



## Nuer Sociality and Current Kinship Controversy

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**Abstract.** – In his critique of sociobiology, Marshall Sahlins relies heavily on Evans-Pritchard’s best-known publications on the Nuer. He maintains that Nuer sociality is most accurately analyzed as “culture,” not “biology.” This dichotomy is the basis of his more recent statement on human kinship. By contrast, it is shown here, based on a more comprehensive attention to the pertinent literature, that Nuer sociality is largely consistent with Darwinian and Western folk notions. [*Sudan, Nuer, procreative kinship, performative kinship, Sahlins, lineage theory*]

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### Introduction

In his well-known critique of sociobiology, Marshall Sahlins (1976) relies heavily on Evans-Pritchard’s best-known publications on the Nuer of what is now South Sudan (1940, 1951). It might seem old hat to contest him, but five considerations make this attempt worthwhile at the present time. First, despite a considerable literature critical of his general analysis only a few scholars (see below) have engaged what, I hope to show, are Sahlins’ distortions of the ethnographic record on these people, and they have provided critiques mainly of what Evans-Pritchard (1945: 64) called “the agnatic principle.” Nobody has dealt with Sahlins’ other misrepresentations. Second, his analysis is based only on Evans-Pritchard’s most

readily available publications on the Nuer: it takes no account whatsoever of his lesser-known articles and monographs, or of pertinent ethnographic materials obtained by other scholars around the same time. Third, what we knew about Nuer sociality at that time has since been supplemented, by both further field research and, as noted, fresh analysis of Evans-Pritchard’s numerous books and articles. Fourth, there is, as I hope to show, a remarkable fit between Sahlins’ well-known essay on the supposed Nuer “segmentary lineage system” (Sahlins 1961) and his more recent attempted synthesis of human kinship (Sahlins 2013). Fifth, and perhaps most important, Sahlins’ allegation of a lack of fit between “a naturally given set of ‘blood relationships’ and a ‘culturally variable’ system of meaningful categories” (1976: 22f.) has resurfaced in a more recent volume, wherein he maintains a distinction between “biology” and “culture,” and asserts unequivocally that human kinship is “culture, all culture” (2013: 89). His approach, which he shares with other scholars inspired by David Schneider,<sup>1</sup> may therefore be dubbed “culturalist.” This essay<sup>2</sup>, then, is a fresh analysis of Nuer sociality largely with these considerations in mind. It

1 E. g., Carsten (1997); DeMallie (1994); Weston (1991).

2 This is being written as the present-day Nuer are being slaughtered and starved by fellow Black Africans in the new Republic of South Sudan. I must therefore retreat, not without guilt, to the safety of that bulwark of anthropological analysis, “the ethnographic present.” This entails as well ignoring the record of previous militant contact with other sub-Saharan Africans documented by Kelly (1985), Southall (1976), and others. A final limitation of this essay involves both the “tribal” name and its contextual variability, documented by Southall (1976), who employs “Naath” rather

also proffers some analyses on this topic, which no one has heretofore attempted.

My central thesis is this: Despite the textbook rendition of the Nuer as a classic – indeed, *the* classic – “patrilineal society,” their social life and thought are in fact founded upon considerations which are reasonably consistent with Western and Darwinian understandings, especially those having to do with behavioral and conceptual favoritism towards close biological kin. I argue that Sahlins’ wholesale dismissal of these understandings is unjustified. To be sure, Nuer social theory includes elements of what Sahlins (2013) calls “postnatal kinship” (more often dubbed “performative kinship”). But most of these, I hope to show, are *modeled upon* what seem to be local appreciations of procreative kinship within the nuclear family. I shall therefore call attention, throughout this essay, to Nuer ideas and those closer to home.

### Prolegomena: Semantic Centrality

I need first to deal in a general way with the phenomenon of *semantic centrality*. In the previous paragraph, I noted that certain ethnographic facts are *modeled on* other ethnographic facts. The latter may therefore be said to be *logically prior* to the former (Scheffler and Lounsbury 1971: 9). Thus for English speakers calling a Catholic Priest “father” is *modeled on* reference to one’s genitor as “my father.” In most if not all languages logical priority in kin terms is signaled by referring to their close genealogical referents, in native parlance, as the ‘real’ or ‘true’ members of their classes, a regularity noted by Firth (1936: 235) and Goldenweiser (1937: 301) eight decades ago but largely ignored in recent kinship scholarship. “Real” and “true” here are *lexical markers*, usually indicative of peripheral semantic status (*father* versus *godfather*), but here the indication is of semantic centrality. The “real” or “true” members of classes are the members *par excellence*, other members are so *with diminished intensity* and to *some degree*. Sometimes they are not *really* members at all, their membership being *as if* or *subjunctive*: thus Malinowski (1929: 495f.) tells us that Trobrianders render someone of the same matriline but not of the same local subclan as a ‘spurious kinsman.’ Similarly, kin terms may be used with a *subjunctive qualifier*, as when I say of a close male friend, “He’s like a brother to me.”

than “Nuer.” The latter, however, has become too established in the literature to avoid it here.

Such non-central usage may be said to involve *semantic patterning*: my rendition of the friend is *patterned on* that with my (real) brother. Or I might say that the former rendition is *analogous to* the latter, or that the former is *like* or *likened to* the latter, or that the former is *contingent on* the latter. Both kin terms and terms translatable as “kinship” more generally are often used without lexical marking, suggesting that their primary significance is provided by individuals locally reckoned to be “close kin” – the real McCoys, so to say. Thus, it is clear that when I refer to “my mother” I do *not* mean my Cub Scout *denmother*. The latter may be said to be a *fictive* or *specialized* kind of mother.

It should be stressed here that *the semantic centrality of procreative kinship is in accord with Darwinian theory*. Thus, when an informant tells us, for example, that his/her genetrix is the ‘true’ member of her kin class, or provides other evidence of modeling (e. g., *mother/denmother*), he/she is acting, knowingly or not, in a way consistent with genetic distinctions. And since such statements abound in the ethnographic literature, as already noted, the vast gulf posited by Sahlins between “biology” and “culture” is very considerably reduced. It is reduced still more when we find that in ongoing behavior people tend to favor close kin, in such ways as being unusually kind to them and loathe to aggress against them – characteristic which, as we shall see, are evident in the Nuer case.

### The Domestic Group

Nuer domestic grouping is grounded in what Evans-Pritchard calls “a natural family,” which, he tells us, “is often a group of persons living in a common household and cooperating in economic and other domestic undertakings” (1945: 19). The caution “often” is necessary because, in polygynous marriages, each wife has a separate hearth (see also Howell 1954: 91ff.). But in such instances collective unity is nonetheless recognized: the common husband renders it as ‘people of my hearth’ (Evans-Pritchard 1951: 127).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, at one point Evans-Pritchard (1951: 152) goes so far as to say that man’s primary kin – and presumably

<sup>3</sup> I employ single quotes in this essay to signal ethnographers’ translations of Nuer terms. I should also note here that I cite only one source per author to support my assertions. Evans-Pritchard especially, in his considerable corpus, often repeats himself, but I see no need for extensive cross-referencing, which would only lengthen this essay.

a woman's as well – “are not *mar*; kin, to him, and he does not speak of them as such. They are members of his *gol*, his family, the intimate circle, which he sees as something quite distinct from kin, just as we when we say that someone is a relative and not a member of the family.” Elsewhere Evans-Pritchard (1950: 362) has more to say on this expression: “The Nuer speak of a man's homestead as his *gol*, the primary meaning of which is the heap of smouldering cattle-dung and the hearth around it that is a feature of every [cattle] byre. It occupies the center of the byre ... In its social use the word means ‘family’, the occupants of the homestead ...” In still another place Evans-Pritchard (1946: 252) renders *gol* as ‘family and home’ (see also Howell 1954: 71ff.).

