AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF ‘BITTERNESS’:
CUCUMBER AND SACRIFICE RECONSIDERED*

BY

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1. ‘A WILD CUCUMBER IS AN OX’

In Nuer Religion (1956) Evans-Pritchard writes that the Nuer of the southern Sudan may sacrifice a wild cucumber in place of an ox. If no beast is available Nuer may sacrifice the Cucumis prophetarum, a knobbly cucumber called kwol yang, cow’s cucumber.

When a cucumber is used as a sacrificial victim Nuer speak of it as on ox. In doing so they are asserting something rather more than that it takes the place of an ox (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 203, 128).

This ‘a cumcumber is an ox’ proposition, together with the ‘twins are birds’ proposition (Evans-Pritchard 1936; 1956: 80, 128-33, 141), has puzzled and charmed many philosophers as well as anthropologists. Some thought this issue was relevant to the problem of rationality or ‘prelogical mentality’ in ‘primitive thought’ (see articles by Gellner and MacIntyre in Wilson 1970; Firth 1966). Hayley tried to explain it through a psycho-analytical approach (1968). Levi-Strauss referred to it from his own perspective on totemistic thought (1962a; 1962b).

Evans-Pritchard’s own interpretation of the proposition is as follows. The resemblance between a cucumber and an ox is ‘conceptual, not perceptual’. So the equation ‘rests on qualitative analogy’. And ‘the expression is asymmetrical’ as ‘a cucumber is an ox, but an ox is not a cucumber’ (1956: 128). Then his argument is focused on the ‘twins-birds’ proposition. The point is that a statement of ‘A is B’ expressing a dyadic relation can only be understood in a triadic relation by referring to the third party, C. And this C is God (kwoth). That is, as both twins and birds are classified as children of God, they have a similar character in respect to God. Evans-Pritchard extends this argument and writes,
'A cucumber is equivalent to an ox in respect to God who accepts it in the place of an ox' (1956: 128-42).

Evans-Pritchard took pains in the construction of this argument, while discussing issues of totemism on the one hand and criticizing the theory of the prelogical mentality on the other. His explanatory model, however, is not fully conclusive, as he himself admits (1956: 140). What is the 'conceptual resemblance' and 'qualitative analogy' between a cucumber and an ox? Why can they be equivalent in relation to God? Why is one specific wild plant chosen rather than another wild or cultivated plant? These questions remain unanswered.

In this paper I would like to go back to these basic questions and try to account for them. In doing so references are made to other relevant ethnographies on Nilotic peoples other than the Nuer, particularly the Dinka (Lienhardt 1961), Atuot (Burton 1981) and Pari, all of whom use wild cucumbers in sacrifices. The data on the Pari were obtained during my field research among them. I do this not only because the data presented by Evans-Pritchard and the interpretation by him on this issue may not give us a satisfactory answer, but because I believe comparison on a limited ethnographical issue among a related set of peoples may, as Evans-Pritchard argued (1951: 91-2; 1965: 29), lead us to a profounder understanding of each case. First, I discuss in detail the actual way and the ritual context in which a cucumber is sacrificed in each people. It will be shown that a cucumber is used in specific contexts, not in all sacrifices. Second, I try to argue that the notion of 'bitterness' which is found among the Dinka and Pari may be a key to explain not only the 'cucumber and ox' issue but also Nilotic religious philosophy in general.

2. Wild cucumber and sacrifice among four nilotic peoples

Dinka

Godfrey Lienhardt's *Divinity and Experience* reports that a 'sacred healing cucumber' which is called *kuoljok* (*Cucumis prophetarum*) may be sacrificed as a temporary substitution for an animal victim. When sacrificed, it is split and cast aside (1961: 257). This cucumber is also used for protection against sickness. When used, it is 'rubbed on the chest, head and back of a sick man' (1961: 209).
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Though it is not clearly stated, what is rubbed is probably not a whole cucumber but its juice. Every Dinka homestead is likely to display one or two cucumbers reserved for future use on a forked branch which is a potential shrine (1961: 257-9).

What should be noted is that this cucumber (kuoljok) is associated with the Powers, by the jok (jok-Power) part of its name, and is noted for its acute 'bite'. This 'bite' is a translation of a Dinka notion kec, 'which is a technical term for effectiveness in prayer and invocation, and means to 'bite' or 'be strong' as hot and bitter things are 'biting', a sensation at once painful and pleasant'. An important master of the fishing-spear is also considered to be kec (1961: 209). Lienhardt clearly states, 'The rationale of the healing powers attributed to them [cucumbers] is that they are intensely bitter (kec, like effective invocations) and that, when ripe, they turn a greenish-blue colour suggesting to the Dinka a stormy sky, and hence, Divinity [nhialić]' (1961: 257).

