A GÂMK ANTI-‘DINGI’ RITUAL:
THE IMAGINATION OF POWER AMONG A
‘PRE-NILOTIC’ PEOPLE¹

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During the 1990 rainy season, the Ingessana Hills were attacked and plundered severely by several thousand guerrillas. The people of the Hills, who call themselves Gâmk, were extremely shocked at the event. Later on, the villagers carried out a big ritual, called ‘the word/problem of the Dinka’ (kor e Dingi), in which they acted out a ‘glorious’ fight against the ‘power’ of the invaders, Dingi. This short essay is intended to portray how Gâmk villagers are trying today to re-define and re-create the situation through their experience of power.²

Forced independence: Gâmk ambiguity in the making

The Gâmk, classified culturally as pre-Nilotic³ and linguistically as an Eastern Jebel branch of the Eastern Sudanic family⁴ and numbering about 50,000, inhabit the area south of the Gezira (the southern Funj region) on the slopes or at the foot of the Ingessana Hills, which have provided both natural barriers against invaders and better rainfall than in the plains. Their oral traditions indicate diverse origins, and it is quite likely that the Hills have been absorbing various migrants and refugees from the rest of the region for a long period. The Gâmk consist of several named groups or districts (gaamk, ‘hills’) which have never been organized into a political unity, while each ‘hill’ is divided into several named subgroups or villages (also called gaamk, or daark) which maintain the village shrine as the centre of community welfare. Like most of the sedentary population in the region, the Gâmk are sorgham cultivators, animal keepers and handicraftmen. Today they are
probably one of the few peoples who keep pigs in the northern Islamized Sudan.

Most of the groups in the Ingessana Hills seem to have withstood foreign encroachment until well into the twentieth century. Such resistance was uncommon among the peoples in this region. Other ‘vernacular’ communities surrounding the Hills have been constantly ‘Funj-ized’ in hopes of being freed from the slave status and ‘uniformed’ by the overwhelming northern Sudanese Arab culture. In the past, the Gäm̄k even had the audacity to raid the pastoral Arabs and Nilotes and took hostages to ransom (Evans-Pritchard, 1927: 70-1).

During the first two decades of this century, the Anglo-Egyptian regime was forced to suppress popular rebellions against taxation in the Hills. These were the last ‘physical’ efforts made by the Gäm̄k to defend the Hills from domination by foreign powers. Having been pacified by punitive expeditions, the Hills experienced a period during which the closed district policy was applied. At first, in 1926, the Condominium government tried to isolate the Hills from being Arabicized in the hope that they would eventually be assimilated to the educational policy of the southern Sudan, but later, in 1938 and 1944, sought to discourage Christian mission (SIM) from applying to work in the ‘politically sensitive’ Ingessana region. Such an indecisive policy prevented the Hills from having schools or even shops until the 1950s.

The ambiguous position has changed little since independence. Even though the Hills are located well inside the northern administrative area and are now economically, educationally and even religiously bound almost exclusively to the north, the Gäm̄k are virtually regarded by the northerners as southerners (janubi), unbelievers (kafir) or even ‘dogs’. But, the ambiguity of the Gäm̄k or rather, in the eyes of the government, their ‘backwardness’ has, since 1985, been transformed by a suspicion that they might defect to the rebel side. It was in this year that the rebel SPLA had attacked Jam Mine, an important government installation in the Hills for a chrome mine operating for the last two decades. The complex and strange events connected with this raid are as briefly narrated below.

The battle took place on 6th December 1985 and more than two hundred rebels and six government soldiers were killed. No civilian casualties were reported. Simultaneously another battle had taken
place at Moghaja Hill, a half-day’s walk south from Jam, where a northernmost Nilotic people (the Moghaja or Hill Burun) live. In contrast to Jam, those killed were not rebels but the whole government troop, some three hundred soldiers, with the exception of a high-ranking Gâmk-born military officer, who was taken captive by the SPLA. It was alleged also that another highly educated Gâmk man had taken a key role in the operation as an SPLA senior officer.