Moreover, husband and wife, at least in monogamous unions, sleep together in a separate hut (personal communication from Evans-Pritchard to H. T. Fischer, quoted in Fischer 1978: 184; see also Seligman and Seligman 1932: 227). But Huffman (1931: 19) reports otherwise. His words:

The men and boys of the [Nuer] village usually sleep in the barn, which is to be found in most villages. A house is set aside for the sleeping quarters of the girls. The women and little children sleep in the houses.

Now Fox (1967: 38f.) has argued that in polygynous communities it is erroneous to speak of nuclear families, where what we have, he alleges, “are ... several mother-child units, ... and one male [is] responsible for them, circulating among them as it were.” But this emphasis on behavior ignores human cognition. The Nuer indeed conceptualize nuclear family dyads in symbolic if not residential terms. If a woman conceives under locally construed inappropriate conditions, as when she is still suckling another of her children, she must be ritually purified “before members of the immediate family may safely eat or drink” (Hutchinson 1992b: 496; see also Evans-Pritchard 1956: 179f.). In the same vein, the milk of a sacrificed cow – the normal sacrificial animal is an ox – may be consumed only by the sacrificer and his immediate kin (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 180). And the Seligmans report a ceremony the purpose of which is “to prevent the dead [man] from coming ... [back] to fetch ... the living, *particularly his wives and children* ...” (Seligman and Seligman 1932: 235, emphasis added). Finally, in cases of incest it is not only the offenders who are magically endangered but, as well, their children, “and sometimes also their nearest of kin” (Hutchinson

1985: 640, fn 8; see also Evans-Pritchard 1935: 41).

These considerations suggest that a mystical bond is held to exist among the members of a nuclear family, with the very last suggesting an attenuation of this bond with regard to kin less closely related (see the following section). Other Nuer usages imply a comparable bond, albeit restricted to husband and wife. Thus, Evans-Pritchard tells us that newly initiated young men are not “allowed contact with pregnant women *or their husbands*” (cited in Beidelman 1966: 460, emphasis added; see also Huffman 1931: 32). I return to this below. According to Huffman (1929: 27), a “wristlet of black and white beads” should be “worn by [a] man whose wife is pregnant to prevent him from sores and cuts.”<sup>4</sup> A married couple is held to be dangerous to a woman about to give birth, for the pair is supposed to carry a substance which “is considered to affect the lying-in woman through her discharges” (Seligman and Seligman 1932: 221).<sup>5</sup>

## The Personal Kindred

Hutchinson tells us that *mar* – she renders it as *maar* – refers to both primary and secondary kin (1996: 243) – as indeed Evans-Pritchard does elsewhere (1951: 6):

All persons with whom a man [or woman] acknowledges any kind of kinship, through however many other persons, are *mar*; kin, to him [or her] ... [H]e [or she] speaks of any or all [such persons] ... as *jimarida*, “my kinsmen.” The term *mar* includes relatives through the mother ... and through the father.

Also pertinent here is Evans-Pritchard's report (1946: 247) that the Nuer language has expressions which he translates as ‘father's side’ and ‘mother's side’ in reckoning kin connection, and that this conceptual opposition can also be id-

4 This would seem to imply the premise that when a woman's body is deformed by pregnancy her husband or lover too is at risk of body deformation. The fact that the woman is deformed *outwardly*, the husband or lover *inwardly*, may also be significant (see Rosaldo and Atkinson 1975 on such contrasts). Elsewhere Huffman (1931: 7) tells us that the color contrasts are more extensive.

5 That Fox's critique of nuclear family theory is unduly limiting was suggested by myself (Shapiro 1982) and Read (e. g., 1984) around the same time several decades ago, and by Scheffler (1966) before that. But the argument really needs to be fleshed out. I hope to do this in a future essay. For a partial effort in this direction see Shapiro and Read (2018).

iomized as “on the side of the [cattle] byre” and, “the side of the hut,” respectively (Evans-Pritchard 1946: 251). By these means, presumably, “it is possible to describe any relationship by combinations of the [nuclear] family terms” (Evans-Pritchard 1951: 169). The similarity to American and Darwinian kin-reckoning should be clear, though at least in the Nuer case this similarity is lessened by the various kinds of performative kinship discussed below.

Indeed, this genealogical sense is so refined among the Nuer that their language contains separate terms for a paternal half-brother (“father’s son”) and his maternal counterpart (“mother’s son”), but only the latter expression applies to a full brother. Moreover, this expression “is also used in a general way as a friendly term of address” toward an unrelated individual (Seligman and Seligman 1932: 219). The parallels with the metaphorical use of “brother” in English are obvious. In both cases, there is a hint of postnatal kinship, though at least in English there is no indication of actual kinship. Whether the Nuer reckon such a ‘brother’ as *mar* is unclear, though I shall hazard the guess that they do *not*, except possibly as a courtesy.

A further comparative point can be made here. In Nuer conceptualization women are thus associated with domesticity (“on the side of the hut”), men with the wider world implied in bridewealth distribution, as well as the spiritual world of animal sacrifice (“on the side of the byre”) (Hutchinson 1980: 374). Similarly, sacrificial ritual in most forms of Christianity is a male monopoly, and even in today’s “liberated” circles, dating involves much the same distinction as found among the Nuer. Thus a woman is said to be “taken out” (of the home) into the wider world, in which the man is usually expected to pay for dinner and/or other expenses. The woman, for her part, may reciprocate with a “home-cooked meal.”

Moreover, to return to the Nuer, “[a]lthough any relative of a man [or woman] is *mar* to him [or her], the word most frequently refers to close relatives only, and on the paternal side ... an agnatic relationship deriving from any forebear as far back as, but not beyond, the ... great grandfather ... [I]t is for descendants of the great grandfather that specific kinship terms are used in their primary reference” (Evans-Pritchard 1951: 7). In the same vein, Evans-Pritchard (1950: 154f.) reports a distinction between ‘real kin,’ in Nuer parlance, and others, presumably reflective of these genealogical considerations (see above). Hutchinson (1996: 123) notes expressions which she translates as

‘cognatic kinship’ and ‘close relatives’ (see also Howell 1954: 104, 110). Thus the Nuer would seem to have a notion of what has been called “a personal kindred” – much as we do – indeed, which is probably universal, as Sahlins (1963: 41) himself once opined (see also Scheffler 1973: 758). Moreover, it appears that, within this kindred, “close relatives” provide the semantically central significance of local notions of kinship – again, something consistent with both Darwinian and American folk notions.<sup>6</sup>

Evans-Pritchard (1940: 106) tells us that five generations – rendered in the Nuer language by a term he translates as ‘steps’ – are recognized in kin classification – one’s own, that of one’s parents, children, grandparents, and grandchildren, though for certain purposes people calculate as far as twelve generations. In any case, Evans-Pritchard (1951: 40) notes that, in the Nuer assessment of possibly incestuous marriages, “the father the man and woman are from [each other] ... genealogically the less seriously incest between them is regarded, especially if they live in different districts ...” (see also Hutchinson 1985: 638). This last modification, to be sure, is a postnatal one, but it is subordinate to genealogical considerations.

