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Living on Earth in the Sky

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Source: *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 22, Fasc. 1 (Feb., 1992), pp. 23-46

Published by: BRILL

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1580782>

Accessed: 19/05/2009 08:58

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LIVING ON EARTH IN THE SKY*

BY

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When asked, in 1975 in Khartoum, to tell me something about Anyuak religion, Omot Ochan Ajwak, an educated Christian Anyuak from Akobo, gave me this surprising answer: 'The Anyuak actually do not have any religion ...!' The answer was so amazing to me that I wondered if Omot Ochan really wanted to pretend that the Anyuak did not have any beliefs in supernatural powers or if he rather wanted to explain that the Anyuak beliefs were too vague to fit in a definite concept and thus would escape definition. Being himself an occasional preacher, Omot Ochan may well have asked himself how he could talk about the Anyuak 'God' in a clear and unbiased manner, concluding that the Anyuak religion, if there was one at all, could not be put in a precise and positive form.

Omot Ochan shares with non-educated Anyuak the difficulty of talking about God, and this difficulty may by itself be understood as a piece of information on the complexity of Anyuak beliefs. If one does admit that 'religion' implies not only the notion of a supreme power but also a direct and stable relationship between that power and the humans, Omot Ochan's statement could hold true, for what indeed characterizes the 'Anyuak sphere of spirituality' is *uncertainty* about the supernatural power and, in particular, about its relationship with the people on earth. Talking about the Anyuak sphere of spirituality therefore is talking about the nature and the existential situation of the human being rather than concentrating on the concept of God. The Anyuak are well aware of a supernatural spiritual power but all their knowledge comes from human sources.

Since this has already been stressed by most of the foreign writers on the Nilotes, I do not need to insist further on the fact that the Anyuak, like all the other Nilotes, do not like to be questioned, and that questions touching on matters of belief are particularly sen-

sitive and therefore hardly ever given direct and clear answers. Such reluctance can be rooted in an instinctive distrust of the foreigner (why should he ask such questions?) and fear of his spiritual powers (indeed, white people are often said to be 'Jwok' i.e. God, a comparison which is not necessarily meant as a compliment!), but it reflects also an uncertainty about God himself, the supernatural power being by definition something unknown, inaccessible and virtually dangerous. The Anyuak incapacity to talk about their relationship with God in a comprehensive way and their fear of revealing their thoughts to an outsider makes any enquiry about Anyuak 'religion' extremely difficult and somewhat speculative.

Information about beliefs cannot be obtained directly from the people but has to be collected in a more discrete and tedious way. God normally remaining silent, he reveals himself through different elements and various objects, in dreams, through events, at particular places or even through living creatures. This mainly symbolic language is quite comprehensible for people used to communicate with nature and its forces and who are aware of the possible consequences of certain signs, but it is not always of an easy access to foreigners who lack such experience. The symbols themselves often do not seem to have much meaning by themselves and often cannot even be explained by the people. Where the answer is not known, questions of course do not lead anywhere. It is a slow, long and cautious approach which can allow a foreigner to penetrate into matters which are not necessarily secret but which are never a subject of conversation. The people know the impact of spiritual matters, and they do not want to stir up these matters without necessity. Anyuak spirituality is highly complex, and apparently full of contradictions. Lack of clarity of course disturbs anybody trying to define Anyuak spirituality, but momentary confusion about the people's attitude towards God is unavoidable as the contradictions are part of the Anyuak concept of God, and in fact part of the definition of God itself.

The Anyuak spiritual sphere is not the result of an intellectual construction but the reflexion of practical experience. And the fact that the Anyuak are full of philosophical thoughts is not due to abstract speculations but to concrete experiences.

The best and probably the only entrance to the spiritual universe of the Anyuak is thus a description of the Anyuak country and its

ecological conditions. Though nobody could disagree about these purely physical conditions, there might be very different or even opposite interpretations of the same place. As the natives of the place always tend to defend and even to praise it (sometimes against all evidence), it might be useful to look at the place with the eye of a foreigner; such a distant and non-objective view may help to give psychological dimensions to a country which the Anyuak claim to be perfect. Though this view may be completely wrong, it may yet help the reader to understand the ambiguous relationship between the Anyuak and the spiritual powers ruling the place.

The most striking feature of Anyuak country for any visitor is its remoteness, isolation and loneliness: small—often tiny—settlements are separated from each other by miles of naked savannah or, in the rainy season, by a sea of tall bars of strong grass. When trying to cross these apparently endless spaces of dry savannah or when, during more than half of the year, locked up behind the giant walls of grass, a foreigner is almost bound to feel lost, both in time and in space: Wherever he turns, there is no way out, there is nowhere to turn except to the self. Continuous self-reflexion and loneliness may have different effects on different persons, but when hunger, sickness and all kinds of other disturbances come in support of the purely psychological pressure on one's existence, probably no-one would succeed in escaping feelings of helplessness and despair. Usually of course, a foreigner has prepared himself to leave the place before it is too late, and in fact no white person ever dared to spend a whole rainy season (which is the time of starvation and epidemics, of sorrow and silence) inside Anyuak country. But it is during this time of hardship that a foreigner could understand the Anyuak character, its courage and its creative forces as well as its inclination to philosophical and often very dark thoughts.

The Anyuak character has been described by Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard as being 'full of fun, boyish, rugged, impolite, impertinent, very obstinate', adding that they are 'a dreadful nuisance most of the time (but good to have around in a fight)'.

Such is indeed the impression one gets when visiting Anyuak country in the time after harvest ('dancing night and day') or when one moves from village to village without ever getting attached to one place and its people. But whoever has lived with the Anyuak for a long time would find that the moments of joy are lived so

strongly because normal life is solitary and pitiless: the Anyuak character is melancholic and sometimes even depressive but yet so strong that it always stands up against the pressures from outside and comes in defense of its human essence.

