Bioethicists know that classic cases and stories can stick in our minds and assume a life of their own. They are remembered in part because they may exemplify moral principles, dilemmas, or simply the oddities of moral experience. Does it matter that they be factually true? The question got stuck in my mind when, looking into another topic (what Jeffrey Blustein passingly refers to as "monstrous moral principles"[1]), I remembered reading about the Nuer.

The Nuer, of the southern Sudan, are described by Stanley Hauerwas as a good and gentle people, "who have a strong sense of communal care for one another." However, there is this oddity: "they have the view that any of their children born obviously retarded or deformed is not a Nuer. Instead, they think such a child is a hippopotamus. An elaborate mythology, in which the various kinds of animals have their place and responsibilities, underwrites this belief. The Nuer do not have a well-defined concept of 'human being' or 'animal,' but ... they feel strongly that each type of creature is best cared for by its own kind. Therefore a deformed child is placed in the river to be cared for by its own--namely hippopotami. From our perspective this is child euthanasia, but the Nuer feel they are doing the only thing they can do if they are to act responsibly. For them a 'quandary' would be raised if the mother of such a child decided she was so attached to this 'hippopotamus' that she wanted to keep it."[2]

Hauerwas’s source is Purity and Danger by anthropologist Mary Douglas. She writes little about the Nuer here but does tell us that "the Nuer treat monstrous births as baby hippopotamuses, accidentally born to humans and, with this labelling, the appropriate action is clear. They gently lay them in the river where they belong."[3] The context for Hauerwas’s comment is, among other things, the abortion debate; he wants to provoke us into examining the narratives that make us "the kind of people we are." The context for Douglas's comment is to illustrate how cultures might interpret things which, given their world views, are "anomalous." What to us, apparently, is drowning, infanticide, or euthanasia is to the Nuer the returning of like to like.

The original account behind this story, by anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Douglas's only cited source, is strikingly different. E-P’s context
was how mythological twin births figure in Nuer explanations of their totems and how contemporary twin births are sometimes interpreted. He explains: "I had not been long in Nuerland [1930] when one morning my Nuer servant Nhial came in some excitement to tell me that a woman of his village, where we were staying, had given birth to a hippopotamus and a male child, both dead. It was too late to see what happened, but I was told that the hippopotamus had been placed in a nearby stream and the child, being a twin and therefore in Nuer eyes a sort of bird, had been placed in a tree.... The reason given for this particular twin-birth was that the woman's husband had killed several hippopotamuses and they had revenged themselves on him by stamping their likeness on one of the twins. . . ."[4]
Let us note well: Both twins were still-born, none was "gently" drowned as Douglas implies and Hauerwas infers; the infant was buried in the stream, not drowned there. Deformed children are not generally considered by the Nuer to be hippopotamuses, only this one. (Other animal totems can cause different deformities in specific instances, pp. 85ff.) And the hippo birth was not thought to be "accidental" (Douglas), but due to the revenge of hippopotamus spirits upon a particular father. E-P does say he "is in doubt whether what was taken to the stream was regarded as a hippopotamus in the full sense or not, for animals can stamp their likeness on a human foetus; but at least the incident shows us how the totemic mentality of the Nuer inclined them at once to perceive the form of a hippopotamus in what we would have regarded merely as a monstrosity . . ." (pp. 84-85). Elsewhere he writes, "Nuer welcome children and hope when they marry that their wives will be fertile. Abortion is said to be very rare and practised only by unmarried girls. Though the men of the kraal may hope that monorchids and babies born with defects and deformities will not survive, they do not kill them or let them die."[5]
I do not know if the received tradition about the Nuer deserves to be called "classic," and I do not know how often it has been repeated. My impression is that it is widely known among ethicists.[6] Besides Mary Douglas, Stanley Hauerwas also references a long review article on abortion by Paul Ramsey, who calls attention to the alleged Nuer practice. Ramsey cites verbatim Mary Douglas's "gently lay them in the river" sentence (though without quotation marks), but unlike Hauerwas he also cites p. 84 from E-P's Nuer Religion. Nonetheless, for some reason Ramsey thought the Nuer drown their deformed babies, believing them hippopotamuses. This exotic anecdote is seductively appealing, perhaps because it seems to typify some human truth or possibility. But it draws much of its power from the impression that it is factually true, which it is not.

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References

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