A strange thing had also occurred in Tau, a village adjacent to Jam. Having heard gunfire in the early morning, the villagers fled to dry river beds or huge caves, where their ancestors used to hide from slave raiders in the late nineteenth century. Although the battle lasted only a day, they remained there for several days because they heard someone shouting, ‘Garang (SPLA) will come back!’ On the second night in the cave, some of the villagers were shocked to hear a BBC report (in Arabic): ‘There has been heavy fighting in the Ingessana Hills between the government and SPLA troops. Many local young people have joined the rebels and ransacked Arabs’ shops.’ They were amazed that the BBC could have information about events unknown to the Gâmk themselves! They came to the conclusion that ‘a moon’ (satellite) could observe such an event as soon as it took place on earth. When they returned home with some anxiety, they found the whole village had been looted. Shops had also been ransacked and set on fire. The owners, Arabs and Fellatas, reported to Damazin Police that it had been SPLA guerrillas and Gâmk collaborators who had attacked their shops. ‘Many many’ police arrived ‘very quickly’ and a lot of Gâmk men were arrested, so ‘no one except women and children were seen in Tau area for a month!’ Many were released sooner or later, except some notorious robbers who, according to Gâmk sources, had circulated false rumours and taken advantage of the situation to plunder everything they could lay their hands on. The BBC report was probably based on hearsay brought to Khartoum by fugitives from the Hills. But the government undoubtedly interpreted the events as evidence of the contact between the rebels and the Gâmk. Since then, for at least two years, plainclothes (jallabiya) policemen carrying small machine-guns were frequently observed around the Hills.

The relation between Gâmk villagers and resident Arab and Fellata traders in the Hills has since become increasingly hostile.
Ten days after the events, a young trader with a gun attacked a Gâmk shrine, regarded by the locals as a locus of the most dreadful power, and intimidated and abused the residents in the vicinity. On his way back, his tractor overturned, and he was killed instantly. Equally, the economic relation of the Gâmk to such high-handed traders, in the difficult circumstances that followed the 1984-85 drought, as well as the ever-deteriorating national economy created tension. When a trader was accused by young Gâmk of corruption in respect of government sugar dealings, he would denounce his accusers as being SPLA sympathizers. Such a denunciation would be a serious threat to the ‘citizenship’ of the people in the region.8

In a few areas, however, villagers have successfully reformed the lejna, the body responsible for the distribution of government goods, by excluding corrupt traders and building their own storehouse.

SPLA leader John Garang, through its clandestine radio station, has tried to implant his theory of political struggle and ‘African’ identity into the peoples of the southern Funj region, and he has even directly called the names of some ethnic groups in the region for this purpose. But, his call seems to have annoyed Gâmk young men, because, I suppose, as long as the Hills remain politically and infrastructurally in the northern part, such a new definition of the Gâmk as ‘African’9 can only serve to undermine an already endangered position. They had to remain, however ambiguous and fragile their position may appear, half-independently under the northern regime.

A tacit complicity?: odd-man-out operations

Since then, SPLA forces have been active in this region. In 1987, they held Kurmuk for a while. In 1989, they advanced up to a position less than a hundred km south of Damazin. On the way, they attacked Fadamia, a stronghold of northern traders in the eastern fringe of the Hills. But the SPLA never attacked Gâmk villagers, considered as ‘African comrades’ on the north-south boundary. The attack in 1990, however, was focused on the villages in the Hills. They attacked even twice, on August 21 and September 27, in two adjacent districts in the south-west part of the Hills; namely, Tau (Soda) and Gor (Kukur). Both operations were highly successful, perhaps even surprisingly so.
One evening, just before sunset, the villagers of Buuilk heard someone shouting from the direction of Kaal, 'Dingi! Dingi woooii!'. At first, they did not take it seriously, because, five years previously, they had been deceived in this way. But before long they saw many people fleeing. Some were carrying babies or valuables, others were desperately driving goats or cows. Soon all the villagers 'ran and ran', in all directions, through the long grass, up to the top of the hills. It was raining heavily and was very cold. Early next morning, some of the villagers went out on reconnaissance but only found guerrillas everywhere. They numbered in the thousands. So the villagers had to spend several days in the bush.