The defiant attitude of the Anyuak may be understood better when considering their own view of their country. I have mentioned that they suffer a lot of all kinds of natural disasters such as drought, inundations or thunderstorms, of attacks on their crops by insects, rats, swarms of grasshoppers or of weaverbirds, that sickness and death (due to malaria, lack of clean water, absence of any medical facilities) bring great sorrow to the people and that there seems to be no way to escape or to improve the situation. It is therefore amazing if not wonderful to see that the Anyuak (exactly as all other Nilotes) are absolutely convinced that there cannot be a better place in the world than their country: 'We have everything we need, water, food, meat and fish in abundance!', they argue (deliberately forgetting to mention the cattle which they cannot keep because of the tse-tse-fly or, as they also say 'because we are tired of these Nuer and Murle attacks').

Whoever would dare to put in doubt the goodness and the generosity of this country or even would dare to talk of wilderness would be strongly contradicted: even the so troublesome mosquitos are said to be 'very good, not bad at all', and this simply 'because they belong to this place'. It is this argument of 'being at home' which is stronger than anything else, someone's 'home' being almost by definition the best place in the world for the person living there. However, considering the existential difficulties encountered by the Anyuak, one may wonder if their belief in the goodness of their country is not just their way of resisting pressures from outside: their country is good to them because they *want* it to be good, because without such a deep trust there would be no hope for survival, nor any reason to fight for existence, let alone to enjoy it. Quite obviously, the appreciation of nature and living conditions is not merely a matter of facts: it is as much a sentimental and even a spiritual matter: *human consciousness* is able to create its own world and to give it its own values in spite of all contradicting evidence and to make a hostile environment (natural or spiritual) habitable for the people.

The notion of *civilization* is crucial as it separates the humans from the elements and being surrounding them and provides them

with an own sphere of existence. When the Anyuak talk about their country, it is not so much of nature they think as of this sphere of human spirituality where the people are no longer subject to nature and spirits but the masters of their universe. When categorizing the different spheres of Anyuak spiritual existence, it is this purely human sphere which stands in the centre and which provides the other, surrounding spheres with their significance.

The division of the Anyuak universe in different spheres is very striking to the eyes: there is a clear separation between the *sphere of the above* (*mal* = the sky) and the *sphere of the below* (*piny* = below; earth). These two parts are contrasting and apparently of a categorical difference: the sky is the sphere full of transparency and emptiness, of uncertainties and speculations, without definite form nor any stability; it is the sphere of the unknown and the virtually dangerous, moving, changing and inhuman. The lower part of the universe is sharply contrasting with the sphere of the above not merely because it lacks transparency and has a physical consistency but mainly because it is stable, hospitable and generous: it shelters and nourishes all forms of earthly and human existence, receiving them even after their death. And while the sphere of the above makes people fear, the earth protects the living beings and comes to their active support whenever they are threatened.

Though the two halves of the universe are so clearly separated from each other that their opposition is evident, there is yet a problem to be solved. It is the problem of the human being who is neither a part of the earth nor of the sky but who *lives on earth in the sky*. It is human nature which actually separates the two halves and which thus makes the conflicts between the two spheres apparent. The fact that it is human consciousness which provides the human being with existential problems (mainly in relation to God but also to its own existence) may be of a theoretical interest only, but what is relevant for the present discussion of Anyuak beliefs is the fact that the Anyuak seem to be aware of it. The human being and not God stands in the centre of Anyuak spirituality.

To comprehend the deeper significance of the earthly sphere of the below and to fully appreciate the particular situation of the human being, it is necessary to talk first about the sphere of the above and to give evidence of the supernatural power thought to be residing there: this sphere of the above is the 'sphere of Anyuak spirituality' *par excellence*.

Before entering it one should keep in mind that this sphere is simply the visible and most obvious part of the Anyuak spiritual imagination and that it takes on its concrete significance through reality in general and human consciousness in particular. The Anyuak spiritual experience has roots in practical life and is more than just the abstract relationship between God and the human beings.

The Anyuak state that *Jwok be jamo* that 'God is air, is wind', and they conclude that the sky is *Po jwok*, 'the home (country) of God'. To translate the term 'Jwok' by 'God' is a delicate and doubtful matter, at least if one understands by 'God' a supreme entity with an absolute consciousness. If one accepts the Anyuak definition of Jwok as being 'air', 'wind', i.e. as something moving, unstable and vague, it would be certainly difficult to define Jwok as a definite and even personal entity. The question is of course of crucial importance, for a God which exists only in an uncertain and changing form would not have a clear identity and could hardly be relied upon. The question is also difficult to answer as the Anyuak themselves would not know how to answer such a precise question: *Jwok nuto*, they would say, 'God exists'. But such a reply acknowledges only the fact that there is a kind of natural force, or a spiritual power (a God) or something which simply escapes definition; it does not explain the nature of this entity or power.

Listening to the Anyuak talk and their constant allusions to Jwok, the answer seems to be simple: the word 'Jwok' is used very frequently and in all types of possible circumstances, private or public ones, at court, when reciting songs or when talking alone. Obviously, Jwok is omnipresent in the mind of the Anyuak. Any question about the existence of Jwok is received with the greatest astonishment, perhaps even with worry: the existence of Jwok is absolutely evident, 'one must be mad or blind to deny it' And the Anyuak to return the question: 'for how could it be possible that such a tiny thing like the sperm turns into a human being?!'. The relationship between the Anyuak and Jwok is so strong indeed that they 'often see Jwok in their dreams' (which are said to be very strong) and that they 'pray every day to Jwok', being apparently surprised that one could survive without doing so.