The above description and explanation is very significant to our discussion here. A wild cucumber is associated with the Powers and the rationale of its healing powers is attributed to its intense 'bitterness'. And the notion of 'bitterness' has a wide connotation, which is applied to effective prayers and invocations and powerful masters of the fishing-spear. We shall return to this point later.

I would like to examine Lienhardt's ethnography in more detail: in what context and how is a cucumber sacrificed? As we have seen, he writes that it may be sacrificed (in actuality it is split and cast aside) as a temporary substitute for an animal victim. Then can it be a substitute in any sacrifice? This point is not clear, but presumably not. Besides rubbing a cucumber on the body of a sick man, we find only one ritual in which it is used (it is not certain whether it can be called a sacrifice). This is a case observed at a fishing camp:

One evening there was a quarrel between a woman and the little daughter of a master of the fishing-spear of the Pagong clan who controlled the fishing in that part of the river. The woman struck the little girl, and threw her basket of fish into the river. The master of the fishing-spear intervened, and there was an angry altercation. The result of this was that the master of the fishing-spear, in a rage, called upon Divinity and his clan-divinities to send the abundant fish away to the swamps downstream…. Later in the afternoon [the next day] it was said that he had relented, and was going to perform a ceremony to bring the fish back to Wan Alel [the place name of the camp]. He and his paternal nephews split several of the little yellow cucumbers (kuoljok) which are used for sacramental healing and blessing and placed them in
a gourd of water. They then floated the gourd on the river, and drawing in with them by a piece of apač grass started from a point a little way upstream and walked slowly downstream invoking so that those on the bank could hear ... [texts of invocations are omitted]... The men then came out of the river, and the crowd was aspered with water from the gourd. Several people then entered the river one by one, and drew the water towards them with their hands in the direction from which the fish were expected to come (1961: 224-6).

This ceremony is, I suppose, performed in order to restore the order of the fishing camp which was disturbed by the anger of the master of the fishing-spear and by the intervention of Divinity and clan divinities invoked by him. Though Lienhardt does not state this clearly, the role of cucumbers in the above case is the same as that in protecting and healing sicknesses, if we consider the act of rubbing cucumbers as a means to restore the order of the body.

Nuer

In practice in what context do the Nuer sacrifice cucumbers? Three different cases are found in Nuer Religion: after the burial of a dead person, cleansing rual (incestuous relations and their consequences) and after having bad dreams.

Since death is an evil thing, all people, except for two or three who dig the grave, should keep away from the homestead of the dead. After the burial, ‘the master of ceremonies of the dead man’s family dips a handful of wild rice in water and asperses the grave-diggers with it’. ‘They then go to the nearest stream to wash themselves. They may not drink water before they have been aspered and have washed lest they die of the consequences (nueer)’ (1956: 144-5). Then after a few days a sacrifice is performed:

A few days later the master of ceremonies sprinkles all the people of the homestead and close kin who live nearby in the same manner and sacrifices an animal to God, an ox if the dead man had a large herd, otherwise one of the flock, in front of the dead man’s hut. He also addresses the ghost and tells him that he has been taken away and must turn his face to the ground and not trouble the living.... If the family have no animal to sacrifice the master of ceremonies sacrifices by cutting in two a wild cucumber. ‘The half of the living, the half of the children, the right half, remains outside, being placed in the thatch of the hut. The half of the dead man is thrown into the bush’. With it is thrown out of the village the contagion of death. They say of this sacrifice ‘ba kiel pity ka del’, ‘(the dead man) is expiated in the earth with a goat’, and that the badness goes into the earth with the blood and the chyme (1956: 145-6).
From the above quotation it is apparent that the left half of the cucumber is thrown out in order to cast away 'the contagion of death'. Evil consequences of death, like those of incest, are contagious. The mortuary ceremony, which is held after four to six months from the burial, is called cuol woc, 'because its purpose is to wipe out (woc) the debt (cuol) which Nuer feel to be due on account of the death' (1956: 146). This point is consistent with the intention of the sacrifice after the burial.

The Nuer believe that incest may bring misfortunes not only to the persons concerned but to their close relatives. The closer the relationship between those who committed incest, the more serious the punishment which would fall on them. When the incest is considered to be very serious, an ox must be sacrificed. If it is not so serious, a sacrifice of a goat or sheep is sufficient. When it is considered to be very slight, dosing of 'incest medicine' is an adequate treatment, and 'if it is deemed wise to make sacrifice, a cucumber or a pendulous fruit of the sausage tree is considered a sufficient offering'. In case of an animal sacrifice, the victim is cut vertically into two from head to tail and 'the guilty persons drink incest medicine infused in the gall of the victim'. In the case of a vegetable offering, a cucumber 'is cut in two and the the left half is thrown away and the contents of the right half are squeezed into water and drunk by the partners to the act'. A fruit of the sausage tree (*Kigelia aethiopica*) is also cut in two. And all these cuttings are called *bakene rual*, the cutting, or splitting, in two of the incest (1956: 184).