A large number of domestic animals were appropriated or killed on the spot for consumption by the guerrillas. All houses, shops, schools and dispensaries in the area were ransacked. At Maak, a girl who resisted being raped was killed, another woman brutally raped by several men was left to die two days later. The very old ones who remained at home were not killed. Several young men were caught and forced to carry the booty, but all managed to escape sooner or later.

The guerrilla troop camped in the Hills for three days. Then the government troops came with tanks. There was no direct confrontation. Not a shot was fired by either side even when some of the guerrillas ran right in front of a tank. Those villagers who witnessed this strange situation were very disappointed.

Some puzzles remain unanswered. Why did the guerrillas attack the Hills? Are they really SPLA soldiers? Isn't it odd that they were reportedly very poorly dressed and stripped Gâmk men at gunpoint to clothe themselves? Aren't they rather an independent group of militia or bandits in the south? But, one thing is clear: the villagers have been left unprotected between the north and the south.

Only forty stolen goats were recovered and returned by the army to their owners, whereas the villagers offered a remaining cow to the soldiers for their rations. In compensation each family was later given a small amount of sorgham by the government, and the people sent their Omda (local administrative officer) to petition the government for exemption of the tax of the next year.

The second attack happened only a month later and had an overwhelming impact on the villagers. Again, the army failed to react seriously. Everyone, young and old alike, took refuge in Jam Mine
where the government garrison was stationed with tanks and artillery. Others travelled further, to Bau, Buk or Sonyo (Damazin), and stayed away until the rains passed and the guerrillas would be unable to hide in the bush. Some of them decide never to return to the Hills because of the shock as well as the loss of their property.

Countermeasures against power: a ritualistic manoeuvre

Generally, the realization of a communal ritual as in this case is dependent on the judgement of the elders in relation to the graveness of dreams or divinatory results rather than of actual events. A special meeting is held by the elders in charge before it can be put into execution. There, the elders bring the accounts of the latest dreams found among the villagers and cross-check them with each other so as to re-interpret them more decisively and publicly in the context of the particular threat to the community. In addition to such pre-talks, some of the elders go to the owner of the animal chosen, often indicated in dreams, for ritual-killing, to negotiate the means of its disposal. The material preparation for this type of ritual is fairly simple. There is no need to brew sorgham beer or to purchase cotton fabrics as in the case of the appeasing ritual for the shadow of the dead. The only requirement is to find an animal, and for each participant to carry a spear, sword of axe. But, when views about the obscurity or graveness of a particular dream message conflict, or there is difficulty in obtaining a specific animal, delay or even the indefinite postponement of the ritual may be the result. The plan for the anti-Dingi ritual took some time to materialize, mainly because many villagers were still reluctant to return home. But, unlike on other occasions, this ritual was indisputably organized even without having a lengthy discussion about the graveness of dreams because of the overwhelmingly dreadful nature of the real happenings. (In other Dingi-affected villages, the equivalent ritual was carried out synchronically.)

This kind of ritual involves, preferably, all the active adult men in the village and is a typical form of Gâmk communal reaction against foreign powers, but it has been evoked only infrequently. I heard that only a few such rituals had taken place during the past decade. I had attended one such case, in 1981, which was against the pastoral Mbororo (Fulbe) who roam and trespass seasonally on
the Hills. This ritual was called ‘the god/demon (tel) of the Fellata (falaade)’. In terms of scale and atmosphere, however, the present case, ‘the word of the Dinka’, was extraordinary; it mobilized a large number of villagers and lasted for several days, and the solemn looks on their faces and the seriousness of the performance made it apparent that this was an exceptionally dramatic event.