The Anyuak have very few rituals and their belief is certainly not of a ritual kind, but the habit of giving Jwok a share of human existence (some drop of beer, some flour or tobacco) is a ceremonial

habit whenever there are festivities, when passing near prominent natural sites or when taking measures against invisible forces. Some people even keep animals (of a certain colour) on behalf of Jwok, and even though this habit is followed mainly by persons believing in Shilluk (Nyikango) or Nuer spirits (Deng, Lwal), it is completely in line with other Anyuak beliefs that colours mediate between the humans and God. Adaptation of foreign spiritual powers (such as the Murle 'God' Bei) also stresses the firm Anyuak belief in God, specific spirits being understood as particular manifestations of one and the same Jwok.

When the Anyuak say (as they very frequently do) *Jwok nuto* i.e. God exists, they do not make any philosophical statement but bear in mind a particular idea of Jwok: this idea is the *relationship between Jwok and the notion of justice*. The Anyuak believe—and this is perhaps the essence of their belief—that Jwok as the creator of all things and beings *wants* things to exist and that he gives his continuous support to their existence. There exists a positive, constructive force which is Jwok and on which the people can rely. For the Anyuak, it is vital to know that *there is* a big power helping them to defend their existence and which supports the people in their fight for survival. Jwok being the principle of creation and representing the creation's right to existence, he is also *the principle of universal order* and stability, representing the idea of legality and justice. To the Anyuak mind, it seems obvious that the structure of the universe is basically a stable one, each being or thing growing according to precise patterns and living in precise parts of the universe: people know who is living where, a great part of their (oral) literature explaining why things are as they are and why they are where they are. The Anyuak show great respect for other beings' rights to existence, such respect providing them with the right to claim some respect for their own territory and life. If there was not this guarantee of regular continuity of existence, all existence would fall apart and there would be nothing but chaos. The call on Jwok to restore a broken order is the people's ultimate resource to find justice and peace.

It is very significant indeed to see what the Anyuak do when they are 'praying': they are in no way talking in a humble way, asking for understanding, pardon and help: the Anyuak 'prayer' is straight-forward, rather offensive talk by which people argue for their rights to existence and *plead* for justice.¹ It is not help people

want from God, they ask for nothing more or less than the restoration of a broken order, an intervention in favour of an existence which has been unfairly assaulted—by unknown or by known persons, by spirits or by anything else.

The occasional necessity to call on Jwok to obtain relief from unlawful elements seems to imply that Jwok needs to be reminded of his creation, that he sometimes is absent or abandons his universe. It is in such moments that people have to call on him; as long as things go well and follow their normal course, Jwok is not approached nor ever worshipped. The mentioned symbolic ‘gifts’ people make to Jwok before drinking, preparing for a fight or passing by a particular site are preventive acts made out of fear of the supernatural without any truly religious (sacred) significance.

The Anyuak do not speculate about Jwok, they *know*. They are sure that Jwok is on their side, which is the side of existence. For without existence, Jwok would not exist either, would be mere consciousness, a consciousness without content. The relationship between the Anyuak and Jwok is a daily and intimate one because they both pursue the same goal of saving existence from destruction.

Whenever discussing the spiritual sphere of the Anyuak, it is essential to keep in mind this absolute trust in Jwok as the principle of justice, of order and peace: ‘Jwok dwong’, ‘God is great’ and his existence is the people’s hope for survival. And as such, it cannot be just a hope, it has to be a certainty, a conviction or—why not—a firm belief in a supernatural power caring for creation.

Before looking at creation and its various, often antagonistic spheres of existence and before elaborating on the legal structure of the universe, the *Anyuak myth about creation* may give us some preliminary information about the relationship between Jwok and the humans. The myth has no fixed form but does not vary in its content. It goes as follows:

First, Jwok created the earth and the animals. Then, he created the human beings. They were twins. When Jwok looked at these new people, he was horrified and exclaimed: “Really, my latest creation doesn’t fit into my world!!!” Full of disgust, he ordered his dog (which was named *Medho*) to throw “these ugly, transparent creatures away”. But the dog didn’t obey his master. Instinctively, he sided with this new type of people for whom he felt much sympathy. He went to hide them in the cavity of a tree, feeding them with milk he stole from God’s many antelopes. This is how the twins grew up. Later on, God decided to distribute weapons to the animals. He called them to his hut. The humans were not informed. But the dog knew about

it. Early in the morning he went to God's hut and knocked at the door. "Who are you?", God asked. "I am the lion", the dog answered. "Take this", God replied, opened the door and threw some spears out. After a few minutes, the dog returned. "Who are you?", God asked. "I am the elephant", the dog replied, and God threw some spears out of his hut. The dog repeated this until there were no spears left in God's store. And when the lion, the elephant, the leopard, the giraffe, the buffalo and others came, God couldn't give them anything else than just tusks, paws, teeth or horns... There was much quarrelling on earth, at that time. God finally got fed up with these beings. *He went and threw the stone of life into the river*, the river (water) representing a sphere of unconsciousness. When the dog saw this, he immediately jumped into the river and tried to pull the stone out of the water. But the stone was too heavy for him. The dog shouted to the people and to the animals who were all watching him from the shore to come and help him. But the people and the animals just laughed, thinking "how stupid he is". In despair, the dog bit off a piece of the big stone and brought it to land. Thanks to this, the people and the animals exist at least for a while. Before that event, people and animals did not know death.

