Nilotic Women: a Diachronic Perspective

by JOHN W. BURTON*

The Dinka treats his wife or wives with great consideration, and it is a mistake to suppose that the latter have no voice in the affairs of life. On the contrary, they are often the prime movers in all things except wars. John G. Millais, *Far Away Up the Nile* (London, 1924), p. 154.

The pastoral Nilotic-speaking peoples of the Southern Sudan have been observed by missionaries, merchants, and casual travellers for more than a century. Significant advances in social theory have been formulated on the basis of Nilotic ethnography. In the light of the voluminous literature recorded by these and other authorities, it may now be of value to draw into clearer relief the nature of the status and authority of the women in these 'traditional' societies, which are increasingly drawn into and irrevocably changed by exogenous sources.

The first section offers a review of what appears in the contemporary view as antiquarian images of Nilotic women. This is followed by a brief analysis of the colonial period and a summary of the effects of British administration in this region of Africa. The third section is concerned with the indigenous images of women in Nilotic mythology. The article concludes with an assessment of women, marriage, and power, with special reference to the pastoral Nilotic Atuot, among whom the author resided with his wife between October 1976 and November 1977.1 Throughout the discussion, however, my concern is with the Dinka, Nuer, and Atuot, since relatively little has been recorded on this score for the related Shilluk, Anuak, and so-called Luo.2

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1 The pastoral Nilotic-speaking Atuot of the Southern Sudan are estimated to number 35,000. Field research was made possible through the generous support of the Social Science Research Council and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. I would also like to thank Atuot women for their co-operation in this research, especially Alak Angui, Iwer Deng, Ayan Alau, Amer Aruktung, Ayan Luk, Acol Ijuong, and Alak Bilieu.

In their recent monograph, *The Africa That Never Was*, D. Hammond and A. Jablow observe that the African continent was often metaphorically described as ‘the strange woman’, or the ‘irresistible woman’, whose ‘beauty is a snare and an inticement to destruction’. Unlike the situation in many equatorial environs, the Upper Nile Basin seems rarely, if ever, perceived as a female to be exploited for pleasure and treasure. It was not the promise of gold within riverbeds nor mineral wealth beneath the soil that attracted early merchants and travellers to this region of Africa. Instead, a fairly extensive system of slave trading provided the incentive for centuries of travel in the Upper Nile. Yet an equally ‘masculine’ romance with the discovery of the source of the White Nile brought smaller numbers to chart the hundreds of square miles of swamp-land which provided the resources of the Nilotes. Since the primary efforts of the former group were directed towards one or another means of economic exploitation, it is understandable that few penned ethnographic observations of significance.

According to E. E. Evans-Pritchard, if the explorers and traders had any ethnographic interest at all, ‘it was incidental to their purpose, and it was in any case difficult to reconcile with their plundering of the natives whenever they were able to do so without risk to themselves’. Instead, ‘Few of the early travellers seem to have understood how their depredations appeared to the natives, or cared how they appeared to them’.2

In the same essay, Evans-Pritchard went on to argue that the better part of what actually was recorded of local peoples and customs is suspect, so that a number of additional citations are merited:

Take Ferdinand Werne [1848] for example. He was a vain and vituperative person with a great hatred for the French; and it must be said also that he had a very superficial understanding of what he saw among the native peoples with whom he came into contact... and even less of what he was told.3

Another famous explorer of the Upper Nile was the Welsh mining engineer John Petherick (1861), ‘a not very reliable authority or estimable person’ according to Evans-Pritchard.4 Then there is ‘The

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sententious Sir Samuel W. Baker’, possibly the most famous Nile explorer, ‘as well as being the most disagreeable and stupid of them’. Evans-Pritchard writes that most of what Brun-Rollet recorded is ‘all rubbish’,¹ and of Gaetano Casati (1891) he says ‘if the translation is faithful, [it] is not only nonsense but would appear to be invention’.²

As is the case in most world ethnographic areas there are volumes written with apparent enthusiasm which, however, seem in hindsight woefully lacking on most counts. In light of the academic appointments of the two Seligmans, Evans-Pritchard’s comments on their tome *Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan* are imponderably damaging. It may be recalled that C. G. Seligman was a colleague of Bronislaw Malinowski’s at the London School of Economics, the latter having been long ago enshrined as a founder of modern fieldwork techniques. Evans-Pritchard writes: ‘The inadequacies of the Seligmans’ account arise primarily from the kind of investigation they were conducting for it could not have given them the answers to the questions they asked’.³ Indeed, a close reading of Evans-Pritchard’s critique leads one to question the validity of many ethnographic entries in their book. Furthermore, considering the intellectual climate of the time, and the dominant concerns in the discipline, it is hardly surprising to note that in the majority of cases where they are mentioned at all, women received uncomplimentary reviews.

With the British ‘recapture’ of the Sudan in 1898, the political climate in the country was radically altered under the guise of indirect rule. At the same time, the countryside was now open to moderately adventurous travellers, and they produced a considerable number of travelogues, including some valuable ethnographic vignettes, though unsystematically recorded. Readers of these accounts would perhaps agree with the author that, in the main, the British treking class was rather more interested in the varieties of local flora and fauna than societies and customs. In nearly all cases, the travellers were male. It was not until the end of World War II that the British-directed Sudan Government permitted white officers to reside with their wives in the Southern Sudan.⁴ A notable exception was Alexandrine Tinne, who travelled considerably within the Southern Sudan between 1861 and

¹ Evans-Pritchard, loc. cit. p. 134.
⁴ In the light of the excellence of his ethnographic studies, it is regretful to have to note Evans-Pritchard’s quip that it was ‘British wives and motor cars’ that spoiled relations between indigenous peoples and the colonial administration; ‘Some Reminiscences and Reflections of Fieldwork’, in *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*, 4, 1973, pp. 1–12. But then, one can also cite his general neglect of women in his ethnographies – see also T. O. Beidelman, ‘The Ethnographer as Translator’, in *Times Literary Supplement* (London), 12 December 1980, p. 1420.
The only readily accessible account of her travels is a brief passage in the book by Millais:

Miss Tinne is a romantic figure in Nile exploration. She was beautiful, a daring rider, a good linguist, but too kind and trusting to venture amongst the savage mauraders of the desert, who acknowledge only one thing – the power of the sword and the rifle.¹

In 1918 the publication of the Sudan Notes and Records was undertaken under the auspices of the Sudan Government, and administrative officials were encouraged to submit their ethnographic notes to the editors of this journal.² Since this was, in principle, a publication for the dissemination of knowledge by administrators, we must probe the non-official accounts by literary travellers in order to discover European impressions of the local inhabitants.

