GHOST MARRIAGE AND THE CATTLE TRADE AMONG THE ATUOT OF THE SOUTHERN SUDAN

JOHN W. BURTON

This essay attempts to interpret the apparent association between participation in the cattle trade of the Southern Sudan and the decreasing frequency of ghost marriage among the Atuot. The commentary on social change is peripheral to the analysis since this phenomenon is a constant rather than extraordinary social process. Arens (1976: 2) has recently emphasized the same point, adding 'social change by its nature is a broad and ill-defined concept that cannot claim a distinct area of enquiry but rather allows for the choice of an infinite variety of areas for discussion.' Because societies and cultures are products of historical processes they are likewise open and subject to perpetual change.

This study begins with a cursory discussion of recent Nilotic history followed by a summary description of the cattle trade. Certain forms of traditional Atuot marriage are then examined. In the conclusion, reference is drawn to data which support the assertion that involvement in this sector of the Sudanese economy directly influences the frequency of ghost marriage.

I

Until well into the present century, Atuot society had been only indirectly affected by administrative and mercantile innovations in the Sudan. Shortly before Sudanese independence in 1956, however, the situation began to change as Atuot men became involved in the embryonic market economy through the cattle trade. This has had a great affect on the traditional pastoral economy because money, unlike cattle, can be regenerated in a comparatively short time. For the Atuot cattle traders, cash has little value by itself, since currency serves only as a measure of the number of cattle that may be bought. Likewise, in areas of western Dinkaland where there has been a considerable amount of inter-marriage with non-Dinka, it is common to hear of bridewealth payment made in cash referred to as 'the cows of marriage.' Clearly the bovine idiom continues to persist.

The exchange of cattle coincides with numerous social processes in Atuot society and of course more widely among the pastoral Nilotes. In the course of animal sacrifice, their central religious rite, Atuot say the life of a 'cow' is offered to God in exchange for human well-being. The exchange of bridewealth is the defining characteristic of Atuot marriage. Cattle are exchanged in order to compensate the bride's family for the loss of a family member. Concurrently, the new bride is expected to 'replace the cows' of her husband's family by giving birth to many children. Cattle have also been exchanged for agricultural products in times of famine and traded for spears, hoes and a variety of articles fashioned by indigenous iron workers. In each of these situations the verb that describes the act of exchange (waar) also connotes balanced reciprocal relations, since the end results are beneficial to both parties. In contrast, buying and selling imply either profit or loss.

During the British colonial period in the Southern Sudan administrators gradually subdued hostilities between the Nilotic peoples, whose 'inter-tribal' relations were
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previously characterized by endemic warfare and cattle raiding. The geographic extent of reciprocal economic exchange was therefore necessarily more limited than at present. When reciting the traditions of the Atuot, elders emphasized that it was impossible to traverse unknown country in search of pasture for cattle. The loss of life or property would have been the inevitable consequence. A passage from an Atuot ox song expresses the same point in suggesting that ‘a fool and his cattle are soon parted.’

You the sons of Atuot,
Do not take the bull to the side of baar [an area of salty grass
in the western Nuer country].
The troubles of Nuer have befallen the Dinka.
You the sons of Atuot,
Do not imagine that taking cattle to pasture is an easy thing,
You are anxious to take the cattle to pasture in baar.
But later you will remain with only the ropes [of the cattle].

The most convincing evidence of greater restriction of economic reciprocity (e.g. bridewealth exchange) in the past is reflected in the frequency of inter- and intra-ethnic marriage. In 1977 84% of extant Atuot marriages were ethnically endogamous.

Opening the way for colonial entry into the Upper Nile Basin, ivory and slave traders intensified inter-ethnic hostilities by setting one pastoral group against another in pursuit of their booty. The tactic of divide and rule was a typical ploy throughout the duration of colonial presence in Africa, though according to Gray (1961: 48) ‘in the Southern Sudan this exploitation of tribal hostilities was particularly destructive.’ Initially the indigenous peoples were offered cattle and beads in exchange for ivory and slaves, but as dependable sources waned, hostilities turned instead against the foreigners who then adopted the more traditional practice of cattle raiding. As a result, cattle obtained by theft became the indispensable medium of exchange in the Nilotic Sudan (Gray 1961: 49).

