

CORRESPONDENCE

Bridewealth Payments and Nuer Cattle

Dear Editors,

In his valuable article "Colonial Policy and Prophets: the 'Nuer Settlement', 1929-30" (JASO x:1), Douglas Johnson refers to a seminar paper¹ which I read at the Institute of Social Anthropology in Oxford, earlier this year. He cites my paper as an example of how the uncritical acceptance of Evans-Pritchard's ethnographic observations about the Nuer (in this case about the role of cattle in their economy) can 'distort' a general argument (in this case about the relationship between stockwealth and bridewealth in some East African herding societies). Because Johnson does not say what my argument was, nor explain in what way it was 'distorted', I would be grateful for the opportunity to comment on his remarks.

I distinguished in my paper between two patterns of bridewealth payment (which may be called Types A and B) and argued that these patterns were related to two different ways in which cattle may be said to make a vital contribution to subsistence among East African herders. Type A bridewealth has the following characteristics. It is an onerous payment which often impoverishes the groom; the amount paid is arrived at by means of formal negotiations between the parties; there is an ideal payment which is rarely achieved in practice; the bulk of the payment, and ideally all of it, is handed over before the bride and groom begin living with each other; and the stock of bridewealth are distributed by a senior kinsman of the bride in a way which is formally determined by a number of earlier marriages - those of the bride's parents, grandparents and great grandparents. Type B bridewealth has the following characteristics. It is not an onerous payment; there are no formal negotiations, there is no ideal amount save, in some cases, a nominal initial payment of half a dozen or so animals; the bulk of the payment is made by the continuous transfers to the bride's kin over the life of the marriage; and the animals are distributed by the groom directly to his individual affines.

I pointed out that among groups with Type A bridewealth, in contrast to those with Type B, cattle do not provide the major part of daily subsistence for the majority of the population. Their importance is, rather, as a standby in times of recurrent food shortage, due to crop failure, when they are not consumed directly but converted into grain. Since the exchange of one animal for grain may ensure a family's survival over, say, a six-month period of extreme shortage, it does not matter in these societies, how thinly cattle are spread about the population. I argued that Type A bridewealth is the main means by which this spreading is achieved.

My argument was based on a description and analysis of Mursi bridewealth (Type A) and subsistence but, in order to generalise my conclusion, I considered, in the second part of my paper, seven other groups of East African herders, including the Nuer (who are highly comparable to the Mursi culturally, linguistically and economically). Not only does Evans-Pritchard make it clear that the Nuer could not survive on the products of their herds alone, but he also states that their cattle 'probably do not greatly exceed the human population'² (The Nuer, p.20). Recent research on minimum herd size among East African herders² suggests that the Nuer would need getting on for ten times that number of cattle in order to subsist entirely on milk, blood and meat, and I therefore felt justified in citing Evans-Pritchard's estimate of their per capita stockwealth in support of what I took to be the uncontroversial assertion that cattle are not their major source of daily subsistence. I suggested that the real economic significance for a Nuer of acquiring a single animal of bridewealth was not so much that it 'has in it the promise of a herd' (Kinship and Marriage among the Nuer, p.89) as that it has in it the promise of several bags of grain in the event of a crop failure.

According to Johnson, however, I should not have accepted Evans-Pritchard's estimate at face value, but should have taken into account 'how the machine-gunning of Nuer herds by planes, the confiscation of cattle, the effect of two rinderpest epidemics in three years, and the hiding of cattle from government patrols and tax assessors might have affected his impressions'. The important words here are 'might have'. We have no way of knowing whether Evans-Pritchard took these factors into account when making his estimate, nor can we know exactly what difference they 'might have' made either to the real world or to Evans-Pritchard's impressions of it. I should perhaps have stressed the cautious tone in which he expressed himself, but then I take it for granted that any statement about per capita stockwealth, for any group of East African herders, by any ethnographer, must be treated with caution. The important question, for my argument, is whether Evans-Pritchard was so far out - that is by a factor of between 5 and 10 - as to undermine the correlation between the economic role of cattle and the nature of bridewealth payments upon which my argument was based. I don't believe that Johnson would claim this. Indeed, the figures for Nuer stockwealth from the Jonglei report to which he has kindly drawn my attention in correspondence do far more to corroborate than to question the accuracy of Evans-Pritchard's estimate.

But did I so phrase my argument as to make it hinge on the accuracy of a statement which Evans-Pritchard himself admitted was no more than an informed guess? I have two points to make here. Firstly, and as should be clear by now, there is no magical significance in the 1:1 human/cattle ratio. It just happens that this is roughly what Evans-Pritchard suggested for the Nuer and it is also what I estimate for the Mursi. But I also included the Jie, who have three to four times as many cattle per capita as Evans-Pritchard estimates for the Nuer, in the category of herders for whom cattle are important mainly as a standby in the event of crop failure. I also quoted the following remarks of Deshler about the Dodos, who are said to have four or five cattle per head of population:

The significant fact of Dodos subsistence is that annual food shortage is a severe problem ... grain supplies in dry years are not adequate to see the tribe through the drought period; ... livestock, largely cattle, are their one means of hedging against possible famine.

I believe that this applies to the Nuer (and the Mursi) as much as it does to the Dodos.

Secondly, my argument was in no way based upon Evans-Pritchard's observations about Nuer pastoralism. I could not avoid referring to the Nuer, for obvious reasons, but I devoted only one paragraph, of twenty-eight lines, to them in a typescript of thirty-six pages. I was and am surprised that my brief reference to Evans-Pritchard's estimate of Nuer stockwealth should have occasioned so much more interest and comment than either the general argument I attempted to sustain or my analysis of the Mursi case which took up half the paper. It was not I who made much of the Nuer. Indeed, as I left Oxford, following the seminar, I was both bemused and intrigued by 'the most evident symptoms of "Nuerosis"' which my paper had unwittingly revealed!

Yours faithfully,

David Turton,
Dept. of Social Anthropology,
University of Manchester.

NOTES

1. The Economics of Mursi Bridewealth: A Comparative Perspective. 9/2/79
2. Brown, L.H. 1973. The biology of pastoral man as a factor in conservation. Biological Conservation. 3(2): 93-100.
-- 1977. The Ecology of Man and Domestic Livestock. In D.J. Pratt and M.D. Gwynne (Eds.), Rangeland Management and Ecology in East Africa.
- Dahl, G. and A. Hjort. 1976. Having Herds. Department of Social Anthropology, University of Stockholm.
3. Native Cattle Keeping in Eastern Africa. In A. Leeds and A.P. Vayda (Eds.), Man, Culture and Animals. American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1965, p.167.

Editor's note: David Turton's article, under the title mentioned above, is due to be published in J. Comaroff (Ed.), The Meaning of Marriage Payments. London: Academic Press (in press).