The myth could be completed by many stories relating the ways the animals separated from the humans (the dog always siding with the humans, bringing them even the fire from God's home) or why there is enmity between certain animals, or they inform us about character and intelligence of various species of animals or even of fishes and birds. There exists a kind of 'post-scriptum' to the basic myth about creation. Though it might well be of a more recent date, it is authentic and known especially by old people. Blasphematory, it yet tells us much about some ideas the Anyuak have about God:

For some time, God and the humans co-existed quite peacefully. But one day, God approached the humans and asked them to lick his arse... The people reacted with indignation. "Never!" they said, "you may be God, but we are human beings (*Luo* means pure human beings) and we do not do such perverse things!". Hearing this, Jwok got very angry, poured water and sand into the people's eyes (preventing them from "ever discovering anything") and left to the people living in the North. Those people did what he desired and "that's why they got all the things they have now"... This latter aspect was indirectly confirmed when the man in charge of religious matters of Otało-village replied to my question "where is Jwok?" (I was expecting replies such as "in the sky", "in trees," "in the water" etc.) by this astonishing question: "What! You don't know? I thought Jwok was with you!"... When considering the people's apparent envy of a white man's possessing the things he apparently receives from Jwok, I asked another elderly man if he, after all, wouldn't like Jwok to come back to Anyuakland; he hesitated for a while and finally replied by saying: "No, it's better he stays where he is"...

Such an amazing answer as well as the myth itself suggest that the relationship between the people and Jwok cannot be as easy and

good as the basically very positive Anyuak opinion of Jwok would lead us to expect: there seems to be a wide gap between the general, almost theoretical appreciation of Jwok and the practical experiences with his obviously inhuman power.

The key to the understanding of the Anyuak's paradoxical view of God is to be found in the human being himself: with his mind, he admires the almighty supernatural force which is the essence of Jwok, but with his body he fears and with his heart he abhors the very same power. And because the Anyuak themselves do not have any reason to imagine or even to hope for a life which would not be a spiritual life on earth, they had to find some other explanation for the puzzling enigma of Jwok's different influence on matters and beings.

The Anyuak beliefs are rooted entirely in their experience with the various forms of earthly or immaterial phenomena, and their attitude towards Jwok as well as towards other elements reflects the conclusions drawn from these experiences.

The Anyuak observe in nature that there are different *spheres of existence*, and that specific beings are always occupying the same spheres. The very 'nature' of these spheres corresponds normally also to the 'nature' of the matter or beings living there. The observation of nature appears to have given the Anyuak the idea of a *structure* of the universe and of an *original organization* of the world. It is Jwok who wanted things to be organized in this way, and Jwok stands up as the guarantee of this order and the stability of the world. If this essential function of Jwok has to be stressed once more, it is because the Anyuak draw important conclusions from such observation: besides the obvious division into spheres of existence they understand that the spheres belong—physically—to certain beings or matters which therefore enjoy an almost divine right to exist within these spheres and thus are entitled to defend this right against all eventual intruders or aggressors. *Respect* for the other's existence and the idea of peaceful co-existence within a same sphere are the two main lessons the Anyuak draw out of the universe's organization. Such at least suggest a great number of customs and patterns of behaviour followed by the Anyuak, not only within their own living sphere but also when dealing with animals and even with apparently non-animated matter. A few examples may illustrate this idea of spiritual spheres in which things and beings exist and have a right to exist.

Within the social or human sphere, the respect people have for each other's privacy and personal integrity is striking: no one would dare to disturb another in his home without a very good reason, and the cautious, always conscious use of language witnesses as well to this discrete approach to another person's intimate sphere. Avoidance of other people by branching off or by keeping distance may be due to fear but expresses also the respect one has for another person.

Respect also governs the relationship between the humans and the earthly sphere. This attitude is not only due to the people's awareness of their direct and permanent dependance on the earth's generosity and physical support but mainly due to their understanding of the spiritual essence of all forms of life. Indeed, whoever observes nature, shares its rhythm and witnesses its inner productive forces has to come to this same conclusion of the spiritual dimension even of apparently lifeless earthly matters.

Thus, the Anyuak would always *ask permission* from the earth (and not from Jwok) before interfering in matters of the earth, for example when making use of some plot for the first time (for planting), when intending to collect firewood in the forest or when cutting a prominent tree. The relationship between the earth and the human beings is established through the so-called 'father of the site' (*obur*) who is the descendant of the very first settlers and who therefore has the most intimate contact possible with the earthly sphere of the place. The absence of such an *obur* may paralyse the activities of a whole community for quite some time (for more than one year in the case I witnessed when an *obur* was away in such a far place as Malakal!).

Basically, the relationship between the people and their country is a very positive one,—and that's why people are so careful when interfering in this sphere. When the Anyuak talk about 'the people' they sometimes use the term *with-ngom* which verbally means 'heads of the earth': this is a beautiful picture for the idea that 'the people' are deeply enrooted in the sphere of the earth, actually sticking out only their heads. The poetical expression of course also shows the prolongation of the human being's existence into another, invisible sphere and provides it with a spiritual dimension: the earth is the people's home, during their life-time and after it. The intimacy of this relationship between the earth and the human is best illustrated in a person's *footprints* which, though empty, witness to the person's

passage on earth, leaving at each step a part of the personality behind.

The footprints are a person's physical (though empty) 'soul', the reflection of his identity²: it is significant that such reflection occurs on the level of the earth and not in the sphere of the sky. It can happen that a person's soles are burning, and in such a case one has to consult an Anyuak doctor specialized in such cases, who will declare that 'the person's soul has been stolen'... With the help of fire he can force the soul to return to the person and thus save his life.

The term for 'soul' is 'shadow', the footprints thus being the shadow of a person's existence. Naturally, a person who has lost his shadow is to perish.

The sentimental relationship between an Anyuak and his country is expressed through highly symbolic customs: when a person is forced—for one reason or another—to leave his home and to settle in another place, he takes a portion of the home-earth with him. At the new place, he mixes that earth with some water and drinks it; after some time, he starts to mix the earth with a small portion of the new land's earth, dilutes it with water and drinks it; in the course of time, the proportion of home-earth and 'foreign' earth changes, until finally the whole potion consists of the new earth and no difference is felt. At this moment, the person can feel at home at the new site, 'feeling at home' being similar to feeling protected and supported, or—on a psychological level—to feeling strong and aggressive.