For some of the Nilotic groups the appearance of the British at the turn of the century was a welcomed event. The newest cadre of aliens was able to enforce a minimal degree of political order in a land where, for centuries before, quite the opposite state of affairs had prevailed. However, throughout their period of tenure in the Sudan, an orderly system of administration eluded the British. Indicative of this was the fact that as late as 1943, thirty-nine people died in the course of a cattle raid led by the Cece Dinka against the Apak section of the Atuot. Somewhat paradoxically, while the Atuot were among the last peoples of the Southern Sudan to be ‘administered,’ they were among the first to exploit certain benefits ensuing from the possibility of safe travel throughout the countryside. Shortly before the Sudan became an independent nation, one official suggested that Atuot appeared to be more ‘cash conscious’ than the majority of Nilotic peoples, citing as evidence the observation that they chose to pay taxes in cash rather than surrendering an equivalent value in cattle. This inclination was related to the development of a cattle trade in the Southern Sudan, in which the Atuot now play a dominant role. There seems to be no entirely satisfactory explanation for this phenomenon since the decision to trade cattle is made by individuals for personal reasons. However, the consideration of a number of related factors may be helpful in positing a sociological interpretation of these events.

Mythological and historical sources suggest that Atuot were at one time less endowed with bovine wealth than at present. For example, in their answers to questions about bridewealth, Atuot men often pointed out that the exchange involved fewer cattle during the recent past. Similarly, compensation for the loss of human
life through the medium of cattle also demanded fewer animals. An equally significant factor is that the reverse exchange of cattle after the settlement of a marriage was unknown to them, yet now this is considered an essential feature of legal marriage. Recognition of the custom is the direct result of an increasing frequency of intermarriage with the neighboring Dinka, who suggest that 'reverse payment' has existed as long as the institution of marriage. One comment by an Atuot friend is pertinent to the analysis suggested here. 'Now since we have a boundary with Dinka [i.e. cannot at the present time openly fight them or attempt to raid their cattle], we have this reverse exchange of cattle. Before, Atuot never married Dinka because they are evil-eyed people.'

A few points may be emphasized before continuing. First, Atuot herds have evidently increased in size in the recent past. Second, in earlier times, in the absence of a centralized national government and armed police, safe movement with herds of cattle across alien territories was unlikely. When viewed diachronically these two inferences seem related to Atuot participation in the cattle trade today. A less significant factor is the introduction of cash, which by itself has little value since the majority of cattle traders are not interested in amassing capital, but are concerned with increasing the size of their herds. The latter observation is reflected in the words of a neophyte in the cattle trade who once told me he was 'selling cattle to buy the money of the government,' in order to purchase additional cattle.

MAP 1: Nilotic Peoples of Sudan.
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II

One occasionally hears Dinka speak of the Atuot cattle traders as a people who 'have the patience to drive chickens to Juba.' In response to this characterization Atuot friends have remarked that driving chickens might better be considered the work of Dinka, yet the observation does serve to emphasize the physical privation which must be endured in order to profit from the trade. The more lucrative markets, in the town of Wau, Raga, Juba and Yambio, range in distance from two hundred to four hundred and fifty miles from Atuotland. Because cattle must be watered and allowed ample time for grazing en route between the market centers, driving them is an arduous and time consuming burden. Younger men, usually third or fourth sons are the most frequent participants. The common motivation for suffering the discomforts of extensive travel by foot is a desire to acquire cash with which to buy cattle for their own marriages.

Rights over the use and distribution of cattle are shared collectively by elder members of patrilineal descent groups. Thus, even while his physical energy is expended in the pursuit, the young trader does not 'own' any of the animals he later brings to the cattle camp of his elders. Rather, having significantly increased the size of the family herd in the course of a number of years, the younger son gains the right to assert his opinion about how the cattle should eventually be allocated. As the Atuot say, 'he now has a word to be heard.' Traditionally the same individual who seeks cattle for his marriage would either have had to wait patiently until a decision was made, or forgo his chance to marry. To date, the capitalist enterprise has not altered the time-honoured notion of 'ownership.'