The last case in which a cucumber is sacrificed is in the event of having bad dreams. Evans-Pritchard writes that Nuer sacrifice a cucumber in minor anxieties such as having bad dreams and committing slight incest. This differs slightly from what was described above, as the juice of cucumbers is rubbed on the body instead of being drunk.

It is treated as though it were an animal victim. It is presented and consecrated, an invocation is said over it, and it is slain by the spear, being cut in half along its edge. The left, or bad, half is then thrown away and the right, or good, half is squeezed and its juice and seeds rubbed on the chest and forehead of the officiant and maybe on others present. This half is afterwards put in the thatch over the entrance to the byre, or sometimes to the dwelling-hut (1956: 203).

The common features of these three cases are: a cucumber is sacrificed in place of an animal victim; it is cut in two and the left half is thrown away in order to cast away the 'debt' or 'pollution'.
According to Evans-Pritchard, these sacrifices fall into the class of 'personal sacrifices'. They are performed in order to get rid of the danger caused by Spirit's intervention in human beings. They are sacrifices of 'desacralization'. The other class is of 'collective sacrifices' whose intention is 'sacralization' (1956: 198-9). Then are cucumbers also sacrificed in collective sacrifices? We do not get an answer from Nuer Religion, as Evans-Pritchard's discussion is mostly focused on 'personal sacrifices' and little information is available on 'collective' ones.

**Atuot**

According to Burton a cucumber is associated with God (Decau, Creator) and is sacrificed to call for rain. At the homestead of a family who has the power to make rain there is a shrine ('home for Awumkuei', Awumkuei is the ox name of rain) with the cucumber planted at its base. Atuot explain:

When you make a home for Awumkuei, you bring five things. Four are *kuol* and the fifth is a sheep. God wants the wild cucumber first, and then the sacrifice of a sheep. We know when a man has been possessed by *kwoth* [the spirit associated with rain] he shakes and wants nothing to eat but the wild cucumber. Even if it is for ten days, he wants nothing else to eat. That is why God wants the sacrifice of wild cucumbers for rain (1981: 88).

From this statement it is not certain how cucumbers are sacrificed for God. It is also said that in the cattle camp cucumbers are sacrificed 'at the base of the cattle peg that serves as a shrine for God in the camp' by 'people with the power of *ring* [flesh, or the power of life]' (1981: 88). The purpose and procedure of the sacrifice, however, is not written.

There is a more elaborate kind of shrine for the power of rain called *luak kwoth*, 'cattle byre of rain'. An Atuot explains about the rain-making ceremony which is performed in the shrine:

When my grandfather was created at Korlil he was given rain by God. When I call rain I go to the *luak kwoth* and go inside alone. I fill the gourd with water and bring eight wild cucumbers, and I put these in with the water. I put some of the water over my feet and wash my hands in it. Then I wash my big fishing-spear with the water and thrust it into the ground near the calabash. Then I pour the water over my head and go outside to sit in the sun, and when it is midday, the rain will come. If it does not rain I sacrifice a sheep early in the morning, when no one else is there, and then it will rain.... (1981: 89).
This act of pouring a calabash of water with cucumbers in it reminds us of the similar aspersion at a Dinka fishing camp which was discussed before. And from this statement we know that pouring water with cucumbers in it is a kind of substitution for the sacrifice of a sheep. The substitution, however, is not exactly between a cucumber and a sheep, since the former is not destroyed as is the latter.

Burton argues that cucumbers are appropriate for sacrifice to call for rain for two reasons. The first is a botanical character of the cucumber. It is ‘one of the few species of plants to grow in Atuotland with a moist center’. The second reason is a symbolic meaning that the Atuot attach to it. ‘The oozing liquid that seeps from an incision of the plant is compared with the moving of blood and life-giving powers of rain’ (1981: 89-90). On its association with rain he notes another point: the name of cucumber, kuol, is also the term referring to the season when the first rain starts (April) (1981: 47, 148).

When the cucumber is sacrificed, it is addressed as ‘the cow of God’ and sometimes it is spoken of as the ‘poor man’s cow’. An Atuot statement on how it is sacrificed is quoted:

*Kuol* follows God. When killed it is cut in half and thrown up into the air. If it falls with one half up and one half down, this shows that God is angry. If both halves land facing up or down, then God has accepted the sacrifice (1981: 90).