A last example may underline the spiritual aspect of this relationship: when an Anyuak is making an oath, he will take some grains of earth with his fingers and put them into his mouth: 'I am eating earth!', he will say, thereby expressing that his words are true. Having said that *Jwok* is the assurance of order and justice in the universe, it may seem surprising that the people do not call on *Jwok* to witness their words: the absence of the word '*Jwok*' in the Anyuak oath makes the strong impact the earth has on the Anyuak mind even more obvious.

The Anyuak have divided their country into a number of territories which all have definite borders. On an intellectual level, there is the clear distinction between 'wilderness' and 'civilization', the latter concept being fundamental when distinguishing the sphere of the humans from other spheres and especially from the

sphere of the above. But on a more practical and physical level, each village and even each homestead has its own territory which is to be respected by others (the Anyuak also highly respect private property and have precise rules about sharing food, game and fish).

I have said that the Anyuak, in a general manner, believe that Jwok has attributed to each being or form of existence its proper sphere where things or being have a *legal* right of existence. But the Anyuak understand that sometimes different kinds of beings have to share the same territory. It is here the notion of peaceful *co-existence* acquires its full importance: without respect, the relationship within the same territory is hampered and eventually destroyed. A definite *legal system* with a strong political power helps to stabilize the internal life of a village inhabited by strong-minded, conceited and arrogant people. One would think that legal argumentation would not help when there are problems which do not originate in human society; the contrary, however, is true. Whenever the Anyuak feel hurt in their integrity or if they feel threatened in their existence, they reply in pure *judicial* terms.

If, for example, a lion has entered the village, a specialist in these matters will look for the lion's footprints (*sic!*); he will follow them for a while and then urinate on them; afterwards, he forms some clumps out of that soil and throws them in the direction of the lion, shouting 'go with your own! This is not your village, go back to your place and leave us in peace!' It is only if the lion starts killing people that action has to be taken and the beast to be killed. In principle, the Anyuak do not kill without need.

Before fishing in a river for the first time of the year, the Anyuak move with a specialist (the 'father of the river' who is often identical with the 'father of the site') to the riverside. There, the specialist talks to the crocodiles urging the *foreign* crocodiles to return to their places. The *native* crocodiles are apparently allowed to stay: knowing the people, the crocodiles would be aware of the fact that it is in *their* interest to keep peace, for if there is a breach of this law of mutual respect and peaceful co-existence, both sides would lose.

The Anyuak talk and argue even with the terrible durra-birds (weaver-birds): they capture a bird and stick their beak into the grass: 'this is your food, this was given to you by Jwok, don't steal things which do not belong to you!!'

In this way, the Anyuak try to keep their world in balance and to maintain peace.

Because *Jwok* is understood to be the deepest cause and the essence of all existence, he is naturally present in the whole sphere of the earth. But if one would search for the 'shadow' of the earth i.e. of its 'soul', one would have to return to the sky which is, so to speak, the negative reflexion of earthly existence: it is empty, inconsistent, transparent and moving, transporting spirituality and providing things with the breath they need to exist.

Rivers are arteries of life, not only because water nourishes the country and fecundates the earth but also because they are somewhere in between the physical reality of earthly existence and spiritual transparency, carrying the sky across the earth: it is not in vain that many Anyuak clans are said to have emerged out of a river or at least were brought into existence by a river (the royal clan of the Anyuak comes from the river and 'returns to the river' after death, exactly as the mother of the Shilluk ancestor, and God, Nyikang was living in a river: similarly, the *Nhaath* (Nuer) were brought ashore by a river, exactly as their Anyuak relatives the *Jowat-Nhaadhi*. Fishes and storks living near the water have a particular significance for some Anyuak clans exactly as the giraffe does for other people for similar reasons.

If the rivers are reflecting the sky and somehow carrying its transparency through the earthly sphere, certain beings and matters are so high above the earth that they are in a more direct contact with the sphere of the above than other forms of earthly matters: certain mountains and particularly tall trees represent such extraordinary forms of earthly existence that they are considered to be potentially dangerous because of their direct vicinity with the sphere of pure spirituality; the same holds true for the giraffe who has its head high up in the sky and nourishes itself from the highest leaves in a tree. People do not really fear these things but think it wise to keep some distance or to approach them—if really necessary—with due respect. Whoever kills a giraffe may die a sudden death even if very healthy, and whoever fails to pay respect (by 'offering' a small quantity of tobacco or flour) to certain spirits residing in mountains, trees, pools or springs may get lost, hurt, drowned or may experience other mischief.

The respect and occasional fear the Anyuak manifest for beings and matters which are in proximity to the sky are first indications that the humans do not have the same positive relationship with the sphere of the above that they enjoy with the earthly sphere of the below.

If it is quite understandable that the Anyuak trust in the earth they are living on because it provides them with food, water, shelter and basically a home in this life and the one after it, it is less understandable that the Anyuak should fear the sphere of the above which is the 'home of Jwok', Jwok being, as it was stressed initially, the sole good reason for all existence.

How to explain that the Anyuak protect themselves by all means from the sphere of the above, the sphere of Jwok? The answer can perhaps be discovered through the observation of a great number of apparently insignificant details. A few examples may illustrate what I would call 'the existential position' of the Anyuak.

The Anyuak would perhaps not express it in the following definite and somewhat negative way, but yet all their attitudes, behaviour, actions and reactions prove it: the basic problem of the universe is the *human being*, or, in other terms (and as it was said by Jwok in the myth about creation), 'the human beings do not fit into the general concept of the world'.