The cattle trade continues throughout the year, interrupted by flooding of other ecological irregularities along routes normally transversed. Atuot have erected temporary cattle camps or 'staging stations' which dot the terrain between market centers. Over the past twenty years, during which time the trade has flourished, small enclaves of Atuot settlement have grown up a short distance from the towns. The social composition of the camps is in continual flux since traders come and go, while the physical locations have become relatively permanent.

Animals considered most suitable for marketing include oxen of little aesthetic value, bulls and dams that are not expected to calve again. In other words, livestock driven to one of these markets are most often those animals which would eventually be culled from their herds, either in payment of taxes or in the course of sacrifice. The cattle are purchased by an indefinable variety of traders, who keep them for their own use or move on to sell them in another market. Increasingly, the most predictable buyers are Arab merchants who have taken up residence in the Southern Sudan who slaughter the cattle to sell as beef in the market towns.

During the course of fieldwork among the Atuot I spoke on a number of occasions with cattle traders in their camps near Juba and Wau. The following text encapsulates the general reasoning behind their labor:

Why are we doing this? There are things we want which do not come to us if we just remain in the cattle camps in Atuotland. First there is wealth. We are here to get money and buy cows. We see a great many cows and buy the ones that are good and bring them back with us. I come here and see the big things of the government, but these are not the things we want. Even though our heads are beaten by the sun and our wives are not here to cook food, we sell bulls and castrated stock and get the money of the government to buy calves. If I have a good bull to sell in Yirol [the administrative center of Atuotland] it will bring seventy pounds [approximately US $200.00]. When I bring the same bull to Juba I will get one hundred and twenty pounds [approximately US $350.00]. We look for the good cows and now we can walk the land without fearing the hatreds and feuds of before.
A dam that has calved only once or a fecund cow is considered the most valuable acquisition. If a man can purchase these animals with a degree of regularity he dramatically increases the potential size of the herd tethered in his camp. Relevant here are the comments of another man. 'What we sell are the bulls. Now when I get the money of the government I can look to buy cows. Before I could only get a cow with the marriage of my daughter. The cows only came from marriage before.'

At first glance one might be inclined to reason that involvement in the cash economy has reinforced traditional social and cultural forms, evidenced, for example, by the continuity of bridewealth exchange. Such conclusions would support the widely accepted (though archaically romantic) notion that pastoral peoples are by inclination conservative and uninterested in a changing world. Conversely, cattle trading could be cited as an important element in social change. Individuals who trade cattle acquire a wider spectrum of experience, and in so doing learn Dinka and Arabic, which open up new worlds for them. Neither of these perspectives could accurately represent the extant phenomena. It is suggested here that if Atuot continue trading cattle, one form of marriage which was more frequent in the past might soon cease to exist, introducing a fundamental change in Atuot social life. They trade cattle in order to acquire animals for bridewealth, yet few Atuot would point out the radical changes which might ensue. In this sense, it is helpful to bear in mind the analytical distinction proposed by Merton (1968) between latent and manifest function in light of the following data.

III

Ghost marriage traditionally took place in the name of a man who died without having been married or for a man who died lacking a son to 'carry his name.' In rare circumstances, should the only surviving heir be female, another woman would be married to her in order to bear children in the name of the dead pater, thereby maintaining legal title over cattle within a 'patrilineal' group. In essence ghost marriage is identical to the simple legal union of two spouses, for bridewealth cattle are exchanged between the family of the deceased and the paternal kin of the bride. Those individuals who would have been expected to contribute livestock for the marriage of the deceased bear the responsibility of arranging a marriage in his name. The selection of a suitor to actually cohabit with the bride is largely a matter of her own discretion, made in accord with the proscriptive norms of incest. The children born of this union are known as 'the children of the ghost.' Atuot explain the practice by saying 'it is done so a man's name will be heard tomorrow.'