The power effectively to curse an individual decreases with genealogical distance from him or her (Evans-Pritchard 1949a: 288f.). In the same vein, when a man dies his widow should marry one of his close agnates, but “if there are no brothers [of the deceased] ... but only cousins, they have less control over the widow and less sense of obligation to the dead [husband] ...” (Evans-Pritchard 1945: 17f.). And, if someone entitled to a portion of the bridewealth associated with a girl’s marriage is deceased, his/her son or daughter inherits the rights of the deceased individual, not kin at further genealogical removes (Evans-Pritchard 1946: 257).

Genealogical proximity can be manipulated for tactical reasons. Here is Evans-Pritchard on this and other fictions by which social distance between people is lessened:

It is a common Nuer practice when addressing people and speaking publicly about them to use words which denote a closer relationship between them and the speaker than their actual relationship ... This is commonly

6 Evans-Pritchard (1951: 156) provides a third meaning for *mar* – “peace” – again likely linked to maternal (and paternal?) succor. Huffman (1929: 31) mentions yet another significance, also probably linked to close kinship – ‘friendship.’

done with kinship terms and, also, in defining the status of a person in his tribe. Nuer do not emphasize that a man is a stranger or [a] Dinka by alluding to him as such in ordinary social life ... In the same way people do not refer to an adopted Dinka as *Jaang* [a term of derision, usually applied to foreign peoples]; for he is by adoption a brother ... (1940: 234f.).

A *mar* relationship may also be feigned when the father of a girl wishes, for other reasons, to reject one of her suitors (Evans-Pritchard 1934: 12).

The converse process also takes place among the Nuer. Thus Evans-Pritchard (1951: 31) reports that individuals previously considered to be kin can be rendered as non-kin – he translates the native expression as ‘We split kinship’ –, but apparently this can be done only between genealogically distant kin, often so as to enable them to marry and/or to cleanse them from incest. Something like this seems to happen when an individual dies, when “a blood sacrifice ... obliterates ... kinship between the living and the dead” (Beidelman 1981: 146, citing Evans-Pritchard).<sup>7</sup>

It is important here to emphasize the bilateral nature of Nuer kinship because Sahlins (1976: 31f.) would stress its relatively superficial patriliney – of which more below – and how this contravenes biological considerations.

Another way by which the nature of Nuer kinship is obscured in the literature is through the conflation of defining and accompanying characteristics. Thus Evans-Pritchard (1937: 213), after listing the genealogical positions which entitle an individual to bridewealth payments, baldly asserts that “[k]inship is legally defined ... by reference to these payments.” This appears to support Sahlins, but in fact, the word “defined” is misleading. Nuer kinship is in fact *defined* primarily by genealogical considerations, which stipulate who is entitled to bridewealth (for a similar analytical error, see Hutchinson 1996: 250f.).

### Matrilateral Kinship among the Nuer

The contrastive term to *mar* is *nei ti gwa*, which Evans-Pritchard (1949b: 94) translates as “unrelat-

ed people.” He notes elsewhere (Evans-Pritchard 1945: 5) that a Nuer man sometimes renders his daughter as an “unrelated person.” Sahlins (1976: 32) takes this literally, as part of his argument that human kinship is independent of biological considerations. But a little reflection will show how absurd this contention is. A man’s daughter will almost certainly become someone else’s wife and, with almost equal certainty, a third individual’s mother. And, despite the much-ballyhooed “patriliney” of the Nuer<sup>8</sup> – of which more below – maternal connection is of the highest order of importance in their social life. Indeed, the word *mar* has the further (and semantically central?) significance of ‘my mother,’ according to Evans-Pritchard (1934: 29; but cf. Hutchinson 1996: 179). It is as if maternal succor is conceptualized as the model for kinship relations in general – as with English *kind*, obviously cognate to *kin*, and the expression “the milk of human kindness.” So when a Nuer man refers to his daughter as an “unrelated person” he is not to be taken literally; rather, he is *likening* her to such an individual, presumably because, on marriage and after an initial period of remaining in the vicinity of her parents (Evans-Pritchard 1948: 39), she often leaves her natal locale and moves to her husband’s,<sup>9</sup> although uxori-local residence seems to be at least as common (Evans-Pritchard 1933: 46, 48; Hutchinson n. d.: 14). The most that can be made of this metaphor is that it expresses the conflation of kinship and co-residence in Nuer thought, a point to which I return below.

Indeed, the Nuer have an expression for matrilateral kin which Evans-Pritchard (1933: 46) translates as “children of girls” and “children of daughters” (see also Hutchinson n. d.: 3). “It is these kin who make up the majority of residents in Nuer communities,” as Evans-Pritchard (1937: 211) himself seems to observe at one point and several commentators<sup>10</sup> have noted, though they are attached to a smaller agnatic core. It is this

7 Hutchinson (1996: 179) reports a ceremony – apparently not the same one noted by Evans-Pritchard – whereby a bond between “patrilineal relations” may be dissolved, adding that no such dissolution could take place, which involve “descent connections through women.” But she does not tell us which “patrilineal relations” can be thus affected. I suspect that the ceremony in question has to do with the transformation of agnatic *mar* into *buth* (see below).

8 It could be argued that the “father” in question is the man who has paid bridewealth and not the genitor. But Sahlins (1976: 35f.) makes too much of this point: as we shall see, the biological father is of considerable significance in Nuer thought.

9 Evans-Pritchard (1937: 212f.); Howell (1954: 96); Huffman (1931: 39); Hutchinson (n. d.: 31).

10 Buchler (1963); Gough (1971: 103); Holy (1979a: 41); Singer (1973: 86).

core, which provides the illusion of “lineages” (see below and Hutchinson n. d.: 2f.).<sup>11</sup>

### The Importance of the Genitor in Nuer Kinship

Thus Nuer “patriliny” hardly negates the importance of maternal connection – another of Sahlins’ arguments (1976: 30–32) which is entirely unfounded. But even this “patriliny,” according to Sahlins, has little or nothing to do with locally posited biological connection. Thus, he maintains that “the biological father is merely the genitor of [a woman’s] children,” and that “the true or legal father” is the one who pays bridewealth (Sahlins 1976: 35f.). There are misrepresentations here which cry out for corrective.

Both the bridewealth-payer and the genitor (if not the same individual) are called *gwan*, which means ‘owner.’<sup>12</sup> There is no information in the literature on the Nuer regarding semantic centrality within the category so designated, so I contacted two scholars who have worked with East African pastoralists on the matter – Christopher Ehret of UCLA and Douglas Johnson, an independent scholar who specializes in the history of northeast Africa. The latter told me, in an email communication dated 22.03.2003, that in these populations the ‘father’ category is not subdivided, and the pertinent native term is applied to *both* the bridewealth-payer and the genitor. Professor Ehret, in an email communication dated 20.01.2013, noted that *gwan*, or a cognate, is a ‘father’ term in many Nilotic languages, and that, in one of them, “it means ‘father’ *who is not one’s own*” (my emphasis). Whether this is true in the Nuer case is unclear. So I conclude, *contra* Sahlins, that there is no evidence that the bridewealth-payer rather than the genitor is the “true” father in the Nuer case.