On 10th December 1990, the first ritual session took place at Kaal; the second one on the 12th at Jamk’s path; and the final one on the 17th in the vicinity of the village shrine (maama) and Aselk’s path. In each place, over quite a vast area, the following performance was enacted from late morning to early evening:

Several diviners (kaik) and some of the elders in charge gather beforehand to consult for a divination into proper sites for the ritual performance and also general auspiciousness for the community. At the signal of a horn whistle (cil), villagers start gathering. Then, a group of about a hundred villagers, consisting of youths and elders, are led by a war leader (seen e kang) and the diviners to the numerous sites where the Dinka are supposed to have left ‘Bad Things’ (jeg ångk: a general term for invisible, often harmful, agents which are visible only to the eye of diviners). A few leading diviners approach particular places such as the natural holes of trees or rocks and the flat surface of the earth and scrutinize the spot both with extreme caution and boldness for any traces of Bad Things, while the rest of the group carefully observe the diviners’ actions (a sort of mime play). But it is necessary for the onlookers to keep their distance lest some Bad Things should jump off and kick over themselves. Once the diviners ‘find’ the Bad Things, and if they are active Bad Things such as the ‘Rainbow Creature’ (mányál), the onlookers throw stones at the spot. On the other hand, if the Bad Things are like the ‘Grain’ (jer) or the ‘Spear’ (más), the diviners themselves dig them up with a diviner’s special digging stick (cerr) and throw them away. At such a moment, everyone yells out in a frenzy ‘Hap!’ with a spear raised overhead. A whole sequence of such actions is replayed several times at the same site, before the group moves to the next site. All of them run, dash and chase between sites in the vast hilly area, and on the way the group is joined by more and more of the villagers. The same scene is reproduced at many other sites until the ritual reaches a climax in which an animal is killed and the elders deliver ritual addresses.

On the first day the animal killed was a he-goat; on the second and third days a male pig. In the ritual context these animals are called ‘medicine’ (sâm). They were killed in different ways; the first two had their throats cut in an instant with a knife at a designated site, while the final one was thrust through with a spear and then hacked, while the animal was still alive, with an axe by several men in front of a village shrine (punuk). The body was taken some distance away to a designated site. Before the animals were roasted and consumed by all participants, several elders, standing in front
of them, delivered long ritual addresses (dârâon). The language used in this dârâon speech is expected to be figurative; kor na faan e duur, the word which is ‘glorious’ and ‘of brevity’. The following are excerpts from some of the addresses recorded at the sites (I was unable to record the first session).

The second session:
B. (an initial of the speaker’s name):
This path of mine is always asking for words [trouble, problem]. Today, the path has words in itself. I am talking about the foot [luut, trace] of Tungt [sing. of Tungk (Moghaja) but implying here the Dinka], who came here now and made me run away jam jam [haphazardly]. I ran in the rain, slept from place to place. Listen! This word made me stand here. Let the elder talk about this foot.... He [Dinka] went and sat on this body [hill], and dropped some things [Bad Things] on it. Listen! I don’t want him in this hill.... Doesn’t this path look something bitter? It has two words. [One is] Tungk (Moghaja) who came in a different manner. They bore children here. They came through this path, gave our fathers seeds and fed our hills.... [But] I talk now only about [the other] Tungt, the one you call Dingi. Listen! They surrounded me... Dogs [Gâmk] have medicine. Bring Gosaal [the name of a strong herb but implying an animal to be killed]! I anoint the body [of hill and people] with it... I don’t want Tungt in this hill. This is the hill of our fathers only.... They used to fence the hill with ebony trees [strongly defended] and recover the name. If you do not follow [the fathers’ way], they will throw you away and you will run like this again with many children on the back, ful ful [the sound of carrying many]. This hill will have no owner [if we don’t defend it]. Do you just want to eat things and keep silence, teng teng [the sound of silence]? I will leave you to eat as much as you like.