The word cuong, which designates a ghost marriage has a variety of other meanings. The same term can connote 'to hold straight, upright' as when sinking a post into the ground. In another context, when leading a dance the singer may reprimand the dancers to kong cuong, 'make a straight line.' Anxious to voice their opinions in a heated argument Atuot may also exclaim kong cuong, implying 'now you just hold it a minute!' The central notion expressed in ghost marriage per se is the intention to 'hold the name of a man straight' so he will 'stand' or be remembered. An accurate record of the incidence of ghost marriages could only be derived from a prolonged period of residence among those who share a common ancestry, though unfortunately this is not often possible. Even in ideal circumstances the task would prove to be difficult. As Evans-Pritchard (1939) has shown for the neighboring Nuer, lineal genealogies are at one point condensed or 'telescoped' thereby obfuscating the possibility of documenting actual relationships and lines of descent. I take
some refuge in the caveat of the master ethnographer who notes, 'indeed, I know of
no more difficult task among Nilotic peoples than that of obtaining correct
genealogies' (Evans-Pritchard 1945: 29). It is likely that some people are ignorant of
the fact that a particular marriage was performed in the name of a ghost. I have also
known people to deny the information (even while it was confirmed by others),
seeking instead to be known as the direct descendant of an individual, for political
or economic ends. There is a psychological parameter involved here too, for one who
lives among them gains the impression that 'the child of a ghost' is an expression
intimating the status of 'orphan,' a fate Atuot lament. Genealogies I obtained
indicate that in the generation of contemporary elders roughly 30% of marriages
were made in the name of a ghost, that is, for a dead man. I was unaware of even a
single ghost marriage among the present generation of recently married males, yet I
would also want to qualify this conclusion by emphasizing the degree of ambiguity
inherent in the investigation.

Seniority of age determines the order of marriage among sons of a single father.
Hence the eldest son is given first priority to use cattle for bridewealth, followed in
order by the second, third or fourth sons of a man's family. This prescription often
results in open hostility between brothers of different mothers, who may be close
enough in age for each of them to consider his own demands above the other. The
few cases of fratricide of which I learned were explained as the result of similar
confrontations. Since a ghost marriage was arranged when, for example, an elder
brother died before having married, the marriage of the next son would have been
delayed indefinitely. The cattle which would have been allocated for his marriage
were used to marry a woman in the name of the deceased. The ideological sanctions
for this are expressed in Atuot notions concerning ghostly vengeance and the curse
of the dead. A ghost marriage was arranged only in the names of males who were
'next in line' to be married, but died before this was possible. On the other hand, the
youngest son was sometimes given the chance to marry instead of ghost marriage for
an elder brother, though only to a woman from a poor family, which accepted a
token bridewealth in expectation of better days. There is a most important reason to
surmise that violent death through warfare accounted in part for a higher frequency
of ghost marriage in the past. Those herding the cattle—young men who were of the
age deemed proper for their first marriage—were the same people who died in cattle
raids and warfare. Thus, if 30% is more or less an accurate figure (and it may be an
underestimate) this suggests that a significant proportion of the male population
inherited an obligation to use their bridewealth cattle for the marriage of a deceased
kinsman. Clearly, the institution of ghost marriage would have been an important
facet of Atuot economic and social organization.

This argument has assumed that if herd sizes were smaller in the past and if fewer
males were able to marry in their lifetimes, a higher rate of ghost marriage could
have been expected. Again it is necessary to state that this reasoning is difficult to
defend unequivocally, since the data are complicated by a degree of genealogical
ambiguity, and further, under normal circumstances Atuot would not consider it
important to volunteer the detailed information unless there was some practical
dilemma that required accurate reconstruction of relationships. Additional support
for this argument lies in a projection of future processes. In the contemporary
setting cash profit realized in the cattle trade is re-invested in livestock. As a result
herd sizes increase and will continue to do so at a supra-physiological rate. Hence,
more cattle will be at hand for settling a greater number of marriages. The genealogical
gaps left by the need to carry out a ghost marriage will begin to be filled in.

Evans-Pritchard (1945: 38) raises an issue of interest for comparative purposes:
The number of widow concubines and of old women without mates (who are also widows) suggests a very high mortality rate among males. This is partly due to the constant fighting that used to go on, and still to a lesser extent goes on between Nuer. A number of additional factors are cited to account for the extremely high rate of ghost marriage among the Nuer (ibid: 7-8):

They [ghost marriages] must be almost as numerous as simple legal families. Not only do many youths die before marriage—and this was yet more the case before the government restricted fighting—but, for one reason or another married men do not always have male children to continue their line. A man's children may die. He and his wife may die. His widow may have no children or go back to her own people and be married to another man. He may beget only daughters.