Millais’s elegantly illustrated Far Away Up the Nile offers a first-hand view of the local life-styles of colonial officials in the Southern Sudan, and includes numerous entries of the sort, ‘Shilluk dogs are said to be the swiftest in Africa’,³ though only scant mention of indigenous people. One of few such remarks concerns Shilluk women, who ‘are distinctly plain and uninteresting in appearance. They crop their hair close and wear a short apron of calf-skin’. It is most odd, therefore, that the same author made the critically insightful observation which introduces the present article!

R. Wyndham, who travelled in the Southern Sudan in search of ‘models’ to inspire his paintings, offers a rather different appraisal. In his eye, ‘Shilluk women were astonishingly beautiful ... their velvet-dark bodies incredibly tall and slender, their long hair golden blonde’.⁴ But, lest the reader imagine Wyndham thought he had discovered an exotic off-shoot of a long-lost Nordic people, he is quick to add, ‘So what matter that their hair was dyed with cow piss?’. With a similar emphasis on the physical appearance, he observed that Nuer ‘women were as comely – and as naked – as the men’, and that they ‘showed a giggling interest in my mis-shapen body and a decided bitchiness toward the world in general’.⁵

In the course of his travels Wyndham befriended a British official who had been married to a Dinka woman named Kajok, though her foreign husband had chosen instead to call her Tits. Wyndham deemed Dinka

² Sudan Notes and Records was considered by Evans-Pritchard to be ‘the best of its kind in Africa, if not in the world’; ‘Anthropological Research in the Southern Sudan’, in Sudan Society (Khartoum), 1, 1962, pp. 9–14. ³ Millais, op. cit. p. 72.
⁵ Ibid. pp. 53–4.
women to be of ‘purely animal consciousness’ and ‘incapable of a continuous strain of thought’. Since his own was evidently constrained by sex, we can only wonder how he arrived at this conclusion. He made no effort to disguise his repugnance of Dinka women whom he observed ‘emerging from the blackness of their huts suckling their babies at revolting, pendulous breasts’.\(^1\) In spite of all these deficiencies, however, Wyndham opined that Dinka women could prove to be ‘perfect domestic pets’.\(^2\)

Another illustration of the European perception of Nilotic women as physical and social inferiors is offered by H. Bernatzik, a traveller who was fascinated by the ‘African wilderness’, but who neither spoke nor understood any local language. None the less, he was able to note (1936) in the market town of Malakal that he ‘met some highly ornamented young women. As soon as the first catches sight of me, she waves in unmistakable fashion and casts lascivious glances at me. Even as far as this, the Europeans have brought prostitution’.\(^3\) Nuer men and women, we are informed, ‘are great tobacco smokers and, like most negroes, love alcohol more than is good for them’.\(^4\) Physical features are once again all that strike his senses when he observes a Dinka woman in the midst of a neighbouring ethnic group: ‘The long-legged, handsome, very thin figures are unmistakable among the small, tubby Jur women’. Forced to abandon his personal pilgrimage among the primitives due to malaria, he writes, ‘Good-bye you elephants, buffalos, rhinos and lions. And your pretty girls will have to wait for someone else to immortalize your charms’.\(^5\)

In his very stout monograph, *Five Years in the Sudan*, E. Fothergill makes but a single reference to Nilotic women (save the caption under a photograph, ‘Gossips of the White Nile’), and we can only wonder what brought him to write ‘Shilluk women, as in all parts of the Sudan, play an important part in the daily lives of the inhabitants; they take a carefree role and prominent part in all social activities’.\(^6\) ‘Attractive creatures’, M. Langley tells us in 1950, ‘are these long-legged Dinka girls, with their tinkle of bells and the silver flash of hoop-la rings from ear to nose’.\(^7\) In the male bastion of the colonial Southern Sudan, women seem always long-legged and savagely attractive, cow piss and all. Once European wives were allowed to accompany their husbands on tours of duty in the Southern Sudan, it became the custom for them

\(^1\) Ibid. p. 81. \(^2\) Ibid. p. 131. \(^3\) Bernatzik, op. cit. p. 20. 
\(^4\) Ibid. p. 32. \(^5\) Ibid. p. 103. 
to take leaves of absence of up to six months in Europe. Langley considered this sufficient evidence of the inferiority of women, since to him they left for nothing better than reasons of personal vanity:

I think that women who follow their husbands to remote places should be young enough to take these inconveniences in their stride. Either that or else admit that this is not a woman’s country.¹

The incredible and glaring biases of these and other accounts need little amplification. We can assume that since books such as these were widely read by an increasingly literate population outside Africa, an important facet of the stereotype of ‘primitive’ women was the responsibility of these authors. As in their native countries, they perceived Nilotic women as necessary, but in the main inconsequential, members of society. At the same time, those sensitive to the issue at hand might also agree that these observers were keenly aware of the power and authority accorded Nilotic women. Perhaps this is part of the reason why women received so little mention in print. In fact, as E. Leacock has noted, it is only within the last decade that anthropologists have begun to make detailed enquiries on women’s rôle in society.²

COLONIAL IMAGES

By now it is little more than commonplace to note that ‘indirect rule’ in British Africa meant direct influence, if only slightly off stage. Among the more pressing enigmas which early British officials confronted in the Southern Sudan was that of defining the local *foci* of authority among peoples who lacked any form of centralised or institutionalised political system. Related problems ensued when peoples frequently married across the orderly cultural ‘boundaries’ which the British had attempted to define. Very often, one pastoral group required the resources of neighbours at some point in the ecological year. In essence, women provided the means for peaceable relations to obtain between such groups as they were exchanged in marriage across the boundaries.³

Where centres of authority could not be defined, British officials saw incipient standing armies in local age-set associations, and fledging

¹ Ibid.
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chiefs in local spokesmen. And what could have been more natural? Since men dominated the world of western politics, should it be different in Africa? Therein the colonial mould was drawn. Commissioners and assistant commissioners of the British administration were instructed to select the appropriate men to assume minor governmental roles as ‘chiefs’, and their sons were sent off to mission schools to learn English, as well as the rudiments of civilisation in primers on rail travel in Europe and the proper time to tip one’s hat or bow.

