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THE NÜER ARE DINKA: AN ESSAY ON ORIGINS AND ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINISM

PETER J. NEWCOMER
University of Connecticut

This short article will use an example from the Nilotic Sudan to outline a process of socio-cultural change and development. Although the argument is restricted to the historical relationship of the Nuer and Dinka, there seems little reason to doubt that the process of fission and subsequent cultural differentiation outlined here could be used to account for the origin of many specific cultures, if not indeed of all cultures. I am using a particular example, for which literature is readily available, to illustrate what may be a very general and widespread kind of social evolution, a sequence of events the logic of which would account for the emergence of socio-cultural entities as such.

As a processual account, the present article will focus more closely upon the logic of Nuer-Dinka social history than upon the empirical features of that history; the object of the article is to show causation in what happened rather than to present an impeccably factual account. I am more interested in the relations between facts, than in the facts themselves. This article will neither disregard facts, however, nor treat them lightly, but logical relations are the key to its success or failure as an explanation of how things came to be the way they are in the ethnographic present of the Nilotic Sudan. The purpose here is to set up a scheme which will generate these present facts.

As a final introductory note, it should be clear that I do not make use of ‘the environment’ in any explanatory sense. It makes little sense to posit that the locus of social change lies outside the system one is studying. Anthropological insistence on doing so produces the ‘receding causation’ so common in its literature; i.e. social systems are dependent variables in a larger system which includes climate, technology, available resources, etc. (cf. Harris 1969). When historical accident is added to the above list, the questions of a truly social science are begged out of existence.

In social science as in other science, the present is often the key to the past. Thus, the present-day distribution of social systems over the environment can give information as to the process by which that distribution came about. Evans-Pritchard’s map (1940: 5), reproduced on p. 6, could be interpreted as suggesting that the Nuer are an intrusive group, and that they have displaced Dinka. There are now two groups of Dinka, separated by 150–200 miles of Nuer. There are also enclaves of Dinka within Nuer territory, and large numbers of Dinka living with Nuer as Nuer. This suggests a history of one-sided encroachment, by the Nuer. In support of this, Evans-Pritchard (1940: 20, 50, 69, 93, 131–2, 150, 193) states that Nuer are able to use Dinka cattle as an emergency resource, and that Nuer raids against Dinka are regular and remunerative. The pattern is one in which the Nuer dominate and expand, and Dinka are expropriated and disappear.
If one admits Nuer intrusion, where did they come from, and when? Relevant facts include a wide range of physical, cultural, and linguistic (cf. Tucker & Bryan 1966: 402–42) similarities between Nuer and Dinka, which would lend weight to the argument that they have been in contact for a very long time. The size of the populations involved—there are approximately 200,000 Nuer and about 900,000 Dinka—also supports the contention that neither of the two groups is a recent in-migrant. Groups of this size do not migrate as single units and some time would be required for the build-up of a population of this size from a small number of migrant ancestors. It looks, in fact, as if each group has equally good credentials to being considered the ‘original inhabitants’ of the area, and both have been there for a long time. If one group is ‘intrusive,’ it would be very difficult to say which, since it is not possible in such a situation to determine which group is ‘lending’ traits and which is ‘borrowing’ them. It is also difficult to understand why it is that the Nuer have not driven all Dinka completely out of the area; if we grant long contact, competition, and consistent victimisation of Dinka, why are any Dinka left at all?

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The inquiry appears to be caught in paradox; both groups are equally ancient and autochthonous, yet one is rapidly dispossessing the other. We are returned to the problem of origins.

I wish to suggest that neither group is intrusive, that the Nuer are in fact Dinka, and offer the following scenario in support of this hypothesis: Imagine Dinka- and Nuer-land, perhaps 400 years ago, as occupied by one culture/people/society resembling present-day Dinka in social structure. As time passes, population pressure upon land leads to expansion to the ecological boundaries (for this type of society, the limits of unoccupied cattle country). Continued population pressure leads to raiding and wars. Over time, groups become differentiated and inter-group competition tends towards a war of all against all. Each group raids others in statistically random fashion. In schematic form this is illustrated in figure 2.