Moreover, Sahlins’ use of the term “merely” in reference to the genitor is misleading: such an individual, even if not married to his children’s mother, is of very considerable importance among the Nuer. Thus Huffman’s Nuer-English dictionary (1929: 43) contains an entry which he translates as “to pay fine for illegitimate child,” adding that “4 cows are paid and then father may claim child” (see also Evans-Pritchard 1945: 20; Hutchinson

1996: 34). Thus, in certain circumstances genitorship *per se*, abetted by a small payment, is sufficient to establish what Evans-Pritchard (1945: 19) calls “the legal family.” Evans-Pritchard (1951: 150) tells us that an individual “recognizes all the near kin of his genitor as his own kin,” even if he has not married his mother, and he writes of a posited “mystical tie” between such a genitor and his offspring (see also Howell 1954: 112). This tie is consistent with the application of the usual incest taboos (see below) to the kin of the genitor (Evans-Pritchard 1949b: 86; Hutchinson 1996: 173), as well as the expectation that “children [will] ... resemble ... their genitors in both [physical] features and character” (Hutchinson 1996: 178). The genitor, moreover, is entitled to an especially designated cow upon his daughter’s marriage and his son’s initiation into manhood through scarification;<sup>13</sup> failure to provide this cow, Evans-Pritchard (1951: 87) tells us, endangered the child’s health and fertility – another reflection, it would seem, of the “mystical bond” between genitor and offspring (see also Howell 1954: 112). The right to receive this cow, Evans-Pritchard (1946: 257) notes, “takes precedence over all other claims.”

There is more. Thus “a man may sacrifice a bull in honour of his genitor” (Evans-Pritchard (1951: 150), and if the latter, upon his death, had no children for whose mother he paid bridewealth, the former “may marry a wife to his name” (1951: 150; see also Hutchinson 1992a: 296) – i. e., make his genitor what Evans-Pritchard calls a “ghost-father” to his own children (see below). A genitor, Evans-Pritchard (1951: 150) further notes, “is not likely to refuse his natural son’s appeal for help, and if he can, he will assist him to marry” – presumably by providing part of the bridewealth (147). Evans-Pritchard (1949b: 87) also tells us that a genitor who has not paid bridewealth for the mother of his children nonetheless sometimes rears them, and Southall (1986), in a re-analysis of Evans-Pritchard’s materials, suggest that this occurs with considerable frequency. Hutchinson (1980: 380) notes that biological father and son are said to be linked by “blood,” though she adds that little is known about Nuer ideas concerning the male contribution to the fetus (382).

An individual’s relationship with his/her genitor would seem to be more affectionate than with the legal father, i. e., the mother’s husband. There is fre-

11 I should note here that my analysis of matrilineal kinship among the Nuer is highly abbreviated. I say a bit more about it below.

12 Evans-Pritchard (1945: 42); Howell (1954: 245); Huffman (1929: 17).

13 See below and Evans-Pritchard (1945: 23–25); Hutchinson (1985: 630); Howell (1954: 248); Seligman and Seligman (1932: 220).

quent mention in the literature on the Nuer of tensions and even homicides involving close agnates (e. g., Evans-Pritchard 1940: 156; Hutchinson 1996: 258), whereas I have been unable to find even a single reference to conflict with a genitor who has not paid bridewealth. Thus Evans-Pritchard (1945: 44), in a general statement of the close relationship between genitor and offspring, tells us that a man is likely to favor his biological sons over his legal sons. Moreover, there is the consideration that if a “ghost father” dies without legal heirs, one of his biological sons is required to enter into a “ghost-marriage” (see below) in his genitor’s name, in order to produce such heirs (Evans-Pritchard 1945: 9). There is, finally, a strong suggestion that a genitor may usurp parts of the legal father’s role. Here is Evans-Pritchard (1945: 43) on the matter:

Often there is opposition between the interests of the legal family and the interests of these other forms of bi-domestic groups, i. e. between the interests of the group united by marriage and descent and the interests of the procreative group united by sentiment and common residence and life. A child is a member of both groups and it often happens that the privileges he derives from membership of the one clash with his feelings towards the people of the other.

Here the position of a young man is very different from that of his sister. The former is likely to be compelled “by self-interest” to reside eventually with his legal father’s people, for they have a share of the local herd of cattle, from which they obtain bridewealth and other resources (Evans-Pritchard 1945: 27f.). Girls, by contrast, have no comparable rights of inheritance and, unlike their brothers, they “may be married from the homes of their genitors ...” (28). Although a man’s name is generated from that of his legal father (son-of-X), particularly when he is in the latter’s village, he “might be called after ... [his] genitor” in the latter’s village, though Evans-Pritchard (1945: 39) cautions that he “cannot assert [with certainty] that this is so ... .” Yet in the very next paragraph, he tells us that “when a man marries a wife to the name of ... [a paternal] kinsman a son born of this union is in ordinary social life called after the man ... who has begotten the son” (39). Hence he writes of the “ties between sons and their genitors being based on sentiment and common domestic interests ... (40; see also Scheffler 1973: 754).

### Maternal Favoritism and Stepparental Callousness

So, Nuer fathers favor their biological offspring – a conclusion entirely consistent with Darwinian theory. Nuer mothers do much the same but stepparents, by contrast, are frequently unkind to their stepchildren – both findings, again, consistent with biological considerations. Here is Evans-Pritchard (1951: 158) on these matters:

Nuer say that if your father has died while you are still a child and his brother has taken your mother in leviratic union he will be kind to you for your mother’s sake while you are a child, but when you grow up he will try to bully you and will be stingy with you. He will favour his own children and neglect you. Even if you are older than his own sons, he may try to obtain wives for them first. What is worse, he may try to use your father’s cattle and the cattle of your sisters’ marriages for this purpose ... while you are still little and unable to protect your own [interests]. His wives may give food to their sons ... while you ... have to wait for your portion ... (see also Evans-Pritchard, cited in Beidelman 1966: 457; Hutchinson 1985: 634).

Such preferential treatment by a woman of her own children is echoed by Evans-Pritchard elsewhere (1936: 261f.) as well as by Hutchinson (1980: 374). In divorce, a weaned child resides with his/her father, but the mother has the right to reside with them later (Evans-Pritchard 1945: 16f.; Hutchinson 1990: 403). Moreover, the incidence of divorce is apparently lessened by a woman’s fear of having to leave her children. “For it was generally assumed that the abandoned child would be subtly, if not blatantly, spurned and ignored by any ... stepmother” (Hutchinson 1996: 183).

### Adoption and Suckling

Adoption is of considerable importance to the Nuer. This usually involves the neighboring Dinka, sometimes voluntarily but often through capture in the course of raiding (see esp. Johnson 1982: 186f.). Thus Evans-Pritchard (1940: 219) tells us that while Dinka residents in a Nuer household are presented outside the household *as if* they are kin to its natal members, they are referred to by a term of derogation within it (see also Seligman and Seligman 1932: 211f.). This suggests that their status as kin is at least questionable – an interpretation supported by Evans-Pritchard’s report that adoption establishes kinship only within the community (1949b: 86f.), and that

an adopted individual is said, presumably in Nuer parlance, *not* to be a ‘real’ or ‘pure’ member of his/her clan (Evans-Pritchard 1933: 42). It also suggests that adopted kin, like stepkin, are treated with some callousness, something consistent with Darwinian theory. In the same vein, “the Nuer son or daughter takes precedence over the captive Dinka in being allowed to be married first” (Huffman 1931: 71). Similarly, a Dinka man in this position could expect to be given in marriage “a blind or lame daughter whom no one [else] wanted to marry ... [N]o one would give a nice girl to a Dinka ...” (Evans-Pritchard 1933: 53, fn 1). And despite the immense importance which Nuer place on bridewealth, an adopted daughter may be given in marriage “for [a] few or even no cattle” (Hutchinson 1996: 261). Moreover, links through adoption are regarded as less important than genealogical ties in assessing whether or not a particular marriage is incestuous (Evans-Pritchard 1949b: 90).<sup>14</sup>

Hutchinson (1996: 62) further tells us that “[a] foster mother who merely cared for, but never suckled, another woman’s child established no permanent bond of *maar*, or kinship with that child.” This suggests that suckling is held to establish kinship among the Nuer (see also Evans-Pritchard 1933: 45), although we are not told whether kinship through suckling is lexically marked so as to indicate secondary semantic status, as it is elsewhere (Shapiro 2017: 250f.). We *do* know that suckled milk is held by the Nuer to be transformed into blood within the child’s body (Hutchinson 1996: 178f.).