It seems from the context that this is how a cucumber is sacrificed to call for rain. This act of cutting the cucumber in two halves (sacrifice) and throwing them up into the air has a divining aspect. On the one hand the cucumber-cutting reminds us of the Nuer case (though the left half is thrown out, unlike the Atuot case), and on the other it reminds us of the case of Mandari, the southern neighbours of the Atuot. In the ‘monthly rite of elimination’ of Mandari which is held by each elementary family, a cucumber equated with a cow is cut in two and thrown on the ground. If at least a half falls facing upwards, it is a good omen. If it falls facing downwards, it is a bad sign. So the cucumber-cutting has a prognosticatory aspect (Baxton 1973: 237-9).

From Burton’s Atuot ethnography we know that a cucumber is associated with rain and is sacrificed to call for it, that it may be a substitution for a sheep, and that it is spoken to as a ‘cow of God’.
It is sacrificed, I suppose, to cast away the intervention of God or the spirit of rain which caused the disorder of rain and to restore proper rain. It is not clear, however, how it is sacrificed. And is the usage of cucumber really limited only to ceremonies associated with rain?

**Pari**

On various occasions the Pari sacrifice wild cucumbers which are called *akalajo* (sing.). Since this cucumber has not yet been identified, it is not certain that it belongs to the same species as *Cucumis prophetarum* of the Nuer (kuol), Dinka (kuoljok) and Atuot (kuol). While the fruit of *Cucumis prophetarum* is covered with soft spines, that of *akalajo* is covered with blunt tubercles. And leaves of the former are more deeply lobed than those of the latter. *Akalajo* can be tentatively identified as *Cucumis figarei* (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 203; Broun and Massey 1929: 102; Agnew 1974: 175, 179). This wild creeping plant is very common in Pariland, especially around homesteads and in cultivated sites. The fruit, being broad ovoid and 5 to 6 cm long, changes colour from green to yellow in the dry season. It has a very bitter taste and is not edible. As I will argue later, this 'bitterness' (*kec*, as in Dinka) has a fundamental significance in the consideration of the rationale of cucumbers' appropriateness in particular ritual acts.

How and on what occasions do the Pari use cucumbers? I observed several times that they were sacrificed in the burial ceremony. When a person dies, he or she is buried in the compound of the homestead which is enclosed with a wooden fence. After the burial is completed, an ox or a bull if the dead is an adult, or a goat if he is a child, is slaughtered and its stomach contents (*weny*) are sprinkled on the grave and smeared on the body of attendants. If an animal is not available, cucumbers are crushed and their juice is smeared. The stomach contents of an animal and cucumbers may be used at the same time. The body parts on which both of them are smeared are insteps, knees, middle of the chest, forehead and top of the head. When the juice is smeared, seeds of the cucumber remain on the skin, sticking to it for some time. This, as well as stomach contents smeared on the body, serves as a mark which indicates that the person has attended the burial ceremony.

As we saw before, the Nuer also sacrifice a cucumber after the
burial if an animal is not available. The cucumber is, however, cut in two, the left half is thrown away and its juice is not used. It is after committing minor incest or having bad dreams that the juice of the right half squeezed in water is drunk or its juice and seeds are rubbed on the chest and forehead of attendants.

I heard that cucumbers are also sacrificed after murder. A murderer is said to be affected by mira, the power of the blood of the killed, and if he contacts someone, he would also be affected by it and become sick. The murderer’s children especially are in danger of contracting leprosy, so the state of mira is contagious. In order to prevent the effect of this, a goat should be slaughtered and its stomach contents smeared on the body (the same parts as in the case of burial) of those concerned. If a murder takes place in the bush where a goat is not available, a cucumber or some soil of an anthill put in water would do (Kurimoto 1986: 136). Informants explained to me that these items are smeared on the body in order to remove the ‘smell of blood’.

When I was in the field, a Toposa man came wandering to Pariland. The Toposa sometimes raid cattle camps of the Pari and are an old foe. On finding him Pari men killed him. A man back from the scene came to visit my friend’s home where I was also present. Before greeting us, he gave us a piece of stomach contents of goat. We smeared it on our bodies. Though he was not one of the murderers, he was affected by mira, since he was at the scene, and it could have been transmitted to us unless we smeared ourselves with the stomach contents.