Thus, from their very inception, young women were excluded from participation in the new schemes of social change. Women were defined as second-class citizens in a world of equals. While there are now Nilotic women who are nuns, medical assistants, government officials, and even a tiny minority who attend universities outside the Sudan, one would encounter enormous difficulty in demonstrating that these ends were implicit in ‘native administration’. Instead, and one assumes this is common anthropological knowledge, the attempt at administering ‘from above’ imposed a structure that inhibited social change.

Factual as these comments are, the establishment of local courts among the Nilotes eventually did serve to advance personal rights, where these were sometimes denied in customary law. Women and men were then able to press their claims in a government-supported court of law. Whereas traditional norms made it nearly impossible for a woman to make a claim for divorce, or for a man to redeem cattle he thought rightfully his own, the slow merging of European with indigenous principles had an undeniably positive effect for personal liberties.

The colonial influence cannot be easily separated from the presence of the missionaries, for the latter were able to reside in the South Sudan on the implicit assumption that the task of the Government was to maintain order, while they educated the people. In order to carry out their announced intentions, missionaries had by necessity to pay greater attention to local custom and nuances of language than did administrative officials. Thus, in a subtle way, what the missionaries in turn wrote of local people and language advanced the concerns of women, by no means in a dramatic fashion, but simply by turning alien eyes towards a better understanding of indigenous world-views and modes of behaviour. This was perhaps more the case among the Nuer and the Dinka, since a tentative missionary presence among the Atuot was aborted soon after its inception.

An early indication of this phenomenon is evident in what A. Kauffman

wrote of the Dinka in 1881.\(^1\) The entries appear somewhat mundane but are still significant. Of the Ceic Dinka it is noted that men help in the construction of huts and undertake all of the heaviest work, while ‘everything else must be done by their wives’. He wrote that Nilotic men ‘regard their women as servants only to work and bear children. Nevertheless, the women walk freely around, are respected, and are spared the horrors of war. But, as women are so costly, quarrels and wars often arise because of them’.\(^2\) While the notion that women are actually ‘bought’ is entirely mis-conceived, what is significant is their very mention. Kauffman also notes that ‘Whilst in general the children love their parents, the parents, especially the mother, love their children dearly’.\(^3\) He includes in his account a number of comments on women by a Dinka convert to Christianity:

I have often heard it said that Negroes do not believe that women have immortal souls, and therefore the men merely make use of them on a purely material basis. This is not the truth with us Dinka. It is true that we do not leave the women idle and often it is they who take on the hardest tasks. But considering their public prayers, the religious ceremonies they hold in families in absence of the father, and the sacrifices they make after his death, such an assertion is untrue. The father is the head of the family, then comes the mother. The women look after the welfare of the family and enjoy the esteem of their husbands. Their authority over the children is respected.\(^4\)

The observation is better than a century old and, somewhat oddly, bears testimony to circumstances noted by an administrator among the Nuer and Dinka in the 1920s. According to V. H. Fergusson, a controversial figure in the colonial Southern Sudan:

It is the girls that rule the people...Yes, it is true the girls here rule up to a point, but few of them have any idea of playing the game; their code of morals is so different from ours. However, in many ways they could set us a fine example.\(^5\)

Why an odd observation? The current mentality figured women as chattel. Here was a rather unsophisticated administrative recruit who learned in the course of his duties quite the opposite. This member of the colonial cadre, whose task it was to administer the political affairs of men, realised that ‘the girls...rule the people’.

Chronologically the next most significant contributor to the literature on Nilotic women is the missionary Ray Huffman, whose slim monograph on *Nuer Customs and Folklore* (1931) was inspired by entirely different

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\(^2\) Ibid. p. 155.

\(^3\) Ibid. p. 174.

\(^4\) Ibid. p. 201.

motives from Fergusson’s recollections. It is perhaps a minor point, yet to the best of my knowledge, Huffman’s was the first book on the Nilotes with index references to women. Since many may not have immediate access to this volume, a number of citations are justified. To begin, it is significant to observe that once the staple crop has been harvested, ‘the grains of durra are pounded out; then it becomes the property of the housewife after the seed durra has been selected and stored for the coming year’. Of especial interest – particularly as this is the first account of its kind – is the text entitled ‘The Woman’s Day’:

The day begins early for the mother. Soon after daybreak she must take her earthen jar and go to the river for water... She carries herself erect, occasionally putting one hand up to steady the jar. But usually she lets one hand hang down while in the other hand she carries her long stemmed pipe, smoking as she goes...

She rinses her jar with water, then fills it. She usually stops to wash her face and is then ready to return to her village. She calls one of the other women who is getting water, or if there are none there to help she calls some passer-by, who – even it be a man – will usually help her to lift the jar up and put it on her head.

When she returns to her home the morning meal must be ready by nine or ten o’clock. So she pounds the durra... The pounded durra is put into the water gradually and stirred frequently. When the food is ready, the woman dishes up the men’s portion in a large half gourd which serves as a dish, puts the mussel shell spoon in it, and calls the men to their breakfast. Then they go into the house and eat. Then the women, if they are young or newly married, eat where they will not be seen by the men. If they have been married several years, they may eat together.

The yard has to be swept, the children fed and cared for, more durra pounded for the morning meal. If there are cattle to be milked the women must milk them morning and evening. In the afternoon she must again go to the river to re-fill the water jar.

The woman has the bulk of the work but she seems to expect it. When the day’s toil is over, the durra pounded, the two meals cooked, the water carried, the children cared for, the mother sits there in the light of the smudge fire which is made to keep mosquitoes away... Now they all sit around the firelight, visiting or telling tales... Another day is past, the woman is in her home, her children about her, her husband satisfied with his food for the day and happy with her. What more could she want?