Indeed, the human beings belong to the sphere of the earth by their physical appearance and their practical life, and they belong to the sphere of spirituality because of their intellectual and spiritual qualities. Because the human person does not belong to either of the two parts of the universe, he has to create his own sphere of existence. In fact, this sphere originally does not exist: the human being is *living on earth in the sky* i.e. in both spheres, finding support in one, being attracted by the other. But the Anyuak find that they are different from both spheres, that they are *human*: in consequence, they try to defend their identity by defending their own sphere of existence, a sphere which they would call 'humanity' or 'civilization'. This is, of course, an *artificial* sphere which is therefore in permanent need of support and re-creation. Human consciousness is the force which allows the people to keep their human identity and which makes them resist all pressure, especially that emanating out of the sphere of the above, the sphere of Jwok.

This view of the Anyuak spiritual universe tallies with the fact that the Anyuak themselves reluctantly admit that they not only fear Jwok but even dislike him (though old people could bluntly state 'Jwok is bad'): furthermore it corresponds to a great number of Anyuak habits and patterns of behaviour which by themselves seem to be without deeper significance and which would be difficult to understand on their own.

When mentioning some of these ways of behaviour etc., it will be seen that the Anyuak mainly delimit their 'human territory' against the sphere of the above where Jwok is active. There are several explanations for this:

The human person, standing upright on earth is actually living in the sphere of the above; it is in this spiritual sphere that he has to create his own sphere. Being directly exposed to the sphere of Jwok, it is understandable that most precautions are to be taken against the forces which are residing there.

Being itself a spiritual being, the human person risks being absorbed by the spiritual sphere, thereby losing its physical qualities and its links to the earth. Jwok, being a completely immaterial force, appears on the other side, to have the tendency to 'eating up' (as the Anyuak say) everything which is in the sphere and which itself is of a spiritual nature.

This opposition between the absolute spirituality of Jwok and mere human spirituality results in a permanent conflict between one and the other. But it is mere philosophical speculation—as it may seem—which has convinced the Anyuak that Jwok's spirituality actually is not human and thus potentially against the interest of the humans.

This 'interest' of the humans is a peaceful life on earth and the respect of the laws of existence and co-existence which are the basis of creation. It is *practical experience* which makes the Anyuak doubt that Jwok has much sympathy for the humans.

Indeed, while they enjoy the support they receive from the sphere below, the earth, and while they praise Jwok for his creative powers, they yet experience a continuous pressure on their existence and feel threatened by rather strange interventions from outside in their otherwise harmonious life. These practical experiences are the ones with *sickness* and the ones with *death*. If Jwok remains incomprehensible and paradoxical, it is because of this double 'nature': as a spiritual force, he makes things exist, but as the same spiritual power can destroy things without much apparent reason.

It is often said that for people living under natural ecological conditions, sickness and death are something natural. This holds true only in what concerns the direct experience of sickness and death, but not the *idea* of sickness and death itself. Well on the contrary, it is because the Anyuak are forced to experience sickness and death

on a daily basis that they abhor them—and look desperately for an explanation for them. The Anyuak may understand that old people get weak and have to die; this is the course of nature and the prospect of death as such does not frighten them. What they find intolerable is the fact that sickness and death strike indiscriminately, killing even the most innocent children for no reason at all. The Anyuak know besides the death of old people, only one ‘natural’ or ‘good’ death: this is death due to fighting! Why? Well, simply because such death can be explained and is not due to some evil, inhuman power; and, of course, it can be avenged, the responsible people usually being known. The Anyuak thus do not seem to worry so much about death itself as about the possible causes of it. And how to explain all these death-cases of innocent people? Indeed, there is no evident explanation, or rather, all explanations are bound to be hypothetical. A very firm belief in God may ‘explain away’ anything as being the expression of God’s inscrutable will, but the Anyuak do not share such a belief, or rather, their firm belief is in justice as the basis of creation and universal order—and in such a view sickness and death must of course appear as an injustice, a breach of the universal law of justice and peace.

How then to explain sickness and death? For the Anyuak, one thing is obvious: both are of a spiritual origin. Therefore, they have to emanate out of the sphere of the above, the sphere of spirituality (and of Jwok). It will be seen that there is another spiritual sphere which can produce sickness and death and which is the sphere of human spirituality, but for more general cases of sickness and death it is the sphere of Jwok which is considered to be dangerous. It can hardly be surprising anymore that the Anyuak term for ‘God’ and for ‘sickness’ is one and the same: Jwok!

If, on a mere concrete level, one is looking for the reasons for a case of sickness — in order to find ways to cure it — one naturally looks to the sphere of spirituality, of Jwok, i.e. the sphere of the above, the sky. But how to get information about things happening in the sky, about the air, the wind (which is Jwok)? Well, besides high trees and mountains (which because of their direct contact with the sphere of spirituality are sometimes feared and avoided), there are *birds* moving through this sphere... There are some birds which are clear indicators of fate or sickness (such as the Bateleur-bird which shows that children are threatened, other birds

indicating warfare etc.), but otherwise birds are just general informants about the winds in the sky. The *Anyuak doctor*³ makes constant use of these birds, for her small leathercards (which have the form of sandals, symbols of a person's footprints i.e. his soul) are said to be the 'shadow' of the birds' flight and fall accordingly to their movements.

Consequently, an Anyuak doctor can only work in the morning and in the afternoon, when there are birds in the sky; during the hot hours of the day, she can tell anything about the 'nature' of the sickness (or the fate of people leaving for abroad etc.). Note that the remedies prescribed by an Anyuak doctor most of the time consist of earthly materials (roots, grasses, barks or animals), though she occasionally also makes use of more spiritual techniques (for example by erecting poles in front of a homestead for chasing evil spirits).

If the sphere of the above (of Jwok) is also the sphere of sickness (of Jwok) and finally of death, it is only natural that people try to protect themselves and avoid direct contact with the sphere of the above. For them, Jwok is wonderful as long as he remains in his own sphere but becomes dangerous as soon as he comes down to the sphere of the humans, a sphere which is, as it was said, purely artificial and therefore lacks natural protection; the humans have to protect themselves.