Ghostly vengeance(cien) is believed by them to be very powerful and destructive. An effective ghostly vengeance may cause misfortunes to the community, such as drought, fire and cattle raids. If the members of the ruling age grade,2 who take the responsibility in maintaining the welfare and prosperity of the society, reach the conclusion that the cause of such a disaster is the ghostly vengeance of someone, they exhume his grave and throw the corpse away in the bush or into the river so that the ghostly vengeance becomes ineffective. I heard that at least three men’s graves were exhumed between 1982 and 1984, as they were accused of having made ghostly vengeance to stop rain. When a grave is exhumed, a goat or sheep and cucumbers are sacrificed and the stomach contents and juice are sprinkled on the corpse and smeared on the body of attendants (Kurimoto 1986: 121-2, 142).
Another usage of cucumbers is associated with mental distraction or 'madness' which is called winy. A person who is affected by winy may have a severe headache, tear his hair, cry and shout or become unconscious and fall down. The first treatment to reduce the symptoms is to crush a cucumber, make him smell it and smear its juice on his head. If this does not help and the sickness continues, then the patient may be diagnosed by a diviner-healer (ajwa) as being 'caught' by jwok (Power, Ultra-human Force). In this case he should be 'cut off' or 'released' from jwok. Should all efforts to cure him fail, he may become a diviner-healer which is a kind of last resort to cure winy (Kurimoto 1988: 286-7).\(^3\)

A Pari told me that a person affected by winy would devour cucumbers which under normal circumstances no one dares to taste. This reminds us of the Atuot episode that a man possessed by kwoth shakes and eats nothing but cucumbers. In another paper I described a case in which a diviner-healer claimed to be able to locate magical items which had been buried to stop rain by smelling them out. When he found them he became unconscious, but recovered after having the stomach contents of a sheep smeared on his head (Kurimoto 1986: 139). It seems that the roles of a cucumber and a sheep are the same in bringing mental and physical disorder of the body back to normal.

The last occasion on which cucumbers are used is fire. When a homestead is burnt and the fire has gone out, cucumbers are crushed and their juice is smeared on the body of residents. I did not come across any actual case, but I heard this is done so that the disaster would not happen again. I said before that the cause of fire might be attributed to a ghostly vengeance. I am not certain, however, that this usage of cucumbers is associated with it.

We have seen five different occasions on which cucumbers are used: burial, murder, exhumation, mental distraction and fire. In each case cucumbers are crushed and the juice is smeared on the body. They are not cut in two as the Nuer and Atuot do. Though we might say that they are substitutions for animal victims, they are not treated as if they were animals, nor spoken to as oxen.

3. Cucumber and sacrifice, reconsidered

Having examined the role of cucumbers in a variety of rituals among four Nilotic societies, I would like to conclude that the pur-
pose of cucumber sacrifices is to cast away the dangerous condition of human beings caused by the intervention of Powers or Ultra-human Forces. Effects of these Powers are often contagious. I use the term the ‘Powers’ or ‘Ultra-human Forces’ in a broad sense including not only God, gods, Divinity, divinities, Spirit, spirits but also the effect of blood, murder, death, incest etc.

In all cases we are dealing with, normal human conditions are endangered by the intervention of or by the proximity with Powers: death (Nuer and Pari), incest and bad dreams (Nuer), disorder caused by the anger of a master of the fishing-spear and sicknesses (Dinka), disorder of rain caused by the spirit of rain or God (Atuot), blood and ghostly vengeance, and ‘madness’ which might have been caused by the intervention of jwok (Pari). Sacrifices are made in order to restore the normal condition.

In this respect I disagree with Evans-Pritchard’s argument that the intention of these sacrifices is ‘desacralization’ and that they are of an expiatory character, performed to ransom the ‘sin’ committed by a sacrifier or to cleanse ‘pollution’ (1956: 220-30). This schema of sacrifice is certainly borrowed from Hubert and Mauss (1964: 50-7). I owe this criticism to de Heusch who has demonstrated that the sacred/profane dualism and the notion of ‘sin’ are Judaeo-Christian centric and thus irrelevant to the analysis of African religion (1985: chap. 1).

In fact when we look at the Pari rituals again, those who attend a burial rite and exhume a grave are not wrongdoers at all. Even whether a murderer is good or bad is situational. When he kills an enemy of the society, he is good. Any murderer is, however, endangered because of the contagious power of the blood of the killed (mira). And if any of his close kin becomes ill, it is not considered as a punishment by jwok. It is an effect of mira. For the Pari jwok is not an ultimate judge of human deeds. They perceive jwok as bringing misfortunes such as sicknesses by ‘catching’ people, and those who are caught are not sinners. They are caught simply because of the proximity with jwok, that is visiting a place of jwok such as a well, pool and rock, not because of a breach of an interdiction. The intention of a sacrifice which follows (major victims are a goat and sorghum beer) is to be ‘cut away’ (ngolo) or be ‘released’ (gonyo) from jwok by appeasing it with gifts (victims), not to expiate a ‘sin’ (Kurimoto 1988: 287-93).