We are told that early on in life a young Nuer girl ‘becomes a small replica of her mother’, and another brief citation from Huffman is worthy of attention:

1 Ray Huffman, _Nuer Customs and Folklore_ (London, 1931), p. 15.
The greatest desire of a Nuer woman is for children. She realizes that as long as she can bear her husband children he will care for her... The mother also realizes that her children will care for her in her old age so her children make her position in old age secure.¹

One cannot deny – and why make the effort? – that the colonial influence denied women the ability to advance their interests to the extent that men were able to do. Yet through the work of missionaries – who were present almost at the behest of the colonial Government – women’s responsibilities, status, and sentiments were at least recognised. What follows in the remainder of this article will further support Leacock’s recent observation:

in non-Moslem African cultures, women’s and men’s rights and responsibilities were conceived and institutionalized as parallel rather than hierarchical, and the activities and organizations of each sex, cross-cut both public and private life; second, women’s status in sub-Saharan Africa has for the most part been seriously undermined by colonial policies.²

MYTHICAL IMAGES

As a preface to the consideration of women in Nilotic mythology something ought to be mentioned briefly about our next source of knowledge about this region. The first intensive examination of the Nilotic peoples by a trained observer was inaugurated by Evans-Pritchard in 1930, and the following two decades brought other Oxford-trained ethnographers to the Sudan, notably R. G. Lienhardt, Jean Buxton, P. P. Howell, and J. H. Driberg. Predictably, the most notable change in studies which appeared was a move away from quips about exotic oddities towards empirically oriented research on social organisation and systems of thought.

In the main, and especially in Evans-Pritchard’s *The Nuer* (1940), the anthropological focus was on men. The theoretical models explicated were essentially translations of the indigenous male model of social experience and how these factors were altered by Nilotic forms of pastoralism. In the case of the Nuer, readers were informed that agnation and patrilineality formed the nub of their social organisation. In association with this principle, variegate factors of ecology result in relations of a permanent order, transcending the minutia of real social

¹ Ibid. p. 42. See also R. Mohr, ‘Ricerche sull’etica sessuale di Alcune Popolazioni dell’Africa Centrale e Orientale’, in *Archivio per l’Anthropologia e la Ethnologia* (Rome), 64, 1969, pp. 157–315.

relations. The emphasis was on structure rather than process. Yet in emphasising the patrilineal model it was not the case that Evans-Pritchard failed to recognise the crucial importance of women; indeed, as may be seen from his 1945 study, the inverse is evident:

marital and domestic conditions among the Nuer indicate the high position of women in their society... The facts cited show how freely women move among the Nuer. We have seen that widows settle with lovers without hindrance, that many girls rear a family without consenting to marriage, and women always take their small children with them when they change households and that sometimes they even marry wives themselves.

The social principle of agnatic descent is, by a kind of paradox, traced through the mother, for the rule is that in virtue of payment [sic] of bridewealth all who are born of the mother are children of her husband. Thus all the children of a woman may be children of a man whom their mother has never even seen... The underlying agnatic principle is therefore in glaring contrast to social activities. But the activities are always changing and passing while the principle endures.¹

What has this to do with mythical images of women? Rather more than we might suspect. It appears on the surface, even accepting the high status of women as indicated by Evans-Pritchard, that they are generally subordinate to men. I believe, however, as the preceding passage indicates, that this is not correct. I know of similar cases among the Atuot where a woman resides in a cattle camp with her children and cattle, unmarried to any man. In the mythical world, women play an even more significant rôle as the very creators of society. A common pastoral Nilotic myth, which takes slightly different form in each society, relates that 'in the beginning' men were creatures of the forest who hunted buffalo while women lived in cattle camps close to rivers, tending cattle, cultivating durra, and fishing. Women went to the riverside and opened their thighs, pushing the foam of waves into their vaginas, giving birth to only females. At one point men emerged from the forest, whence developed the institutions of marriage and bridewealth.¹

Nilotic women as a class share a strong symbolic association with rivers, grain, and piscatorial activities. The riverine connections in particular are common throughout Africa as the following citations indicate. According to D. Zahan:

¹ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Some Aspects of Marriage and the Family Among the Nuer (Lusaka, 1945), p. 64.
Junod... remarks that the word which designates water among the Thonga, as well as many of the names of streams among the Bantu of southeast Africa, possess the feminine suffix ti, which seems to show that long ago water was considered a feminine principle. The connection between fecundity and flowing water is also found elsewhere in Africa. For example, the section of the Niger river flowing through Bambara territory is given the same meaning. This part of the river is regarded as the body of Faro who is associated with the multiplication and proliferation of beings.

For the peoples bordering the eastern shores of Lake Victoria, M. Kenny makes a number of related comments. ‘The Luganda word for Lake Victoria is Nalubaale, a word indicating a spirit of feminine or motherly qualities; lubaale is the generic word for “diety” and the prefix na gives it a feminine sense’. Kenny continues noting that Mukasa, the King of Buganda, ‘was closely identified with pythons and with Ganda python deities. He married the python-goddess Nalwanga, who had, as did Mukasa himself, control over fertility and the increase of fish’. In a more philosophical vein, Kenny suggests that ‘bodies of water, in their formlessness, are deprived of concrete referents; therefore, to contemplate the sea is to contemplate God’.

There is likewise evident in the Nilotic world an analogy between women as producers of life and rivers as veritable wombs from which human beings emerged. Many of the rivers and streams which cross-cut their country bear the feminine prefix nya. I consider it particularly significant that the primary symbol of secular authority and spiritual power among the pastoral Nilotes is the fishing spear rather than the fighting spear. Fishing is one of the primary economic activities engaged in by women. There is more to be said of the association between women, rivers, and life-giving divinities. David Westermann translates a Shilluk myth describing how Okwa, the father of the divine spirit Nyikang – the ubiquitous spirit incorporate in every Shilluk reth or ‘divine king’ – married Nyakae, the mother of the river:

Nyakae never died and never will. The western part of the river Sobat and part of the White Nile are her favorite abodes. She often appears, usually in

3 Kenny, loc. cit. pp. 728 and 721.
the form of a crocodile, but at times in different forms and always in the river or on its banks.1

The daughter of a reth is sometimes called ‘little queen’. According to Hofmayr:

In Shilluk history the daughters of the king have risen to chieftainships, and wives of kings attain great influence over the social life of subjects and become, so to speak, mothers of the country.2

C. G. Seligman makes reference to an Anuak myth in which the son of a female river-spirit emerges from a river with the necklaces which later become the royal insignia of local political arbitrators, the village headmen.3 Writing of the western Nuer, H. C. Jackson refers to ‘the ancestress of Nuer Alyett, who came from a tree herself, but produced from the river a canoe and a short while later, a cow and a calf’.4 In Dinka mythology people were all initially ‘in the river’.5 According to I. E. Bedri, ‘In the old days, a very old woman, after bathing in a river, suddenly felt she became pregnant from river spirits’.6 Of the Nuer pantheon, Evans-Pritchard writes:

A great spirit of interest is buk…This female spirit known throughout Nuerland, is associated with rivers and streams. Nuer sometimes offer first fruits of their millet and make libations to it in streams in times of sickness, and they may sacrifice animals to it on the banks. They also throw beer and tobacco and maybe a bound goat as well, into the river as offerings when they move their herds across rivers or engage in large scale fishing.7

Similarly, for the Dinka, Lienhardt observes that Abuk (sometimes said to be the first woman) is the patroness of women and women’s produce, the resources of the rivers and their gardens. Among the Ceic Dinka Abuk is thought to be the mother of the culture hero Awail Longar, the first spiritual-political leader of the Dinka and the prototype of ‘masters of the fishing spear’.8 Abuk was given a fish by the Creator to sustain her health after her impregnation in the river.9 V. H. Fergusson relates

4 H. C. Jackson, The Nuer of the Upper Nile Province (Khartoum, 1923), p. 70.
8 See Lienhardt, Divinity and Experience, passim.
a myth indicating that the ancestor of the Nuong Nuer and the Atuot was a fish.\(^1\) It might also be noted that one referent of the Dinka and Nuer term *deng* [as a heavenly power, *Deng*] is ‘rain’ or ‘water from the heavens’.

The common pastoral Nilotic myth accounting for the origin of death views women as pivotal. At one time, there was no separation between the earthly and heavenly world. Both were conjoined by a rope. One day a young wife, eager to prepare a large meal for her new family, struck God with the pestle used for pounding grain into flour. In anger, God withdrew from the human realm to remain forever on high.\(^2\) A Dinka song recalls this world with a sense of sad longing:

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\begin{align*}
\text{The ancient feud when the finch cut the rope} \\
\text{And turned your mother into a mortal being} \\
\text{The beauty of your original world} \ldots \\
\text{A home in which you were all bound one to another} \ldots
\end{align*}
\]

Other evidence indicates a mythical relation between women and the products of their labour. Lienhardt writes, ‘I have heard it said that rain is grain falling from the millet of Divinity when birds peck at it’.\(^4\) Bedri likewise notes, ‘Some Dinka believe that God created heaven first and earth afterwards, and heavy rain fell on earth and people sprouted like grain’.\(^5\) To my understanding, these are not the kind of mythological representations one might expect to find among people whose primary cultural interests are supposed to involve cattle, which are tended solely by males.

One further Atuot myth, a text that offers an account of their initial migration into their present territory, indicates that there was no water to be found in the area. People suffered for days with thirst and were close to perishing. There was only a single well, but when a bucket was lowered into it and brought to the surface, the water turned into blood. A beautiful young woman named Ayirol was thrown into the well, and

\(^2\) An analogous text comes from surprisingly far afield, and appears in a collection of Sri Lankan folktales. ‘In the primitive days, the sky was not so far off from the earth as at present. The sun and moon in their course through the heavens sometimes came in close contact with the house-tops. The stars were stationed so close to the earth that they served as lamps to the houses. There was a servant maid who was repeatedly disturbed by the passing clouds when she was sweeping the compound and this was to her a real nuisance. One cloudy morning, when this naughty girl was sweeping the compound as usual, the clouds came frequently in contact with the broomstick and interfered with her work. Losing all patience, she gave a smart blow to the firmament with the broomstick, saying, “Get away from hence”. The sky, as a matter of course, was quite ashamed at this affront thus offered to it by a servant girl, and flew far away, far out of human reach.’ H. Parker (ed. and translator), *Village Folk Tales of Ceylon* (Dehiwala, 1910), p. 42.
\(^4\) Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience*, p. 33.
\(^5\) Bedri, ‘Notes on the Padang Dinka’, p. 46.
there followed immediately a huge gushing spring of water from beneath the earth that eventually formed the lake now called Ayirol. The next morning an image of the woman appeared by the lakeside and soon vanished. People rushed to this site to find she had left behind a canoe, a fishing spear, and one of each of the species of fish that people now consume. As in the Shilluk version, Atuot maintain that Ayirol never died but instead continues to appear just above the surface of the lake or by the shore, a circumstance that heralds a sacrifice dedicated to her spirit.

Two further illustrations, far afield from the Nilotic world, might be mentioned here in recognition of the wide distribution of similar themes in African cosmologies. With regard to the Venda, Zahan writes:

Lake Fundunzi represents the very place of creation, the primordial womb. It shelters the annual rites for obtaining grain, during which a young girl was supposed to be ritually offered to its waters in order to open the gates of heaven and drive out drought.

In a longer passage on the Buganda, Kenny observes:

A woman called Nyamugondho was caught by a fisherman. She was caught on a type of hooked line which is known in Dholuo as a mughondo, and hence her name. The fisherman took this woman to wife and she brought him great wealth in livestock, which seemingly appeared from nowhere. But he drank too much beer and abused her. The woman got annoyed and left the man by walking into the lake; all the animals followed her and he could not stop them. He went down to the shore and while leaning on his staff was turned into a tree... Nyamugondho later appeared as Simbi, and again was abused by the people there whom she destroyed in an explosion... Finally she went to Gem in Luo country and became a famous rainmaker.

A final reference to a Maasi myth is presented, essentially similar to the Atuot text accounting for the origin of marriage and bridewealth. Since the Maasi too are widely known for their consuming interest in cattle, the events of the myth are likewise paradoxical. M. Burton and L. Kirk write:

Originally, all of the women lived by themselves with their children without husbands, and kept wild animals as livestock. Once when they were going to slaughter an animal, the women fell to arguing. Each woman said, ‘My son is going to stay home from herding today and eat kidney’. While they were arguing, no one went herding, and the animals forgot to come home at the end of the day. So the women had to take husbands, who had cattle. Wild animals are now referred to as ‘women’s animals’.

The myth is clearly a transformation of a number of possible variations on a common theme.¹ In both the Maasi and Sudanese Nilotic examples, the myth entails a radical transformation of social and economic experience. And as in the creation myth, women are ultimately responsible for the alterations. Burton and Kirk suggest that the message of the Maasi myth is that although women dominate the household, they are incapable (in the minds of Maasi men?) of managing 'the external, non-domestic world, where important things happen'.²

What one could justifiably term the 'domestication of men by women' is hinted at in the contemporary world through a song sung by women as they accompany a young wife to her husband’s homestead following marriage:

The husband is proud
He has deceived people with horns
We came upon man bathing in the river
The man copulated with all of them
We put man into the river...