## Secondary Forms of Marriage

There is the further question of how we should regard the other forms of marriage that Evans-Pritchard reported for the Nuer. The key point is that these other forms are semantically *secondary*: they are *modeled on* the forms already discussed, they occur *only* under certain *contingent* conditions, and they have an *as if* or *subjunctive* character. One of these has already been mentioned, i. e., what Evans-Pritchard (1951: 108–111) calls “ghost marriage,” whereby a man is said to marry a woman “in the name of” a deceased kinsman. Evans-Pritchard makes it plain that the “ghost hus-

band” is reckoned *for some purposes* to be the father of his widow’s children. His words:

This is a vicarious marriage. The vicarious husband acts *as though* he were the ... [legal] husband in the ritual that precedes and brings about marriage, and in domestic duties when he and his “wife” begin to share a home. In his physiological and domestic roles he is [the] husband in all but the strict legal sense. In everyday usage, people speak of him as the husband of the wife ... (Evans-Pritchard 1945: 6; emphasis added).

It seems a safe guess that the “ghost husband” has the usual rights and advantages that accrue to the genitor (see above). It also bears noting that “ghost marriage” occurs only when a man dies without heirs (Evans-Pritchard 1945: 5–14; Hutchinson n. d.: 19–21), i. e., that it is a *contingent* form of union. This is consistent with Evans-Pritchard’s report that genealogical links through such marriages are deemed less salient than corresponding links in orthodox marriages in the reckoning of incest taboos (Evans-Pritchard 1949b: 90).

Sahlins (1976: 35) proffers Nuer “ghost marriage” as yet another example of the independence of human sociality from biological considerations, but, yet again, he fails to see the subjunctivity and contingency it involves. This is also true of his treatment of the marriage of two women among the Nuer. Such a marriage, Evans-Pritchard tells us, occurs when “the woman-husband marries her wife *in exactly the same way as a man marries a woman*” (1951: 108; emphasis added). This way of putting it in itself suggests *modeling* – an interpretation supported by Evans-Pritchard’s further report that such a woman “is generally barren, and for this reason counts *in some respects* as a man.”<sup>15</sup> Beidelman, surveying the literature on the Nuer, expands on ideas associated with barren females:

Sterile women sometimes *approach* masculine roles as magical experts and curers and as “husbands” to women; rarely they are even ... camp leaders. Rarely, a woman may even be a prophet, *but only if she is a barren, old woman who consequently resembles a man* ... Similarly, a sterile cow may be substituted at a sacrifice in place of an ox ... (Beidelman 1966: 461; emphases added to indicate peripheral semantic status and/or contingency).

All of which instances a remarkably common notion that what bars women from full participation in social life is their involvement in carnal repro-

<sup>14</sup> Evans-Pritchard is not always consistent, especially on the subject of the treatment of adopted Dinka (see, e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1935: 80f. for contrary statements). Still, I believe the gravamen of his analysis favors my own interpretation.

<sup>15</sup> Evans-Pritchard (1951: 108; emphasis added); see also Huffman (1931: 61); Hutchinson (1992a: 296).



duction. It is as if the Nuer have anticipated certain sectors of current feminist theory and – especially pertinent in the present context – sexual selection theory as well.

It bears emphasis that a Nuer woman who “counts as a man” under certain circumstances can be construed as “counting as a woman” in others. A remarkable example of this is provided by Hutchinson (1996: 233), in an account of a court case in which both a woman and a man lay claim to paternal rights over a child. The judge “stressed that he had great difficulty reaching a verdict, [but] he ultimately decided to deny the woman’s paternity claim in favor of the man’s. ‘What woman,’ he asked, ‘has ever produced sperm?’” For this Nuer man, at least, gender classification is *primarily* based on physiological attributes, contrary to a very great deal of current Western thought, including “third sex” theory in anthropology (but see Besnier 1994).

A Nuer woman can also “count as a man” in the fabrication of genealogies, which sometimes transform mother/child links into father/child ones.<sup>16</sup> It is even said that a woman so rendered as a genealogical male “has become a man” (Evans-Pritchard 1951: 16). But this is nothing more than a euphemism. Thus Evans-Pritchard (1949b: 91) notes a case wherein a man was allowed to marry a woman whose legal father was a woman of the man’s own agnatic category – something which, he assures us, could not have happened had the legal father been a man.

### Kinship through Affinity

Howell’s glossary indicates that the Nuer ‘parent-in-law’ terms are lexically marked versions of the corresponding ‘parent’ terms (Howell 1954: 248), as is the case in English. Correspondingly, there is evidence that Nuer affines become kin over time, apparently with the birth of a child to the married couple (Evans-Pritchard 1933: 47), and that this bond is retained even in the case of divorce (Evans-Pritchard 1950: 365; Hutchinson 1992b: 494). There is thus some indication of postnatal kinship, though the lexical data suggest that in this instance it is *modeled on* procreative kinship. This interpretation is supported by Howell’s statement that when a woman is taken as a concubine rather than a wife, there is a relationship between the kin of the woman and the man “which is *patterned on*

*kinship*” (1954: 162, emphasis added; see also Evans-Pritchard 1950: 373). In the same vein, as regards ordinary marriage, sexual relations with a kinsman’s wife are said to be incestuous, because “[i]t is felt that the wife of a kinsman is *in some degree* also a kinswoman, especially as a potential mother of kinsmen in the next generation” (Howell 1954: 164; emphasis added). So, again we have postnatal kinship, and again it is a diminished form of procreative kinship.

### Kinship and Co-residence

In a Nuer myth quoted by Beidelman (1966: 462) a man becomes kin to another man simply by living with him, and, consequently, their children are prohibited from marrying each other. Indeed, co-residence in the same village seems to trump procreative ties at a certain point: thus Evans-Pritchard (1950: 370) tells us that “what is significant is less the category or degree of kinship than the fact of living together ...” (see also Gough 1971; Southall 1986). Hutchinson (1992b: 497) corroborates this point with a particular experience in the field:

I once overheard several men gossiping about a young man who was having an affair with an “unrelated” girl who, nevertheless, formed part of his ... household. Surprised by the vehemence of their disapproval, I asked whether the couple’s behaviour was really so scandalous ... “But it’s incestuous”, one of them replied. “It’s as bad as if you ..., after having eaten in all our homes, were to accept a lover from our village (see also Hutchinson 1985: 638).

Hutchinson (1992b: 497) makes the logic crystal-clear: “Here ... we see the distinction drawn between ‘relatives’ (that is, people from whom one may seek food but not sex) and ‘non-relatives’ (or those for whom the reverse is true).” In this regard, the marital relationship has a liminal quality: Here is Huffman (1931: 41) on the matter:

A wife never eats with her husband nor sees him eat. And he, while he knows she eats her food each day, never sees any sign of it. The custom is usually observed for two or three years. Then they may eat together.

Presumably this is when they are considered kin, probably through the birth of children, though it is unclear whether this determination is made before or as a result of commensality (see below).