My argument does not, I think, contradict ethnographic facts
described in *Nuer Religion*. ‘Sins’ are hardly committed deliberately. The consequences or effects of ‘sins’, which are called by the same names as ‘sins’ such as *nueer* (breaches of social and religious rules), *dhom* (adultery), *rual* (incest) and *thiang* (having intercourse with a wife nursing a child) are contagious (1956: 283-8). And sacrifices made because of these breaches are said to ‘wipe out’ (*woc*) faults (1956: 190-1). At the same time Evans-Pritchard argues that the intention of these (personal) sacrifices is to get rid of Spirit from man, as consequences of ‘sins’ are considered to be interventions or punishments of Spirit; and Spirit and its intervention is always dangerous to man (1956: 197-8).

In spite of basic similarities, a difference remains between the Pari and the Nuer. *Kwoth* (God or Spirit) of Nuer is much more a guardian of social and moral order and more a Supreme Being, if we accept what Evans-Pritchard demonstrates, than *jwok* of the Pari.

I believe Nilotic sacrifices as a whole would be better accounted for if we consider them as a means to cast away the danger caused by the intervention of Powers of which God and gods forms a part, instead of seeing them as a supernatural means of communication between human beings and God (expiation of sin is an example) or between the profane and the sacred. This paper, however, is not a place to argue this general issue.

4. **Semantics of ‘bitterness’**

*The notion of ‘bitterness’*

Cucumbers are very ‘bitter’ not only in taste but metaphorically. I wish to argue that they are appropriate for sacrifices because of their ‘bitterness’ and that it is essentially a notion to represent Ultra-human Forces or Powers in the world. I suggest it might be a key notion for interpreting Nilotic religion.

We have already seen that among the Dinka the notion of *kec* means to ‘bite’ or ‘be strong’, as hot and bitter things are ‘biting’, and it is used to express the effectiveness in prayer and invocation and the power of master of the fishing-spear. It refers to a sensation at once painful and pleasant. Here I would like to translate *kec* as ‘bitter’. Lienhardt argues that the rationale of the healing powers of cucumbers is attributed to their ‘bitterness’ and that they are associated with *jok*. 
The notion of *kec* among the Pari is very similar to that of the Dinka, but its connotation is wider. (I argued this point elsewhere. See Kurimoto 1986: 135-6; 1988: 282.) First, it is better to note that *kec* in Pari has no meaning to 'bite'. The verb meaning to bite is *kac*, a different term from *kec*.

In the field I first became accustomed to this term while drinking and eating with my friends. When sorghum beer is well-brewed and strong, it is described as *kec*, which is preferable. On the other hand watery beer is *bath*, tasteless. A salty stew is *kec* and if the salt is insufficient, it is *bath*. A hot taste like that of red peppers is also *kec*.

It is not, however, only a term for taste. A powerful Rain Chief (*rwadhi-koth*, 'Chief or King of rain'), diviner-healer (*ajwa*) and evil eye (*ci-jwok*) are 'bitter'. An effective invocation (*lam*) as well as a ghostly vengeance (*cien*) is 'bitter'. And the attribute of stomach contents of a goat or sheep, soil of an anthill and human blood is 'bitter'. It should be noted that domestic animals themselves, not only their stomach contents, are considered to be 'bitter'. So are anthills.

As for human blood, we already saw that a murderer is affected by *mira* because of the blood of the dead. We find another case illustrating the power of human blood. If a man working at a cultivated site is hurt and bleeds on the ground, the site is believed to have no rain. A sacrifice of a goat or sheep is required to prevent this.

Finally, 'bitterness' is an attribute of *jwok*. There are more than seventy places of *jwok* in Pariland: rocks, caves, trees, groves, wells, deep channels of rivers and anthills. A place of *jwok* is called *kany mu kec*, a 'bitter place'.

Now how can we interpret this notion? First of all, does 'bitterness' bear a negative or a positive meaning? Is being 'bitter' preferable for the Pari or not? In the case of sorghum beer, being 'bitter' is preferable. The more 'bitter' an invocation is, the more welfare and prosperity may be brought. In other cases, however, it is both negative and positive. A very 'bitter' ghostly vengeance may cause such serious disasters as drought, cattle raids and fire on the one hand, and may destroy Pari enemies on the other. While the power of a diviner-healer is helpful in diagnosing a sickness and healing it, a client may ask him to use the same power to harm others. The powerful Rain Chief is expected to make enough rain,
but sometimes he may neglect this work because of personal anger or because of political tactics in order to extract more tribute. And a ‘bitter’ evil eye and human blood are, I think, always negative. ‘Bitterness’ is neither good nor evil. It is both. Or I would say it is a notion beyond the good/evil dichotomy.