The best way of protecting oneself is prevention, and this means in our context that the humans have to manifest their presence and to give demarcation-lines to their own sphere on 'human territory'. As their sphere has to be clearly separated from the sphere of the above (of Jwok), this has to occur vertically:

A village site is often stockaded, because of enemies and wild beasts (hyenas!): at the entrance, one can find huge, wildly 'gesticulating' dry branches of trees sticking high into the sky. These poles work as a kind of scarecrow and are meant to keep away evil spirits. The same type of poles can be found in front of houses (often cattle-byres) or usually around the fence of a chief: kings surround their courts by artificially sharpened, nail-like poles which stick into the sky like barbed wire, adding to the symbol the craft and the presence of the human mind. Commoners may use one or the other type of fence-poles, all according to their linking and of course to their practical skills. Human or earthly noise is another means to manifest human presence: by filling up the air

one can repel the sphere of pure spirituality. This is done under special circumstances, such as in case of epidemics or continuous death in the village when all the people start to make a lot of noise (by clapping hands, beating skins and shouting), usually at the sight of the new moon. The Anyuak drum like all other Anyuak music is not meant to 'entertain' people: it is, as king Agada put it, 'to call on the earth and to make the earth vibrate'. The Anyuak king dislikes all music not meant for such spiritual aims.

In the centre of humanity stands of course the human being, and *human consciousness* is the strongest way of expressing humanity. As the human person is often moving and directly exposed to the sphere of the above, he needs special and permanent protection, in his homestead as well as outside of it.

One means of making Jwok aware of the presence of a human mind is to give every object the mark of human consciousness: this is expressed in almost all aspects of Anyuak life, in the quality of their tools, their work, their food or in their love for the cleanliness of everything surrounding them, and especially their own body.

Everything is marked by this conscious 'signature' of the human mind, houses, pots, poles, tools, or whatever. If the marks are failing, then at least there must be an element stressing the earthly essence of the thing, its lack of transcendancy and spiritual dimensions.

The human body itself needs to be protected against possible contact with foreign matter. While a person can defend himself against attacks from beings living in the wilderness by a spear, he has to repel matters of a spiritual essence by other means. The most common amongst these means are *beads* which through their colours contrast with the transcendancy of the sky and manifest human presence; at the same time, they work inside the body and are able to extract evil matters or to cure infections. *Rings* also surround a human being and thus keep other matters at a distance, the ivory-rings being especially popular because of their white colour (symbol of purity) and because of their earthly essence. Much attention is given to the head because it is closest to the sphere of the above and the centre of human consciousness: headgear, wigs and different types of hairstyle are common whenever a person celebrates his humanity (and thereby defies spiritual matters); the traditional hairstyle called *binyi* is not seen very often nowadays, but it is still the strongest expression for the human person's need to protect his

head: it is made out of a mixture of earth, cowdung, urine from cattle and oil. *Feathers* also put human spirituality into evidence and thus defy foreign hostile matter. Often, the human body is protected by *scarifications* which have apparently no other significance than giving emphasis to the human body and especially its attractive parts. The clothing of the traditionally naked Anyuak consists of these small but essential items: that they are indeed connected to the very essence of the human person is very clearly shown in the tale where a hyena succeeds in convincing a chief's daughter to give it all her beads; immediately, the hyena gets the girl's identity and is thought to be the chief's daughter, doing all the horrible things one can imagine. Beads are of the utmost importance for spiritual life, carrying a person's essence from one generation to another: they are also symbols of chieftainship and especially of kingship, transforming in the latter case a human person into an immortal being of a divine essence. Interesting is the Anyuak reaction after a death case: they strip themselves of all their beads and thus remain absolutely naked: such is the Anyuak sign of absolute despair and anger. The same explanation holds true for the habit of shaving off all one's hair after a death case. Only a king makes an exception and this because a king as a leader of the nation is not allowed to show any sign of human feelings and weakness; for, if he did, the whole village would have lost its mind and would perish.

Such are the small details which, when put together, suggest that the Anyuak feel a strong need to protect themselves from intrusions by spiritual, invisible matters.

Before speaking about the perhaps most important means of protection (which is language), two apparently strange habits of the Anyuak have to be considered:

The first one is the *extraction of the six lower front teeth*. As the procedure is both brutal and strange, there must be good reasons for it. Foreigners have suggested a number of more or less absurd explanations (some stipulating that the Nilotes would otherwise be very ugly, others suggesting that the air in the area is so sticky that breathing would be difficult, others again consider it as a means against malaria and tetanus...), but the most simple explanation is probably the one of the people themselves, even if it sounds quite strange to other people. 'Are we animals?' is the reply to the question by the Anyuak, meaning that the human being needs to discriminate himself from animals and especially from the wild

beasts which use their lower teeth for tearing other animals in pieces. Remembering the importance of the notion of civilization for the Anyuak, such an explanation does not sound really absurd (note that the Dinka explain that they remove their lower teeth 'because the cattle have only lower and no upper teeth', i.e. also with the same intention of distinguishing oneself from animals). Of course, there would still be the possibility of explaining the custom as a tribal mark (of all Nilotes), but this would make it difficult to explain why most Nilotic tribes (though not the Anyuak) have their own tribal marks on their heads.

In any case, the removal of the teeth is an attempt to distinguish oneself from other beings, *people or wild animals*. The human territory needs its borderlines also on the level of the earth.