In the same vein, if a Nuer man wants to marry a Dinka girl captured in battle, “he ... hands her

16 Evans-Pritchard (1933: 46); see also Hutchinson (1996: 262); Southall (1986).

over to another man to bring up outside his village ‘because if she were to remain in his homestead she would become his daughter’. Generally, a captured girl is brought up a member of her captor’s household and is regarded as his daughter” (Evans-Pritchard 1949b: 87). And in considering whether or not a proposed marriage is incestuous “it is sometimes held to be less questionable if the [prospective] bride and bridegroom do not belong to the same residential groups” (Evans-Pritchard 1949b: 90).

It is not clear whether, in this conflation of kinship and co-residence, the latter is modeled on the former. A third example, however, sheds more light on the matter. Thus, Evans-Pritchard also writes of “the mythological creation of kinship *fiction*s” (1940: 228; emphasis added). In one myth a man was suckled with another man and eventually lived with him *as a brother* (232; emphasis added). In another story these same two men “shared a hut together and became *like* brothers ...” (232; emphasis added). The suggestion, then, is that the possibility of establishing a kinship tie through co-suckling and/or co-residence is recognized, but such ties *are patterned on* those stemming from procreation.

### Kinship Stemming from Male Initiation

The same is true for kinship established through co-participation in male initiation, which situates a man in the age-set system. Thus Howell (1954: 84) refers to “an association similar to kinship” connected with the scarification of boys around puberty. It may well be significant that Hutchinson (1996: 185) refers to such links as “blood bonds,” because she tells us (171) that “[b]onds of maternity ... were forged solely through a ... contribution of blood ... .” Evans-Pritchard (1940: 258; emphases added) writes of a “mystical union” among men who were scarified together, and “an *almost* physical bond, *analogous to that of true kinship, for they have shed their blood together*” (see also Howell 1954: 84; Hutchinson 1996: 250). In any case, the pertinent expression for men in such a relationship is *maar ricā* (Hutchinson 1992b: 494), and Huffman’s Nuer-English dictionary renders *ric* as ‘age or class’ (Huffman 1929: 42). Hence ‘age kinship’ is a lexically marked and *specialized* form of ‘true’ kinship, *mar* pure and simple, just as *godmother*, *step-mother*, and *mother-in-law* are, for English speakers, specialized kinds of *mother*; pure and simple.

This interpretation is borne out by marital restrictions. Thus, a man may not marry the daughter of another man with whom he was scarified in his youth because “she is his ‘daughter’ and he is her ‘father’” (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 257). But this prohibition is sometimes breached, in which case the relationship is said to be *not* ‘incest,’ in Nuer parlance, but rather ‘*like* “incest”’ (Evans-Pritchard 1949b: 89, emphasis added). Moreover, this form of kinship is extended:

The members of a man’s father’s age-set are his “fathers” ... The sons of a man’s set are his “sons” ... The wives of members of a man’s father’s set are his “mothers,” and the wives of members of his sons’ sets are his “daughters.” All members of a man’s own set are likewise “brothers” ... (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 258; see also Evans-Pritchard 1936: 259–269).

Note that all of these are *native* extension rules.<sup>17</sup> As Evans-Pritchard (1940: 259) puts it, such a system “is comparable to the classificatory system of kinship nomenclature in its assimilation of social relations to a few elementary types.”

Members of the same age-set eat together until they marry (Hutchinson 1992b: 494) and, although there is no absolute rule, they tend to make war together (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 254). Hutchinson (1992b: 494) has shown the juxtaposition of these ideas:

The “blood brotherhood” forged among age mates at initiation ... carries with it expectations of uninhibited commensality. The “blood” which men gain from their common bowl is, in fact, explicitly equated with that later expected in acts of mutual defense ... Indeed, one ... youth [I interviewed] went so far as to suggest that food-sharing, in itself, creates a quasi-blood bond ... “If I have a little food and I share it with you, that means we are brothers. Once we have eaten together, we should not marry each other’s daughters nor kill each another” (see Evans-Pritchard 1936: 264 for a remarkably similar statement).

This is a remarkable passage. Blood from the mother (and genitor?) helps form the fetus, as we have seen, and, as we have also seen, close kin

<sup>17</sup> This bears emphasis. The extension rules proffered by Harold Scheffler and others are often taken to exist only in the heads of some anthropologists. But the plain fact is that there is abundant evidence in the ethnographic record that such rules are employed endogenously, albeit according to what Read (2018, and elsewhere) calls “kin term product” logic. Scheffler has addressed the matter, especially in his analysis of the sociality of the Baniata of the Solomon Islands (1972). Read provides several further examples, as does Shapiro (2017).

normally and properly eat together, apparently producing more blood through commensality. Nor is the notion that the collaborative spilling of blood especially remarkable as a kinship-forming (or kinship-affirming) act, for this is just what usually happens in Nuer sacrifice (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 197–230). But although practices of this last sort are, it would seem, usually if not always *modeled on* procreative kinship, they are also associated with what might be dubbed “anti-kinship.” Thus, Evans-Pritchard (cited in Beidelman 1968: 125) notes that newly scarified men are prohibited from having contact with sexually active people, because such people “are likely to be sexually unclean” (Evans-Pritchard 1936: 241). This applies especially to pregnant women (1936: 241; see also Huffman 1931: 32). Beidelman (1968: 125) further notes that in the course of initiation the scarified young men are cared for by boys, nursing mothers, and post-menopausal women – three classes of people ideally dissociated from sexual relations. They are guarded by “[o]ne or two men ... who abstain from sexual relations for the time” (Evans-Pritchard 1936: 242).

Burton (1974: 529–532), working with the publications of Evans-Pritchard and other earlier scholars, points out a number of parallels between newly initiated young men and menstruating women. Both are secluded from normal social relations, including sexual contact. Both are considered polluting. Just as women during their periods may not milk cows, the quintessential feminine subsistence activity, so initiates may have no contact with oxen, whose care is quintessentially manly. Initiates are supposed to cover themselves with clothes worn by menstruating women. A post-menopausal woman, by contrast, may have cuts incised into her forehead that are similar to the ones inflicted on initiates – this when her youngest son is cut, when, apparently, she “counts as a man.” Paradoxically, after cutting, initiates are metaphorically rendered as ‘hornless cattle,’ suggestive of castration, but the operation is nonetheless alleged to enhance their powers of insemination, i. e., of generating further kinship (see also Huffman 1931: 29–33). I would suggest the following set of parallels between all this and ideas closer to home:

Scarification	Stigmata of the Crucifixion
Antithetical to sex	Jesus’ “sinless” life
“Rebirth” into manhood	Resurrection
Enhanced powers of insemination	Agricultural abundance <sup>18</sup>

### The Limitations of Nuer Patriliney

As already noted, Sahlins argues that unilineal descent grouping contravenes genetic theory, since an individual is equally related genetically to each of his/her parents. This gives the impression that such groups provide the *sole* kinship constructs in their ethnographic contexts. But, as we have seen, this is anything but the case, and it can only be sustained for the Nuer by taking seriously some of Evans-Pritchard’s most unwarranted remarks. Thus Evans-Pritchard tells us that “Nuer speak fluently in terms of lineages” (1940: 195). But, as Kuper (1982: 84) and McKinnon (2000: 55f.) have noted, this fluency has to do with space rather than genealogy, as the expression “lineage” might suggest. Here again is Evans-Pritchard: “A lineage is *thok mac*, the hearth, or *thok dwiel*, the entrance to the hut ... [B]ut in normal everyday usage Nuer employ the word *cieng*” (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 195). Now *cieng* is polysemic, but all its usages have purely *spatial* reference (Evans-Pritchard 1933: 21–24). Evans-Pritchard (1933: 21) glosses it as ‘home’ but he notes that it may be used to refer to any locale with which the speaker (or individual spoken about) may be associated, regardless of level of generality (21–24) – much as I might say that my home is the co-operative apartment I own, or that it is New York City, or that it is the United States. But none of these usages has a genealogical referent.