The point of the argument is closely parallel to that concerning the nature of jwok among the Pari. It is both good and evil and a very ambiguous power. I demonstrated in another paper that jwok is an explanatory principle of phenomena which are beyond human understanding and control and refers therefore to Ultra-human Forces. Though the nature of jwok is neither good nor evil, proximity to it is dangerous because of its Ultra-human Forces and its intervention in the human sphere may bring about misfortunes. Therefore it is desirable to keep it away from human beings (1988: 293). These attributes of jwok are expressed as ‘bitter’.

From what is discussed above, I would say that ‘bitterness’ is a notion representing the attribute of amorphous Ultra-human Forces, which are beyond good and evil from the human perspective. This is a fundamental notion in Pari religion and ritual. By looking at the notion in this way, we can understand why almost all religious agents and materials are ‘bitter’. Cucumbers are substituted for or equated with goats and sheep because they are bitter.

So far, I do not find any reference to the notion of ‘bitterness’ in Nuer and Atuot ethnographies. I can only presume, therefore, based on cultural and linguistic affinities between the Pari and Dinka on the one hand and the Nuer and Atuot on the other, it may also bear a symbolic religious meaning among the latter. When I was in western Ethiopia while doing field work among the Anywaa (Anuak), I came to know a couple of Nuer men. When I asked, they said that kuol (wild cucumber) is keco, ‘bitter’. In Pari keco is the plural form of kec. I presume that the Nuer drink the gall of an animal victim to cast away the bad effects of incest and as a process to settle a blood-feud (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 184, 295-6, 298) because it is very ‘bitter’. And in an Atuot ox song of a power (jok of earth quoted by Burton we find the term ‘bitter’ repeatedly appears—‘bitter tree (shrine)’, ‘bitter medicine’ and ‘bitter heart’ (1981: 92-3). This ‘bitter’ is presumably the translation of kec or keco.

The term kec itself is commonly found in various Nilotic
languages such as Shilluk, Anywaa and Acholi. I hope future studies will reveal the semantics of kec in each ethnic group. Then it may be understood that the ‘conceptual resemblance’ and ‘qualitative analogy’ between oxen and cucumbers implied by Evans-Pritchard is ‘bitterness’.

I think this is not a mere speculation since the notion of ‘bitterness’ as a significant religious idea is also found among other peoples who are related to Nilotes. For instance among the Bodi of south-western Ethiopia, soured milk which is spat on the body in various rituals is considered to be ‘bitter’ (balal) as well-brewed beer is ‘bitter’. And they may abandon an old grazing land because it has become ‘bitter’ (Fukui Katsuyoshi, personal communication).

Among the Kipsigis of Kenya, members of particular clans who are specialized in collective cursing are called ‘people of the bitter tongue’ (my emphasis) (Komma 1984: 17). And among the Bari, Lotuho, Lokoya and Lulubo of the southern Sudan, who are neighbours of the Pari, ‘bitter’ is frequently used in referring to the power of a King which resides in his stomach (Simonse 1990: 252-4), just as the Pari believe the power to make ghostly vengeance is in the stomach. There are, of course, fragments of ethnographic data. They suggest, however, the applicability of ‘bitterness’ as an analytical notion.

The notion of ‘tastelessness’

What is the opposite notion of ‘bitterness’ among the Pari? It is not ‘sweetness’ as one might suppose. ‘Sweetness’ in Pari bears little symbolic meaning. Rather, it is ‘tastelessness’ (bath) that forms a pair with ‘bitterness’. This notion has a wider symbolic meaning which corresponds to ‘bitterness’ (Kurimoto 1986: 135-6).

For instance, the jwok which intervenes in or ‘catches’ only members of a certain descent group is considered bath, not kec (Kurimoto 1988: 285). A powerless Rain Chief or a diviner-healer is described as bath. Ineffective invocations and ghostly vengeances are also considered to be bath. Thus the opposite correspondence between ‘tastelessness’ and ‘bitterness’ is consistent. We may find this correspondence between a ‘bitter’ cucumber and a ‘tasteless’ water melon.