At first sight, it is not obvious either why Anyuak see the need to insist on the difference between themselves and the spiritual power of Jwok. However, human consciousness is, after all, the very essence of a human person; that it is purely immaterial like Jwok itself makes it particularly vulnerable when Jwok tries to absorb it. The Anyuak therefore do everything to state their physical identity and try to remain on solid earth as long as possible. What is the most striking difference between the inhuman spirituality of Jwok and human spirituality? It is creation or procreation: Jwok creates by his sole transcendental powers while humans procreate through their sexual organs. In consequence the *sexual organs* have a particular importance in such a purely spiritual context. Jwok has no sexual organs, while every 'normal' human being has its sexual organs and thus *physical* means to procreate, the difference being so obvious that it is not necessary to insist and to elaborate.

Yet, the importance of the matter is clearly demonstrated by the Anyuak habit of checking each newborn infant's sexual organs: if they are 'normal', people are satisfied. But if, by change or rather by bad luck, the child is born with 'incomplete' sexual parts or is born naturally circumcised, then the people are scared and fear that the child is not completely human i.e. that there is a part of Jwok in it. They could call it *Ci-Jwok*, 'witch' or 'sorcerer'— and they would throw the child away... However, the Anyuak admit and deeply regret that many parents of such children are not strong enough to let these babies perish, some even being happy because they are witches themselves...

The Anyuak *Ci-Jwok* (verbally 'God's wife' or 'God's slave', the term showing the close connection between Jwok and that person) enjoys the suffering of others and spreads illness out of mere pleasure; he/she works often through the eyes but knows many other means to harm people; and when such people succeed in killing someone, they dance out of joy on the grave... The Anyuaks are convinced that there are 'plenty of' these witches inside any village, and that they are responsible for a good part of their suffering. The fact that the *Ci-Jwok* is considered to be an agent of Jwok underlines once more the pessimistic view the Anyuak have of Jwok's attitude towards humans.

Twins, by the way, are also considered to be not normal and they need in consequence to be cured from the spiritual element which is in them. Kings do not give birth to twins at all, letting one of them die at the riverside in case it should happen.

The need the Anyuak manifest to differentiate themselves from other beings such as the animals or Jwok shows how much they are concerned about their own identity and how much they like to put their own life in contrast with other forms of existence, physical or metaphysical.

When a person passes by night near a homestead and is asked 'who are you?', he will not reveal his name but will simply answer *dhano yak*, 'I am just a human person'. Such an answer is fully satisfactory to the person enquiring about the nightly by-passer.

As it was seen when talking about the Anyuak witch, not everybody is a truly human person. Those who still have their lower teeth and those who have no normal sexual organs are clearly not part of the category of 'pure' human beings. Children are also excluded from this definition (at least in its strictest form): it is only when a boy of girl is sexually mature that one concludes that 'he (or she) is now a true human being'.

It is, of course, not just sexuality which is the characteristic of such a human person. What really makes the essence of a person is *human consciousness*: animals do not have it, and Jwok of course is not a human but remains a vague and moving matter without a clear identity. Being an abstract and immaterial matter (like Jwok itself) it seems very speculative to venture to talk about it in a definite way and to define what 'Anyuak consciousness' is. What is its form, and what is the content?

I have already suggested a reply to the latter: Anyuak con-

sciousness is consciousness of the difference between the human being and other forms of existence (Jwok being the most pressing one) and it is the consciousness of the human being in need of particular protection: in other words, Anyuak consciousness concentrates on the human person and tries to screen it off from other elements (mainly Jwok). The centre of Anyuak consciousness is humanity, is the sphere of human existence. The multiple means by which the Anyuak try to surround it in order to prevent other elements from entering shows that the people fear to lose their identity (and the consciousness of it) if it does not get such permanent support. The human problem is not Jwok but lies in their own spiritual power: without directing it towards the physical and human interests, it would rapidly be absorbed by the supernatural forces residing in the sphere of Jwok.

When trying to come to a conclusion on the complexity of Anyuak beliefs, one finds that it is the human being rather than Jwok which stands in the centre of the universe, but the human condition on earth is dependent on Jwok's presence. The Anyuak acknowledge in positive terms the power of Anyuak as a creative force, but they are scared of its shining emptiness and moving transparency and they prefer to enforce their human identity rather than to give themselves to Jwok. If they trust in Jwok it is by conviction as well as by necessity the Anyuak believe that: the human world has been created to exist, and that there is no other hope for its existence than a belief in a form of justice, in Jwok. The Anyuak divine force is thus in no way a personal entity on which one could rely as on a friend or as on a God but *a force which is working in and through all things*, creating physical materials and beings as much as emptiness and death. Jwok, it seems, is a spiritual force which needs human support to survive. Put in front of Jwok's contradiction (of life and death, good and evil, creator and destroyer, the material and the immaterial, of pure spirituality and physical reality), the Anyuak take the side of Jwok: not by adoring him or by submitting to his wishes but, quite the contrary, by expelling Jwok into his proper, transcendental sphere of spirituality and by saving his creation from self-destruction. 'God exists' and 'Jwok is great', but it is the people who have to take care of his creation.

The Anyuak thus believe in the humanity of their world, and they praise everybody supporting their fight for its dignity, its permanence and its stability.

One could finally comment on Anyuak spirituality and find that it is not so much a 'religion' as a kind of ideology in which the human being is distributing the roles and makes the rules of play. Jwok is given the honours and paid due respect, but there is little doubt that it is not for him, Jwok, to decide what should happen in this world. In the Anyuak universe, everybody and everything has to reply to precise patterns of behaviour.

If the Anyuak idea of Jwok may surprise in its basic negativity, one may guess that such belief is the last resource of a people constantly threatened by misfortune, sickness and death: a desperate hope of justice for human sake—in spite of all daily evidence.

NOTES

* A final section of this article will be published in the next issue of the Journal.

1. This is the Hebrew sense of praying: to argue with God.
2. The Nuer avoid stepping on the footprints of a sick person, fearing to fall sick themselves.
3. The Anyuak doctor is usually a woman, dealing with spiritual matters requiring strong earthly connections (as women have).