The pervasive theme of the foregoing discussion is the association between women, rivers, and the generation of life. There is little ambiguity that in mythical times women were, indeed, at the centre of society, and that men became dependent upon their labours. I stressed at the beginning of this section that the prima facie perception of Nilotic women subordinate in a social system of agnation and patrilineity was misguided. Hence, I would argue that the jural and domestic significance of women is in a sense only underscored in Nilotic collective representations. Their social status and authority in the modern world is the subject of the following section.

WOMEN, MARRIAGE, AND AUTHORITY³

In pastoral Nilotic societies marriage is formally recognised and defined through the institution known as bridewealth. This refers to the situation where, after a marriage has been agreed upon, the groom’s agnates, and some members of his mother’s natal lineage, transfer rights of ownership over a number of cattle to equivalent members of the

³ Marriage takes on a considerable variety of forms in pastoral Nilotic societies. This discussion primarily concerns the simple legal union that the Atuot have in mind when making general observations on the topic. See Burton, 'Women and Men in Marriage'; also Evans-Pritchard, Some Aspects of Marriage and the Family Among the Nuer.
bride’s kin. It is somewhat bemusing to recall how entirely misunderstood the practice was by missionaries and Europeans. Throughout the 1920s, a vapid debate ensued in the pages of the leading British journal of anthropology as to whether the bride was or was not ‘bought’ with cattle. This exchange was termed either ‘marriage payment’ or ‘bride-price’. Evans-Pritchard encouraged the use of ‘bridewealth’ as an alternative term, and later on defined the social rather than explicitly economic character of the custom with regard to the Azande.

To begin, the exchange of bridewealth is not a monetary transaction since the Nilotes employ different verbs in describing exchange and purchase. Second, unlike outright purchase, where a value is placed on a commodity and then exchanged through some appropriate medium, the actual transfer of cattle typically requires at least a number of years – indeed, ‘Sometimes the final cows are never transferred’. A third distinction between the ‘purchase’ of a bride and the institution of bridewealth is that, unlike the cash transaction, the number of cattle to be exchanged is a cultural ideal. For example, in a survey of Atuot marriage I conducted, an ideal of 50 ‘cows’ was the standard, while in practice this varied from two goats and a mosquito net to 168 cattle.

A less evident distinction between purchase and exchange is that if a woman or man buys a cloth or lump of tobacco, the article belongs only to that individual. Conversely, no single individual ‘owns’ a herd of cattle. A larger or smaller kin-defined group collectively shares rights of ownership in the herd. Likewise, the bride is not a possession of the groom, but is rather married into his lineage, and that of his father and ancestors, in order to perpetuate that lineage. Cattle are exchanged in place of the children that she will bear in her husband’s name. Thus the patrilineal kin of his own generation will address the wife of the groom as cek cang, ‘my wife of the daytime’. In other words, just as a herd of cattle cannot be said to be the property of a single individual, so too are the products of a wife’s labour shared by her husband’s kin and agnates.

Superficially one might assume that a marriage is completed once the settlement of bridewealth has transpired. This is, however, but a single step in the process wherein a marriage is ‘tied’, as they say. Until she

conceives her first child, the woman is treated more as a respected guest than as kin, and actually enjoys much the same freedom as experienced prior to her engagement and marriage. Indeed, should she find her husband's surroundings unsatisfactory, she may soon return to her natal homestead and insist that she will not be married. She might also elope with a man she really admires but was encouraged not to marry, although this is quite rare.\(^1\) Children in each of these societies learn early on in life that the ultimate purpose of sexual relations and marriage is the birth of children. Lienhard notes, 'In travelling extensively through Dinkaland for nearly two and a half years, I never met a middle-aged man or women who was not, or had not at some time been married'.\(^2\) Elsewhere he writes:

In the Dinka way of thinking, when two families have a marriage between them, each has provided the means for the continuation of the other. Each is in this respect the source of the life and growth of the other. Children and cattle multiplying from generation to generation are the ultimate value of Dinka life and the only assurance of a kind of immortality. In each marriage this guarantee of continuing life is obtained only through the provision of a woman by an unrelated family.\(^3\)

In the same way, among the Nuer the wife's natal kin 'are just as interested in the birth of children of the union as the kinsmen of the husband'.\(^4\)

Earlier it was indicated how women figure as the source of human existence in the mythical world. As Lienhardt's comments demonstrate, that same value is consciously expressed in the 'real' world. Just as every young man wishes to marry, so too do young women seek husbands. The formal and public symbol of a married woman is her triangular-shaped skirt, which she is given by her husband's kin. When a young bride is escorted to her husband's home by her age-mates, they sing:

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Their hearts are filled with envy  
My skirt is given in the cattle camp of Loguany  
I am the lady of the skirt of Loguany  
*Majjim* [small metal rings] adorn the hem  
I will dance with any wife [i.e. boast of her marriage]  
I will dance with the beautiful skirt  
Women who compare their skirts with ours  
Only envy is in their hearts  
My sister says, come, and admire the skirt.
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\(^1\) See, for example, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Kinship and Marriage Among the Nuer* (Oxford, 1951).
\(^3\) Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience*, p. 129.
Since a young wife is understandably conscious of the number of cows exchanged at the time of her marriage — for that is, among other things, indicative of the status of the groom’s family, and of her merits in the eyes of her husband’s lineage — she will press for a marriage to a family ‘rich in heart and cattle’.

Among the Atuot it is customary for the first child to be named after an especially fecund and beautiful cow received by the wife’s lineage. In the case of a female child, the name might be Akuei, or, if male, Makuei. This is known as the rin yang, ‘the name of [the colour of] the cow’, and not only identifies an individual, but later acts as a record of the marriage and the perpetuation of the memory of those involved. A brother or paternal cousin of the bride or groom, for example, will later recall in an ox-song ‘the marriage of the cow akuei’. Since the name is taken from the colour pattern of a cow (rather than a bull or ox), it serves as a symbol of the expectation of growth and physical well-being among those involved in the marriage. Once again, special attention is implicitly drawn to the critical importance of women in the perpetuation of life.