This water melon (ucok, or Citrullus vulgaris, belonging to the same family as wild cucumbers) (Takei 1984: 66) both grow wild
and cultivated, and its fruit is tasteless. I heard two different cases in which they are used. The first is the murder of the Rain Chief. In 1984, after a long series of rain conflicts started in 1982, the Rain Chief of the Pari was murdered by people of the ruling age grade for her alleged responsibility for the drought. 5 I was absent in the field at the time, but later from what I heard from those who were there I came to know that, when she died, her stomach was cut open and a water melon was crushed and put in it. The explanation given to me for these acts was that they were done in order to make an expected ‘bitter’ ghostly vengeance ‘tasteless’ by using a ‘tasteless’ water melon. The corpse was left in the bush and before reaching home those who took part in the murder smeared the stomach contents of a goat, juice of cucumbers and soil of an anthill mixed with water on their body (Kurimoto 1986: 124-36). The other case is the exhumation of a man’s grave who was accused of having stopped rain by ghostly vengeance. When members of the ruling age grade reached the spot they first crushed a water melon and sprinkled it on the grave. The purpose of the act is the same as in the above case. When the corpse was found, the stomach contents of a ram and juice of cucumbers were sprinkled on it and smeared on their body (Kurimoto 1986: 142). In these cases ‘tasteless’ water melons were used in order to ‘neutralize’ the ‘bitterness’ of ghostly vengeance.

Hence we may say that if ‘bitterness’ represents the attribute of Powers, ‘tastelessness’ signifies the situation of no Power. They are a pair of notions and we may understand one better in reference to the other.

The notion of ‘tastelessness’ is, however, found so far only among the Pari and again, as in the case of ‘bitterness’, we have to wait for future study to reveal its relevance to the analysis of Nilotic religion.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to demonstrate: the Nuer-Dinka-Atuot-Pari unit of comparison is relevant for the interpretation of issues related to cucumbers and sacrifices; cucumbers are sacrificed in order to cast away a dangerous condition of human beings caused by the intervention of Powers; they can be substitutions for animal victims because they are ‘bitter’, just as other victims are ‘bitter’.
And I suggested that the notion of 'bitterness', representing a common attribute of most religious agents and items, could be a key to understanding Nilotic religion.

I admit that these points are still only hypothetical. Moreover I do not claim that 'bitterness' is the only rationale why a cucumber is appropriate for a sacrificial victim. Its botanical characteristics are also to be taken into consideration. It is one of a few species of plants whose juicy fruits are available even in the dry season. Its fruits are very common and can be easily found when needed. And its 'smell', not only its 'taste' might be significant, as among the Pari a 'mad' person is made to smell its juice and a murderer smears it and stomach contents of an animal on his body for the purpose of removing the 'smell of blood'.

Another issue for which I cannot give an explanation is why in Pari sacrifices 'bitter' things are appropriate for offering to 'bitter' jwok. Is there the same reasoning as in a Japanese saying, 'to control poison with poison' (its English equivalence is 'Meet evil with evil')? Or is it a parallel phenomenon to the appropriateness of victims in Mandari sacrifices: 'hot' spirits require 'hot' animals (goats) and 'cool' Celestial Spirits require 'cool' animals (sheep) (Buxton 1973: 394-5)?

I have admittedly seen Nuer, Dinka and Atuot ethnographies of religion through my own experiences with the Pari among whom the idea of God or Supreme Being is, it seems to me, very vague. I believe, however, Nilotic sacrifices and other religious practices would be understood in a different and probably a better way, if we considered them as interactions between human beings and all intervening Powers, and not as necessarily centered on God. God or gods is just one of the conceptualized form of Powers, though there is no denying that it is a major form.

NOTES

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1. The Pari live at the foot of Lipul hill (Jebel Lafon) in Torit District, Equatoria Province of the southern Sudan. They are Lwo speakers and linguistically very closely related to the Anywaa (Anuak). The field research was carried out during four successive trips between 1978 and 1986. The total length of the stay in the field is about 9 months. More than 13 months were spent in
towns, mainly Torit and Juba. The Pari are basically cultivators, while they are also excellent hunters and fishermen. Though they raise a considerable number of cattle, goats and sheep, they are not 'people of cattle' like the Nuer and Dinka. For instance, there is no 'favourite' ox. For early accounts of the Pari see Driberg (1925), Evans-Pritchard (1940) and Crazzolara (1950: chap. 9; 1951: chap. 5). For their subsistence economy see Kurimoto (1984) and for social organization and religion see Kurimoto (1986; 1988).

2. The Pari have a well-developed age system in which all men above six or seven years of age are organized into three age grades: youngsters (awope), the middle-aged or rulers (mojomiiji) and elders (eidonge). They claim that this system was borrowed from the neighbouring Lopit and Lotuho (Kurimoto 1986: 108-9).

3. Winy is also the plural form of winyo, a bird.

4. It should be noted not all jwok are associated with particular places. For instance jwok to which the cause of rain and reproduction is attributed is not associated with any 'bitter' place, though it is not called 'jwok of the sky or above'.


6. In 1980 when the Rain Chief died, his wife succeeded to the office, since their eldest son was still young. She was killed in 1984.

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