation are involved, as, for example, in homicide. When a man kills another, how the damage is treated, both with regard to manner and to the amount of compensation demanded, much depends on whether the slaying was premeditated or was the unfortunate outcome of a sudden quarrel or an accident, God also takes deliberation into account in breaches of moral law. Thus it is not thought that children will fall sick if they have incestuous relations in their play " because the children are ignorant of having done wrong ". They know no better. Likewise, if two kinsmen have relations with the same girl, which Nuer regard as incest, without knowing that the other was making love to her, " it is not incest because each was unaware that the other was making love to her". Again, it is not thought that a man who commits incest with a kinswoman, not knowing her to be a kinswoman, will suffer any serious, or even any, consequences: "This is not incest because he was unaware of the relationship between them." If a man who respects hearts or lungs of animals eats them not knowing the nature of the meat he eats, " This is an accident and his spirit (the spirit of hearts or lungs) knows that it was not done deliberately." He may get a slight illness, but not a serious one. When I was living on the Sobat River news came to our village that some persons in an upstream village had found some meat and had cooked and eaten it, thinking that it was the flesh of some animal crocodiles had mutilated, and that they had later discovered it to be the flesh of a man whom crocodiles had killed and torn to pieces. I was told that these persons would at once have taken wal nuera medicine to cleanse them from pollution, and that while the happening was very disgusting it was unlikely that it would

cause death because the flesh was eaten in ignorance of its nature. Nuer say that God may overlook what was done in error. Similarly, they say that he will not allow a curse to harm a man who has done no deliberate wrong.

One can make too rigid distinctions between the meanings of words, and while an error or accident is clearly regarded by Nuer as different from a deliberate and premeditated act, the concepts of gwac and duer shade into each other. There is perhaps always an element of the unintentional in the worst fault, and a Nuer who has committed a bad fault is inclined to excuse himself, as we would do, by calling it a mistake; but it is also true that,

except in matters of no moment, and although the consequences may not be so severe, a wrong act is always a fault, whether it was deliberate or was due merely to forgetfulness or even involuntary, and may involve liability. Thus the children who commit incest in play, the men who in ignorance have relations with the same girl, the man who unknowingly has relations with a kinswoman, and the man who by mistake eats the flesh of his totem have all committed dueri, faults, and they cannot be certain that evil consequences will not follow. Likewise a man who inadvertently eats from a dish from which a man with whom his kin have a blood feud has eaten, and a man who appears naked before a kinswoman of his wife, not having noticed her presence, have committed faults. It may well happen that a man does not know he has done wrong till he suffers the consequences of the wrong. For example, a man takes a woman for concubine not knowing that she is distantly related to him, and his children by her die. He then makes inquiries and discovers the relationship. He sinned, like Oedipus, in ignorance, but that did not alter what he had done and, like Oedipus, he paid the penalty of his fault. Even the innocent may suffer, as the example I have just given shows. Indeed the whole human race suffers death on account of what was no more than a trivial oversight. If man had prevented the hyaena and the durra-bird from escaping from heaven there would have been no death. This is the lesson of another story recounted by Father Crazzolaral about the origin of death. Like

' Schmidt (1949, pp. 16-17). Father Crazzolaral says that this myth is 'I he known " but I have never myself heard it, and I think that, for the reasons I have given earlier when speaking of the myth about the rope from heaven to earth, it is probably Dinka or of Dinka origin. Miss Huffman (1931, P. 90) records a different story accounting for the origin of death, though it attributes death to an equally fortuitous cause. The story she tells has undoubtedly been taken over by the Nuer in the vicinity of the American Mission at Nasir from the Anuak community who live there. The point of the story does not come out in Miss Huffman's version but is clear in the Anuak version I have recorded in Anuakland (Evans-Pritchard and Beaton, 1940, pp. 56-7). In the Anuak version God threw a stone into a river so that men would die. Dog, realising the consequences of God's act, tried to persuade the people to get the stone out of the water and, when they refused to do so, himself dived after it. He was not able to lift the stone unaided, and the people being simple, merely laughed at him; so he had to be content with biting off a bit of the stone and bringing it to them. So man, thanks to dog, lives a long life, even if he dies in the end. Before this happened men used to die for a little while and then came to life again.

many similar stories it makes death follow from what appears to have been either a mere blunder or, at the worst, a trifling act of malice. When man was created God took a

piece of a gourd vessel and threw it into water to indicate that man would live for ever, just as the rind would float for ever on the water. He then sent a barren, or divorced woman to men to tell them that they would live for ever, but, in explaining this to them, she threw, instead of a piece of gourd, a potsherd into the water, and it sank. She then told men that they would all die just as the sherd sank in the water and did not rise to the surface again. In what Father Crazzolaro says is a rare variant of this myth, a dragon-fly takes the place of the woman and a piece of ambatch wood and a stone the places of the pieces of gourd and the potsherd. Almost fortuitous though these happenings were, what had happened, as we have noted before, could not be made not to have happened. Men have to accept the consequences of their actions, whether they are deliberate or not.

Hence when Nuer suffer a misfortune they ponder how it may have come about, for it follows from what has just been said, and from the fact we noted earlier that God is always in the right, that if a misfortune comes to a man it is most likely on account of some fault. This is why on such occasions one hears so often in Nuer prayers and invocations the plaint " What have we done ?" or " What evil have we done ?" So we find that in invocations at mortuary ceremonies they ask God whether the man's death was just the lot of all created things or was some special suffering he had sent them. This is also the reason why Nuer sacrifices are so often propitiations, expiations, atonements, and purifications. It is therefore probable that suffering usually entails a measure of guilt. Nuer search their consciences to discover what fault might have brought it on them, though this is more evident when a misfortune is only pending and may yet be stayed or though it has fallen may yet be mitigated, for if the fault can be determined they will know better what action to take. When the misfortune is complete and their condition can in no way be alleviated they are less interested in its cause and accept its accomplishment with sorrow and resignation.

When Nuer suffer they sometimes at once know what is the cause of their suffering because they are well aware of some particular fault. They sometimes, as we would say, tempt God by doing what they know to be wrong, hoping that it will not matter very much, such as having relations with a woman which are incestuous but not very incestuous. If trouble comes they know that this is the cause, for they have said that whether the relationship was too close for congress would be decided by any consequences of it. They now discover that it was more serious than they thought. Very often Nuer neglect their duties to their various spirits. They omit or forget to sacrifice to them or they fail to dedicate cows to them or they use their sacred cows for marriage and find that they cannot replace them or do not trouble to do so. If a misfortune falls on them they then know that it is due to the anger of a spirit. Often, however, they are in doubt about the cause and confused and bewildered. It may be that the suffering is just something, like death in old age, which had to happen. It may be due to a fetish or the evil eye. It may arise from bad intentions or evil dispositions. I will not discuss here all the possible causes of suffering nor their moral significance for Nuer. I wish only to stress that Nuer generally feel that suffering is due to some fault of theirs, and it is probable that there is always an element of this feeling in every situation of misfortune, whatever its immediate cause may be thought to be; and also that they trust that God will intervene on their behalf if they pray to him for help.

It is in the light of the cardinal concepts of what we may call Nuer mystical and moral theology of which I have given some account in this address that their prayers and sacrifices are to be interpreted.

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