In his very first publication on Nuer sociality, Evans-Pritchard employs the word “lineage” and tells us that the native equivalent is *thok dwiel* (1933: 28), which, as we have just seen, has a spatial reference. But this is not all. Here once more is Evans-Pritchard (1933: 28):

*Thok dwiel* is ... a relative term since its extension depends on the particular person who is selected as the point of departure. Thus if we begin with the father then the *thok dwiel* will include only sons and daughters, but if we take the [paternal] grandfather as our point of departure it will include all his sons and daughters and the children of his sons. A larger and larger number of ag-

<sup>18</sup> I am indebted to Carnes (1989: 125–127) for this set of parallels between masculinization and spiritual advancement.

nates ... will be included in the ... *thok dwiel* the higher up the line of ascent we take the point of departure ... [T]he only question is how far back the Nuer goes up the line of ascent before he hits on an ancestor whose descendants in the male line he includes in his notion of kin. ... [T]here is no invariable rule in the matter and since the notion of kin is relative, more people are included in some contexts than in others by the same speaker.

So the term Evans-Pritchard renders as “lineage” in fact refers to a subset of agnatically related kin reckoned through a particular Ego. Nuer “lineages,” then, are not bounded ancestor-oriented *groups* but unbounded ego-oriented *categories*, to use Goodenough’s terminology (1961). Their confinement to agnates distinguishes them from the personal kindred noted above, but this does not make them lineages in any of the received senses. Evans-Pritchard’s famous hierarchy of lineage segments in “The Nuer” (1940: 196–198) is thus his own concoction, utterly unrelated to distinctions made by the people themselves – a conclusion already suggested by Holy (1979a: 38) and McKinnon (2000: 43). I must, therefore, agree with Verdon (1982) that the Nuer have no lineages of any kind, and nothing like a “segmentary lineage system.” In view of the enormous role played by Evans-Pritchard’s post-1939 publications in shaping textbook presentations of such systems, these are conclusions of a very high order of irony. Sahlins’ well-known rendition of Nuer “segmentary organization” (1961) is thus without merit. As Glickman (1971) and Holy (1979b: 6f.) have shown, the pertinent segments that unite for warfare are residentially and not lineally based, and, as already noted, their composition is dominated by matrilineal kin of a small agnatic core (see also Kelly 1985: 168f.).

Evans-Pritchard (1934: 32) also writes of “distant patrilineal kinship,” rendered by the Nuer as *buth*. Adopted Dinka are given *buth*, thus underscoring their status as marginal kin (see above and Evans-Pritchard 1933: 51–53), as well as the names associated with the clan of the adopter. But, although the clans are normally exogamous, such an adoptee may marry someone of his/her clan (14f.), which suggests an additional attenuation of kinship. This attenuation is further underscored by the fact that, while *mar* share meat in a domestic context, those in a *buth* relationship share only sacrificial meat, which comes from a castrated male animal (Evans-Pritchard 1934: 30). *Buth*, I suggest, partakes of much the same mix of kinship and anti-kinship found in male initiation, with

which is thus shares the element of controlled bodily mutilation.

Moreover, I suspect that dead relatives are at least sometimes classed as *buth*. As noted, Evans-Pritchard assures us that Nuer can go back at least two generations in reckoning kinship, but he also reports a sacrificial ceremony by which kinship between the living and the dead is abolished (see above). I shall guess that the actual meaning of *buth* is ‘attenuated kinsman,’ either because of assumed genealogical distance or because of adoption, or because of death.

But what is most important here is that *buth* signals a segmentary organization only in a limited sense. As we have seen, the “lineages” so related are in fact ego-centered units. So, it follows, are most of the larger units based on a *buth* relationship – a conclusion already reached by Verdon (1982: 571). Patri-clans are sometimes said to be linked in this way (Evans-Pritchard 1933: 35), and in such cases *buth* pertains to an ancestor-orientation. But – and here again we are indebted to Verdon (1982: 574) these units are social *categories* and have no functions as such in warfare. Verdon (1982: 574) concludes that agnation merely “serves as a convenient mnemonic to support a network of segmentary military alliances between local groups ...” (see also Holy 1979a: 41). Similarly, Southall (1986: 4) claims that it provides a native “conceptual structure.” Kelly (1974: 290) allows that “the lineage structure ... which is deeply rooted in the Nuer psyche has nothing to do with ... the cognatic composition of local communities.” Holy (1979b: 4), writing more generally, tells us “[t]hat there seems to be almost a general consensus ... that the concept of a segmentary lineage structure is the natives’ folk model” (see also Karp and Maynard 1983: 489f.; Smith 1956). But Kuper (1982: 84), rightly to my mind, does not concede even that much. “It is extremely doubtful,” he writes, “that there is a Nuer folk model which corresponds even loosely to the model of the segmentary lineage system.”

Also noteworthy here is that Nuer speak of entire clans “as though they were persons and could have kinship relations between them like those between persons ...” (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 237; emphases added). We are not told anywhere how this works, but it seems clear that such interclan kinship is *modeled on* interpersonal kinship, the primary referent of which, as we have seen, is usually supplied by procreative ties. The only exceptions to this generalization are paternity established through the payment of bridewealth and,

with less certainty, kinship established by co-residence. But perhaps the best evidence for the overall centrality of procreative ideas in Nuer kinship is Evans-Pritchard's statement that, in assessing whether a proposed marriage is or is not incestuous, the latter verdict is more likely if "some of the links between the pair are those of adoption or of ghost-parentage and not of consanguinity" (1949b: 90). Hence his report that "the kinship of cognation ... [is] *mar* in the usual sense of the word" (90). It is, in short, *real* kinship for the Nuer as well as for us and, probably, people everywhere else.

Hutchinson (n. d.: 3), writing of certain Nuer groups, reports "'relationship/kinship of the diel' (*maar diila*)," involving putative kin links among agnatic cores. It is not clear, however, that this notion differs from *buth*. In any case it is lexically marked, and it exists "even when no identifiable kinship or descent tie exist[s]" (4), which suggests a semantically peripheral kind of kinship. In the same essay she notes that kinship can also be effected by "commensality, labor exchange, mutual defense[,] and other commo[n] forms of cooperation" (10), but she provides no evidence on the semantic relationship between these criteria and others considered here.

### Kinship between Ritual Leaders

In an early publication, Evans-Pritchard (1934: 46) suggests that certain ritual leaders – the "leopard-skin chiefs," as he calls them – have kinship among them because, as one informant told him, "[t]heir blood is still in the ground and in the leopard-skin." Reference is to their role in settling "blood disputes," wherein they draw blood from the killer – this likened to the blood of his victim – and sacrifice "the cow of blood" (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 293) – in fact not a cow but an ox (203). It is not clear why the animal is rendered as female, though I shall guess this is because, as in all Nuer sacrifices, it is a castrated male. In any case, Evans-Pritchard (1934: 46) adds "as ... [such priests] walk on the earth they [thus] partake, as it were, of each other's blood ... [T]hey [therefore] may not marry one another's daughters." We have already seen that blood is deemed to be the maternal (and paternal?) contribution to the formation of the fetus, and that it figures in other kinds of kinship which are logically dependent on procreative relations. It would seem, then, that although the data are admittedly scanty, this sort of bond is similarly dependent.