The use of a personal name is related to the formal respect that a wife and husband ought to show for each other. Were a husband to address a wife by her personal name in a public setting, she would certainly be offended and demand a token gift in redress of this disrespect. She might also refuse to prepare food for her husband on that and a number of days following. Like a spear or a skirt, a name is a very important personal possession. Proper etiquette demands that a husband refer to a wife as yin cekde, ‘my wife’, and concurrently that she simply call him coude, ‘my husband’.

The mention of personal names as a significant factor of a wife’s status may seem trivial, yet we have only to recall how much attention the same phenomenon has attracted in western society within the past decade. A name is a personal possession, an essential part of one’s identity, a notion that Nilotic women have long recognised. Early on in her marriage, her husband’s kin will address a woman as ‘wife of our son’, and later as ‘mother of the children of our lineage’. Children born to the same mother occasionally address each other with the endearing yin, gat e mar, ‘you, the child of my mother’, or ‘you, the child born of one vagina with me’.

I have already explained that marriage occurs in a wide variety of forms in pastoral Nilotic societies, and that polygamy is a cultural ideal.

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1 See Burton, ‘Atuot Age Categories and Marriage’.
It has been my own experience that the majority of western men and women are abashed by this practice, and this has been especially the case in my lectures at a New England college where the predictable initial query is, 'Why do women put up with that?'. The curious fact is that Atuot women very often asked if there was something wrong with me, and 'Why not at least court another woman for marriage?' My wife and I used to laugh, but they were serious.\(^1\)

It can be argued that women favour polygamy because it is, among other things, a means of maximising their own interests.\(^2\) When translated into a proper Atuot form, the aphorism 'many hands make light work' makes equally good sense. The most obvious fact is that to be a co-wife is indicative of the resources and influence of the husband's family and lineage. Women gain power in association with such families, and it was hinted earlier that Atuot women are repugnant to the thought of marriage into a 'poor' family. I wish to emphasise that this is not simply a matter of the cultural value placed on cattle, because they provide many essential resources both in terms of material welfare and as food. Cattle reproduce with little human intervention – unlike the laborious undertaking of horticulture – and are thus a vital source of economic security should all else fail.

These observations should not cloud the fact that Atuot women equally take pride in successful gardens – especially when they result in the production of beer which they particularly enjoy drinking with other women. Garden produce is strictly regarded as the property of the woman from whose garden it was harvested.\(^3\) Later on in life, when she has established her presence and authority within a family, a woman is similarly pleased to see her daughter married with a high bridewealth. It goes without saying that the greater the number of children she raises, the greater her chances of personal satisfaction.

At this point I would like to present two of many texts collected in the course of fieldwork on the topic of women and marriage. The first is an extract from a conversation with a co-wife of middle age:

With two women, the marriage is very good. That one bears a child and then the other bears a child. The husband gives each of them their food [i.e. ensures for their well-being]. One does the cooking for a time and then the other. But

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\(^1\) Cf. Howell, 'Some Observations on Divorce Among the Nuer', p. 140, who writes of the Nuer that 'a divorce based on a single instance of adultery is extremely rare, and it is only when his wife persists with one man, or several men, or actually elopes with one of them, that a man will seek a divorce'.

\(^2\) See also C. H. Bledsoe, *Women and Marriage in Kpelle Society* (Stanford, 1980), p. 3.

\(^3\) See Francis Mading Deng, 'Property and Value-Interplay Among the Nilotes of the Southern Sudan', in *Iowa Law Review* (Iowa City), 51, 1966, p. 554.
if he gives more food to one than to the other, a wife will say I am refused by my husband. She may want to leave.

An older woman, who had long out-lived her husband offered these comments:

A woman stays with her husband well, each with their own sleeping hides. This is how they have respect for each other. They stay together and bear children. The husband looks after the wives so that they will be healthy. This is how they stay well without quarreling. Like it is now, I have this home and I stayed well with my husband long ago. Do you see? I bore this one and that one [pointing towards her children], and now they will have a home like this. Now, as I am old and my husband dead, I have to eat from their hands.

When a woman has fulfilled many of her domestic responsibilities she begins to re-define her relationship with her husband, and has the right to refuse sexual companionship. The Atuot say of such a woman, *cek ce pel ngoth*, 'she has left intercourse behind'. She may also encourage her husband to marry another woman to assume the majority of domestic tasks. Among the Nuer, 'should a married man wish to have an affair with a girl his wife would have no objection and would probably help him in it'.

Early on in life pre-pubescent girls are made to be responsible and independent of direct parental authority, whether this involves caring for smaller siblings or seeing to other domestic chores. In their teens, young women are entirely on their own in selecting and flirting with male suitors. For the Mandari, Nilotic neighbours of the Atuot to the south of their country, Jean Buxton writes:

There are recognized Don Juans who deceive with stories of non-existent marriage cows. Girls may band together to punish such a man. If he comes to their hut they will set on him with sticks, and batter him with their heavy brass bracelets. As he rushes away they follow him shouting abuse until others hear the noise and join in the chase. Later he will send a head of tobacco as a conciliatory present to the parents of the girl.

A similar state prevails among the Nuer, according to Evans-Pritchard:

it rests entirely with a girl whether she accepts a man's attentions and how far he presses his advances. A girl who is fond of a youth and wants him to marry

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1 Reference here could be made to R. G. Lienhardt where he notes: 'To keep children ignorant [of the techniques of sexual intercourse] or on the other hand to give them any special instruction in them, would seem equally strange... So are perversions or, as far as I could discover, any great variety of physical technique. I might add here that Atuot men, and the small number of women we felt we could ask, likened homosexuality and cunnilingus to incest: those involved in such acts would die from sin.' 'Dinka Representations of the Relations Between the Sexes', p. 79.


her. Sometimes a girl herself makes a proposal of marriage. She goes with some companions of her sex to the kraal of her favourite and drives away several of his father's cows to her home... When several days have passed and the cattle have not been returned, the young man knows that the girl's people are willing to discuss the matter.¹

As indicated earlier, elopement is rare in these societies, thereby underscoring the point that few women are married against their own will. Lienhardt writes of the Dinka:

The relatively few conspicuously unhappy marriages I have come across... have been in somewhat exceptional circumstances, with very domineering and ambitious fathers insisting upon marriages their daughters dislike, for the sake of their own or the family's standing.²