A:
My father, don’t leave me!

B:
I leave you! I leave you, I tell you! I leave you to keep open a hole in the body [defenceless]. Have you heard of any Dingi ever coming into this path before? They have come now! You are still a baby [do not follow the word of fathers].... I forbid [Dinka] today, at this moment. Let them go away!

L:
I am listening! I am listening! If a person has the path, only he may talk.... They have come now. Didn’t they carry a Spear, did they? We can sit, as our fathers did and defended the hill.... Let them go pat [completely]! Let’s repair the word as our fathers did! Then, we will be able to sleep wirrrrr [the sound of sleeping soundly]!

The third session:
L:
A priest (aur) said, ‘Today, all the villagers came out. The earth (aldelk) has become very bad. I want to hear the voices of dogs [villagers].’ Let everyone
say whatever he wants to say. We should not whisper like thieves, but speak openly... This man [Dinka] came out here [seen in divination] carrying something short [Spear].... All dogs are here now. Let’s talk!... Many bad things have arrived here. People say, ‘dáksāár! dáksāár!’ [dastuur: a ‘zaar’-like illness from the north]. This had never arrived here before. We only heard the name. Are you really happy to hear, ‘Delung! Delung!’ [the sound of the Arab daluka drum played at the singing party where girls fall ill of dastuur]? You say that some elder has brought it here. Where did I find it? ...Now, the one who has brought Sofaa [Islamic wedding], return it back! Why children are shouting [a symptom of dastuur]? Why?... It was brought from the Arabs (damk). Elders refused it, but others said, ‘It is sweet’. Why are all girls taken to that far away place, Aulek [where dastuur girls can only be treated]?... After having finished this case, I want to put another medicine [for dastuur] in the iron house [village shrine].

M:

I am not standing here in terms of this word [dastuur], but of the event that happened during the rains and of somebody [Dinka] who came through this path. He [Dinka] brought hot water [Bad Things], which made people sick, caused diarrhoea [hardship].... The villagers in Jam whisper about dastuur, ‘It is good. [Because] We can drink tea.’ Once having drunk the tea of dastuur, one tends to expect others to fall ill of dastuur. But, this word is sitting on a Gai tree [overlooking us] and eating [undermining] people. I want to deal with this word soon.

The images of power: trauma or power from without

The villagers were relieved to complete the ritual. Although some were still nervous, the majority seemed optimistic and said, ‘Dingi won’t return!’ Some of the elders had already started to prepare another ritual against dastuur. The primary concern is always how to deal with power. At first, it seemed to have been successful. But, two weeks later, a child was badly burned when he picked up and played with a grenade left in the bush. When I heard the news, I asked whether such a dangerous/bad thing should have not been discovered by the clairvoyant diviners at the ritual, but my neighbours unanimously replied, ‘The diviners and elders have made a good job of it. The grenade is not their job but the army’s.’ So, what was the nature of power they tried to deal with in the ritual? Although the ritual may involve other themes to be explored, here I will only pursue this question.

As a matter of fact, we cannot expect a very explicit answer to this question from them. The only thing they can say is that they ‘repaired the word of the Dinka’ (liusá kor e Dingi). But it is not difficult to observe a great sense of emotional relief following the ritual. So it is easy to see that the ritual was concerned with people’s
dreadful memory of an experience of power and the images of Dingi. The ritual seemed to be successful in removing this memory together with the Bad Things.

I have come across many other Gâmk rituals dealing with what we may call the problems of inner states. In the case of ‘the god of the Fellata’, for example, the villagers had been irritated by Mbororo pastoralists who trespassed with a huge herd on the grazing areas in the Hills. This time, what was eliminated together with ‘the Spear of Fellata’ in a similar way through the ritual was their serious concern about an epidemic of illness and death of Gâmk youths who were not able to resist the beauty of Mbororo girls and had sexual intercourse with such girls in dreams.