Figure 2.

Now postulate a group of these ‘Dinka’ who develop a social mutation which works like Sahlins’s conception of the segmentary lineage (Sahlins 1961), that is, as an adaptation for predatory expansion. Since each semi-isolated group is somewhat different socially from its neighbour, the appearance of such a social innovation, particularly in the context of active intergroup conflict, seems reasonable enough. Sahlins (1961: 328) describes segmentary lineage socio-political organisation in the following way:

Primary (or ‘minimal’) segments whose focal line ancestors comprise a territorial entity of a higher order, a minor segment, usually named after their common ancestor, the father of the siblings. They comprise an entity, however, only with reference and in opposition to an
equivalent lineage segment, one descended from the brother of their common ancestor. In turn, minor segments comprise a higher-level entity, a major lineage, in opposition to the descendant of their common ancestor. The build-up of inclusive segments can proceed to the level of the tribe itself. [Although it did not in the Nuer case.]

In a situation of inter-group competition,

War is effectively joined by the Nuer . . . against other neighboring groups because, even if it has been initiated by a small lineage segment, it pits 'all of us' against 'them'. More than that, the societies under attack do not form such extensive intra-tribal alliances, hence it is usually 'all of us' against 'a few of them' (Sahlins 1961: 333).

Comparing Dinka social organisation with that of Nuer in order to isolate an element which gives Nuer their seemingly decisive advantage is admittedly a tentative operation, particularly in the absence of actual fieldwork directed towards this problem. The literature available, however, does provide some relevant suggestions. Lienhardt (1958: 114 sqq.) indicates a close congruence between agnation and territoriality in Dinka-land. This organisational feature is combined with the 'easier' ecology of Dinka country which enables less frequent and less wide-ranging transhumance (Lienhardt 1958: 101); people tend to stay close to their villages throughout the year. Less migration means less interaction with other tribe members, so that when a Dinka sub-clan becomes large, it can split off from the parent population and cease to relate to it in any but the most tenuous way. Re-fusion for defence seems to be less easily accomplished than among Nuer. Sahlins (1961: 339) observes that Dinka segments 'display a notable tendency to fragment into absolute, independent entities.' And Lienhardt (1958: 108) remarks that '... Dinka recognise that Nuer are able to unite on a larger scale than Dinka.'

Continuing the processual account, wars either start or continue, with advantage to the mutant Dinka group. (Fig. 3). All Dinka remain confined by their ecological boundaries, and cannot be pressed more densely together without assuming technological evolution. In the raiding and counter-raiding, the mutant grouping comes to occupy more land than it loses, resulting in more and more territory being placed under the new social system. The people are not moved around much in this process; defeated groups are fitted into the mutant group as it expands.1 Supporting this last hypothesis, it is apparent from Evans-Pritchard’s accounts (1940: 221–7; 1957: 31–2) that well-developed mechanisms exist in Nuer social structure which serve to ‘digest’ captured or defeated Dinka. Such a fate’s befalling a Dinka has the reliable effect of turning him and his descendants into the mutant group—into Nuer. Evans-Pritchard remarks of this process:

We have already described how Nuer scorn Dinka and persistently raid them, but they do not treat those Dinka who are members of their community differently from its Nuer members, and we have seen that persons of Dinka descent form probably at least half the population of most tribes. These Dinka are either children of captives and immigrants who have been brought up as Nuer, or are themselves captives and immigrants who are residing permanently among Nuer. . . . it is said ‘cat Nath’; ‘they have become Nuer’ (1940: 221).

Thus Dinka progressively disappear as a socio-cultural entity although relatively few of them are actually killed in their interaction with the Nuer.