The Atuot have more or less stopped raiding, but their wealth in cattle has increased as they have become more adept at trading. Within living memory they suggest that the age of first marriage for males has decreased from about forty to twenty-five or thirty. In addition, they note the average or ideal number of cattle expected as bridewealth has increased, but to a lesser extent. The Atuot have in the past two decades increased the size of their herds largely through profitable involvement in the cattle trade. Among the more significant changes in the economic sphere is that younger men who participate in the trade are now recognized to have the right to demand that their desire for marriage in their own lifetimes be realized.

IV

I do not suggest that a causal relationship can be posited between the comparatively recent innovation of cattle trading and a concomitant decline in the frequency of Atuot ghost marriage. Instead, an attempt has been made to demonstrate how the two phenomena appear inter-related, both in the present and, to a certain degree, historically. The association is partially confirmed by Atuot. Men with whom I discussed this problem agreed that with larger herds younger sons would be more likely to have a chance to marry in their lifetimes and a single marriage would be less likely to deplete a herd. The projected younger age of first marriage for males would lessen the age disparity between them and their first wives and in this event, the change would be reflected in a notably different demographic structure. Such a diversion is evaluated positively by the Atuot since ideally the changes will increase the size of families, thereby assuring the memory of their names. For an older man or woman, few of life's offerings are more rewarding than the realization of this end. So very different in consequence is the somber lament of a bachelor who sings:

The cattle of my father have finished,
I am a man left behind,
implying that in the absence of a wife (that is, cattle to be exchanged for a wife) to bear children in his name, he has already 'ceased to exist.'

It seems certain that no one favors having to relinquish his rights to the use of cattle for a marriage that produces nothing in his own name, yet the practice is enjoined by a fundamental moral obligation. At the time of writing the cash medium has not yet affected the traditional definition of ownership, for cattle still unify rather than separate persons who inherit rights to their use. The Atuot notion of individual ownership is likely to receive additional emphasis in the assertion of a man's right to marry a woman within his own lifetime, thereby altering one form of marriage and expressing anew a basic and traditional aspect of Atuot society.
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NOTES

1 The Atuot are a group of about 35,000 Nilotic speaking pastoralists who live some fifty miles west of the Nile in the Southern Sudan. Known as Atuot by their Nuer and Dinka neighbors, they refer to themselves as nei cieng Reel, 'the people of the land of Reel.' Atuotland is bordered by the Agar, Ceiic and Alab Dinka, and to the south by the Mandari. Field research among the Atuot (October 1977–November 1978) was made possible with grants provided by the Social Science Research Council and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, whose assistance is gratefully acknowledged.

2 The population of administrative centers in the Southern Sudan grew dramatically in the course of the recently ended civil war. Those who remained in the countryside during the war were often accused by Arab soldiers of aiding the guerrilla forces. The cattle trade seems to have grown in proportion to the increasing town populations.

3 A more comprehensive discussion of Atuot marriage is unfortunately impossible here but requires a separate essay.

4 Deng (1972: 79) offers an interesting perspective in contrast: 'It may be that modern government has increased the expression of aggressiveness since it is now known that there can be intervention to stop unrestrained fighting. In the past more self-restraint was necessary.'

REFERENCES


Résumé

MARIAGE FANTÔME ET COMMERCE DU BÉTAIL CHEZ LES ATUOT DANS LE SUD DU SOUDAN

On tente ici de déchiffrer les rapports qui existent entre une nouvelle forme de commercialisation du bétail où les animaux sont destinés à un marché et le déclin parallèle du mariage fantôme chez les Atuot. Cette analyse semblerait indiquer que la diffusion de cette activité chez les Atuot pourrait entraîner des changements démographiques importants dans leur société. De plus, tandis que l'on observe la régression d'une forme traditionnelle de mariage, le commerce du bétail risque fort d'encourager le développement d'une échange de prix de la fiancée.