Among the Nuer, 'strong-minded girls stand up against family pressure on this issue'.³ The notably low incidence of divorce among the Atuot – approximately three per cent in the survey I conducted – can be explained by the same factors. I would argue that Nilotic women are accorded considerable power and freedom on their assumption of adulthood, and in the realisation and control of their sexuality and reproductive capabilities. The division of labour in these societies is based on a complimentary opposition between female and male tasks.⁴

While pastoralism receives special cultural elaboration, senior members of each sex acknowledge and emphasise that this activity has no intrinsic superiority over cultivation and fishing. Indeed, much of their folklore and mythology communicates the primacy of these tasks over and beyond the pastoral onus. The anthropological romance with pastoralism has simply over-emphasised this aspect of Nilotic life, which in fact, as far as labour is concerned, primarily involves males in their 20s and early 30s.⁵ As they advance in years, women assume important roles in the division of family property, as well as in rituals imagined

¹ Evans-Pritchard, 'A Note on Courtship Among the Nuer', p. 124.
² Lienhardt, 'Dinka Representations of the Relations Between the Sexes', pp. 81–2.
³ Evans-Pritchard, 'A Note on Courtship Among the Nuer', p. 126.
⁴ See also Burton, 'Atuot Age Categories and Marriage', and 'Women and Men in Marriage'.
⁵ For those who know of the Dinka first-hand, most would agree that Francis Mading Deng's monograph is laced with indications of male bias. For example, in discussing female possession he argues, 'While they may not rebel against the system, women have customary ways of making themselves heard which the Dinka do not understand as rebellious, but which are essentially ways of expressing dissent. For instance, women get possessed and, while in a state of trance, voice complaints and demands'; The Dinka of the Sudan (New York, 1972), p. 99. It is just as likely that female possession is associated with spirits that figure as physical maladies – see J. W. Burton, 'The Village and the Cattle Camp: aspects of Atuot religion', in Ivan Karp and Charles Bird (eds.), Explorations in African Systems of Thought (Bloomington, 1980). At any rate, the simple functionalism of Deng's analysis betrays a more significant issue: women do make public their complaints, with community approval.
to promote fertility and well-being. This is not because they ‘become more like males’, but because of the recognition of their domestic and jural authority. Unlike many African societies, in the Nilotic world there are no so-called ‘secret societies’ or cults which initiate males into a private world of knowledge. Such phenomena are indeed antithetical to the fundamental moral and religious precepts of Nilotic societies.

One therefore has some difficulty in understanding Alice Singer’s second-hand analysis of women’s rôles among the Nuer. In lieu of a shred of evidence it is asserted that women, in fact, exchange males through the bridewealth system. Were this the case, a formalised system of matrilineages would have long ago emerged. In the apparent attempt to underscore women’s rôles the author seeks to impose a structure of dominance and hierarchy where none exists. In the course of our first fieldwork among the Atuot, my wife and I were fortunate enough to have befriended many individuals of both sexes who were always candid in aswering our questions, and equally straightforward in posing their own. We spent one afternoon in the homestead of Acol and her husband Ijuong in casual, open-ended conversation, and at one point the latter commented:

If there were no women, how could all the people be here? She is the one who created the land. She is the mother of the black people, of the animals, of the cows, of the fish – of all the things in the land. It is women who keep the land.

Later, in the same conversation, Acol (who had borne six children) appeared bemused by my question, ‘Is it better to have a female or male child?’. She replied, ‘What matter does it make? What does this mean? Any child is good, for a child is a gift of the Creator’. Clearly, the question was prompted by a former bias of my own society, and her reply, I believe, indicates the absence of a similar prejudice among the Atuot.

As was the case with so-called ‘warrior grades’ in the minds of colonial officials – who saw them as small-scale armies eager to rebel against the alien presence – so too did early travellers in this region of Africa carry with them prejudices about gender rôles and sex stereotypes. The symmetry and reciprocal complementarity between the sexes in non-centralised African societies, which Leacock correctly observed, was the norm rather than the exception. This equality is misconstrued

3 Cf. Leacock, loc. cit. 1972, p. 34: ‘Unfortunately, the debate over women’s status in primitive society has largely ignored the actual role of women in primitive society in favor of an almost exclusive focus on descent systems’.
by analyses such as that by Singer, where an inverted supremacy is sought when, in praxis, none exists, though on this score, it is interesting to consider the Awemba proverb, ‘Men are the slaves of women’.\(^1\) While anthropologists would wish to declaim the validity of the assertion, they are all to some degree equally slaves of their own cultural preconceptions, though we should like to imagine far less so than ever before.

Therefore, with regard to the case at hand, we are misled in a search for systems of inequality where the indigenous system lacks an equivalent hierarchy of values and statuses. Marilyn Strathern persuasively argues that a ‘straw man of male bias’ informs much of the recent feminist-inspired revisionist anthropology.\(^2\) Kay Milton also presents a number of challenging and substantive criticisms of the ‘new’ or radical-feminist social science:

precisely because feminist anthropologists treat the existence of male dominance as a dogma, it is difficult to establish what in their terms is the existential status of the phenomenon, and what precisely it consists of... Far from being a cultural universal it is rather a manifestation of their own ‘evaluation of the relation between the sexes’.\(^3\)

Unlike many ‘radical feminist social scientists’, Nilotic peoples seem to understand the following fact of human existence: separation creates dependence.

As I argue elsewhere, it is age rather than sex which accrues authority among the Nilotes.\(^4\) In the eyes of these pastoralists the only ‘inferior’ people are those who do not practise their mode of livelihood. Foreigners are only accepted by them as even approaching a level of humanity where they make the effort to ascribe to their way of life. Where it is asserted dogmatically that women in technologically simple societies have an inferior status, one is inclined to reason that a full appreciation of the facts has not been achieved. The inverse proposition is evident in the opinion of a middle-class male that Dinka women are property like horses, and that the people lack a notion of romantic love.\(^5\)

\(^1\) Cited in Driberg, loc. cit. p. 421.
\(^4\) Burton, ‘Atout Age Categories and Marriage’.
and symmetry in gender rôles, even greater than some have suggested. This is not an equality of androgyny, but an equality that emphasises and assumes the complementarity of sexual difference.¹ If accorded the validity this observation claims, then the present essay may be of wider relevance than the Nilotic world in the cross-cultural study of women and society. As K. Gough so ably demonstrates, Nilotic women are fully equal citizens and realise the great singularity of their own self-identity.² It is only through an unwarranted western bias that this could be translated into a status of inferiority and submission.