More difficult questions remain to be answered. How can they ‘obtain’ relief from the bad memory or anxiety by removing all Bad Things such as the Spear, the Grain and the Rainbow Creature brought by the Dinka and by killing an animal? For us, traumatic experience cannot be erased from our memories by any means (except by time) and it is this that exactly defines ‘trauma’. On the other hand, in their rituals, Gâmk explicitly treat not only memories but also ‘dreams’, ‘illness’, ‘anger’ and even ‘delight’, which our psychology would regard as being internally produced mental sensations within the self, in such a way that these are readily removable from and attachable to a person. This raises the epistemological question of how ‘self-knowledge’ differs from one culture to another, a question which Lienhardt has discussed with great insight in his book on Dinka religion (1961: 147-70).

In the comparative context, my data on Gâmk healing rituals and the notions of the selfhood (Okazaki: 1984, 1986) seem to strongly support the Dinka model of passiones self-knowledge. And, in this respect the relation of the Gâmk to powers (jeg ângk, tel) are analogous to the relation of the Dinka to powers (jok, yeeth, nhialic), though the powers of the former appear less ‘ultra-human’ (Lienhardt: ibid: 28) than the latter:

If the word ‘passions’, passiones, were still normally current as the opposite of ‘actions’, it would be possible to say that the Dinka Powers were the images of human passiones seen as the active sources of those passiones (ibid: 151).

The dreadful experience of the past by the Gâmk is probably not the ‘memory’ derived from the mind or the remembering self but power itself acting upon the self from outside, and the Bad Things
may be the images of such experiences seen as the active sources. Undoubtedly, it is this image of power that the villagers tried to deal with in the ritual.

Does it follow that this type of self-knowledge and the imagination of power are a unique (pre-)Nilotic discourse of power? I ‘refuse’ to think so, because this discourse might also be used to deal with some of our own ‘profound’ experiences such as the experience of art, love, anger, shame, anxiety, memory, dreams, all of which we cannot easily control or explain. It would be more accurate to see them as a power acting from without, except that we do not generally locate such experiences outside the self as the Nilotes do, but rather postulate something like a much ‘deeper’ self or ‘unconscious’ mind which acts upon the ‘surface’ self. In so far as the notion of an autonomous self is maintained by such ‘deep’ self-knowledge, we shall never be relieved from our own traumas.

The Gâmk villagers, on the other hand, have overcome the ‘trauma’ of the dreadful image of the Dinka or kor e Dingi, the ‘fatal word of the Dinka’. Without this ‘repair of word’ ritual, they would be unable to live in the Hills any longer. Indeed, the diviners and the elders have done a good repair job. The villagers say, ‘Dingi won’t return!’ Alas, this may be so only for the time being, probably only until the time of the next rains.

NOTES

1. Fieldwork among the Gâmk, done intermittently in 1981, 82-83, 84 and 89-91, was funded by various sources. The last period with which most of this essay is concerned was supported by JSPS (research fellowship) and SOAS (additional award for fieldwork), whose assistance is gratefully acknowledged.

2. Throughout this essay I have avoided mentioning personal names and some place names in consideration of the current political climate in the Sudan.


8. See Africa Watch Committee, 1990: 75 for the 1987-88 massacre of non-Arab farmers in Darazain for this reason.

9. See Miller, 1985: 6-13 for the dubious derivation of the word ‘Africa’. To the majority of Gâmk villagers, the word ‘Africa’ is almost unknown, while ‘John Garang’ has become known as a household nick-name for strong rubber string torn out of a used tyre.

10. This point is suggested in Hamamoto, 1986: 531.
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BIBLIOGRAPHY