In this process, the language and culture of the area are not much changed; only the social system is gradually altered upon the land. The new system is the Nuer
system, and its users begin to differentiate themselves on this basis, in an implicit fashion. That is, they call themselves Nuer (*Nath*) without mentioning (or knowing) their distinguishing feature[s]. This difference or set of differences, most probably the segmentary lineage system, gives them the advantage but they attribute their superiority to moral factors, in common human fashion. They are Nuer; others are only Dinka.

![Figure 3](image)

Both Leach (1954) and Haaland (1969) have interpreted a group’s ‘cultural’ characters as labels for its social differences from surrounding groups and this is certainly a most useful approach from the perspective of the present study. ‘Cultural’ symbols, from this point of view, are of quite limited interest *qua* symbols. Rather than trying to unravel the nature of the symbolic differences between Nuer and Dinka, this approach concentrates upon the identity of the social-structural referents of culturally-expressed differences. We must find, then, not what the labels are that a Nuer uses to separate himself from Dinka, but why he chooses to so separate himself. The answer to this question must surely be expressed in terms which are objective, material, and scientific (in that it can be profitably subjected to rational criticism).

Studies which have led the way in this direction include that by Haaland (1969), which shows a sequence of cultural succession much like that described above. The
group of his study, the sedentary agricultural Fur, transform themselves into Baggara Arab nomads voluntarily as their cattle herds become too large to manage from a base in the Fur village. A cattle-rich Fur must switch to a Baggara way of life if he is to retain control of an increasing herd. Since cattle are the only cumulable material good in the system Haaland describes for Darfur, the transition from Fur to Baggara is one which many well-off Fur have to consider, in spite of the fact that Baggara living conditions are apparently worse than those prevailing among settled Fur.

The Baggara social system is in itself a dead-end—that is, people are fed into it from outside (Fur in-migrants) and from its own natural recruitment, yet the Baggara are contracting in numbers. Thus, recruitment into the Baggara system is very definitely a one-way process. But, although uni-directional, it cannot be interpreted as evolutionary.

A somewhat similar case of systemic change is that described by Leach (1954) for highland Burma. Here, local groupings of Kachin tribesmen shift back and forth between gurnsa autocracy and gumlao anarchy. These changes take place over a period of generations and so are not directly visible. This case, of course, differs from that of the Fur/Baggara (Haaland 1969) and Dinka/Nuer (here reconstructed) in that it is reversible (in fact Leach takes great pains to show that it is self-reversing).

I would see these cases as special instances of the Dinka/Nuer type of transition process. In this, the change is both uni-directional (as is the Fur/Baggara) and is cumulative (in that it spreads over the land available to it technologically). Neither the Burmese nor the example from Darfur have any evolutionary significance; they lead nowhere (Baggara) or are cyclical (gumsa/gumlao). These must be seen as aberrant cases of social evolution, not as models for the kind of algorithmic and cumulative processes which have not only brought mankind into the tribal stage but have taken him beyond it. It has not been 'the environment,' or 'technology,' or 'culture contact' which has brought men up through their history, but rather the process by which the possibilities, logic, and contradictions within each social system produce the successor to that social system. It is this set of possibilities, this logic of development, and these contradictions which must provide the raw materials for the study of society. This article proposes this developmental process as a possible explanation of one classic set of circumstances.

NOTES

1 A physical analogy to the action of the Nuer in Dinkaland would be to drop a spot of dye into a bucket of water (rather than drop in a stone which would force out some of the contents of the bucket).

2 See Barth (1969). This and other articles in this collection provide convincing material reasons for identity maintenance at the cultural level by referring to the social structures underlying such identity postures.

3 Evans-Pritchard (1940: 123) appears to be implying this when he says of the Nuer: 'Opposition to their neighbours gives them a consciousness of kind and a strong sense of exclusiveness. A Nuer is known as such by his culture, which is very homogeneous, especially by his language, by the absence of his lower incisors, and, if he is a man, by six cuts on his brow.'

4 Haaland (1969: 72-3) gives low fertility and urbanisation of Baggara as reasons for this.

REFERENCES