This means that in Nuer thought the blood of killing, whether a man or an ox, is likened to the blood of procreation, and that the ox (and the murdered man?) is (are?) feminized. There are remarkable Christian parallels. Communion wine is said to be Jesus' blood, partaking of which is held to be partaking in His sacrifice, and this in turn is held to be procreative in a more profound sense. Correspondingly, Jesus is frequently feminized in medieval art and writing, wherein, for example, the blood shed at His crucifixion is rendered as converted into milk (Bynum 1982: 113–125).

### Some Nuer Ideas Concerning Physical Combat

Hutchinson (1996: 123) writes of a "special sacrificial ceremony" that could end a blood feud, but she adds that "it was extremely unlikely for this to occur ... unless the parties to the feud were close relatives ... ." In the same vein Evans-Pritchard (1956: 213) tells us that, while fighting among non-kin is carried out with spears, conflict among kin is effected with clubs, so as to lessen the possibility of killing. Similarly, feuding within the village "is soon settled, because the people on both sides have got to mix and because there are sure to be between them many ties of kinship ... (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 156). In short, and in accordance with Darwinian theory, lethal aggression among kin is decidedly inhibited.

The same conclusion can be drawn by considering the Nuer lexicon for aggressive action. Evans-Pritchard (1940: 161) reports four terms in this domain, to wit:

*kur* = a fight involving people of different Nuer subtribes  
*ter* = a fight involving people of the same Nuer subtribe  
*pec* = raiding the Dinka for cattle  
*dwac* = individual dueling

What is remarkable here is that *only* the first term is used at a higher level of classification to refer to fighting in general. Just as, for the Nuer, 'close' kin are *really* kin (see above), so a fight between different subtribes, "in which no claims for compensation would be recognized" (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 161), is *really* fighting. But raiding the hapless Dinka is rendered as a semantically diminished form of combat, as are the other two forms lexically recognized. These last two forms, at least, seem usually to occur between kin, among whom arbitration and a settlement in cattle is expected (161), should a difference arise. They are therefore *diminished* modes of aggression and in conformity with Darwinian theory.

## Conclusion

The first and more specific concluding argument is that Sahlins' analysis of the Nuer "segmentary lineage system" is very wide of the mark indeed. Here is Holy (1979b: 2) on the matter:

Sahlins' ... argument that the [Nuer] segmentary lineage system ... derives directly from the assumption that the segmentary lineage structure depicts ongoing social processes.

On closer inspection, however, it appears that ... [this] assumption ... is not ... well founded. Most of the available case histories of hostilities between Nuer ... [groups] and their political alliances ... indicate that the opposition between ... [groups] is not as balanced as Evans-Pritchard's paradigmatic presentation would suggest.

More generally, Sahlins' "segmentary lineage" analysis, written when he was a "neo-evolutionist" at the University of Michigan (Sahlins 1960), is not all that different from his more recent re-thinking of kinship. In "neo-evolutionist" thought, as in its Victorian predecessor, uncomplicated *typologies* are taken as constituting a reality which ethnographic data merely instantiate: this is sheer nominalism, a way certain scholars represent their data, and it was the crux of the Boasian indictment of "evolutionism" (see esp. Boas 1896; Goldenweiser 1937: 507–526). In the segmentary lineage essay, Sahlins takes what is at best a native platitude, which British anthropologists had reified as a "lineage system" in the two preceding decades and treats it as an accurate statement of Nuer sociality. Similarly, his more recent sallies into what he takes to be earnest expressions of a "mutuality of being" in fact is little more than a more comprehensive journey into the domain of tribal rhetoric (Shapiro 2013: 185f.). Thus, he takes Evans-Pritchard's report that a Nuer man renders his daughter as 'an unrelated person' literally, so he – the Nuer father – must *really* think of her as a stranger. One might just as well believe that, because Nuer say that influential men are 'bulls' (Evans-Pritchard 1934: 40f.) – presumably because they are powerful (because of political influence rather than sheer physical strength), have many mates, and, though them, sire many offspring – they must have a unique and decidedly non-Western ethno-zoology in which man and bovine are typologically lumped. The only shift here is the replacement of anthropological misrepresentations by native misrepresentations. The result is an every person's anthropology, one based

on what the people in question might tell Administrator, Tourist, undiscerning Ethnographer, and their own children; the last, at least, grow up to know better (Shapiro 2013: 187). Furthermore, it does not make any sense to insist on the importance of a distinction between "a naturally given sense of 'blood' relationships and a culturally variable system of meaningful categories," noted above – especially when one's sense of "meaning" fails to distinguish focal significance from metaphor, and one's view of "biology" is antediluvian,<sup>19</sup> resting as it does on a hopelessly inadequate notion of inevitability – what one historian of science has called "folk essentialism" (Griffiths 2002). There is irony here: Sahlins indicts procreation-based kinship studies because, allegedly, they impose Western understandings on non-Western people, but in fact the imposition is his own: he renders the latter as Stone Age simpletons, entrapped in their own homilies and in typologies created by his fellow scholastics, utterly incapable of holding complicated models of their social life.

In contrast, it should now be clear that Nuer sociality, in fact, partakes of a large number of characteristics of that are by no means foreign to us.<sup>20</sup> For present purposes, the most important of these are (1) the *modeling* of most forms of postnatal kinship on native procreative theory,<sup>21</sup> (2) a fairly close fit with Darwinian theory. Both of these characteristics are contrary to Marshall Sahlins' ideas about kinship generally and more particularly on the Nuer. But they are entirely consistent with the Trobriand materials, and with those pertaining to the MaeEnga of the New Guinea Highlands, both of which have engaged Sahlins' attention (Shapiro 2014 and references therein), and with his own ethnographic materials from Fiji (Sahlins 1963). It now seems reasonable to suggest that his "culturalist" theory of kinship is hopelessly wide of the mark.

19 See, e. g., Alexander (1977); Etter (1978); Irons and Cronk (2000).

20 And, I might add, to the rest of the world. In the initial version of this essay, I referred to further ethnographic data, in order to give the reader some idea of the widespread nature of the elements of Nuer sociality. But to include these materials here would have enlarged the essay too much beyond the space allowed by this journal.

21 In an essay which strikes me as remarkable only for its obtuseness and literary pretentiousness, Evens (1989: 340) denies this, insisting that "all forms [of Nuer kinship] must be the true form."

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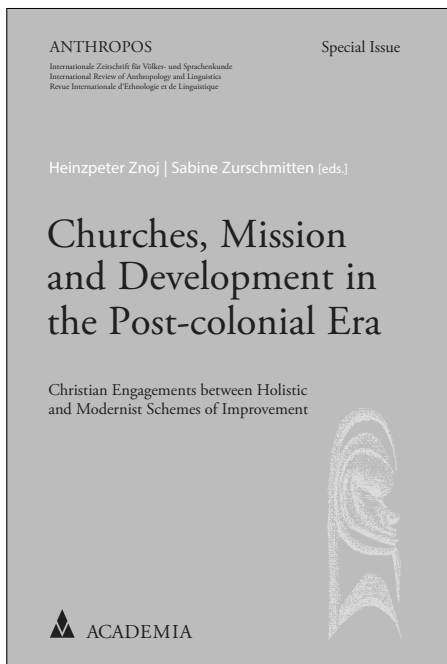
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