

## **'HIGH GODS' AMONG SOME NILOTIC PEOPLES**

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THE objects of this paper are three: (i) to suggest that the problem of 'High Gods', among the Nilotes at least, is largely a pseudo-problem, arising from the context of European thought in theology and anthropology and not from the material itself; (ii) to give an account of some of the religious conceptions of several Nilotic people with a view to demonstrating this point; and (iii) to suggest tentatively some of the lines upon which sociological comparison between these peoples might be made with a view to attaining a better understanding of the factors affecting the differences between some of their religious conceptions.

As is well known, the anthropological interpretation of 'primitive' religion up to (and probably including) our times has been affected by a debate between two philosophies, the one grounded in rationalism and the other in kinds of Christian theology. The principal tenets of the latter may be represented by a passage from More's *Utopia*, which is an account, based to some extent on the reports of travellers, of a 'natural' society uninformed by the Christian revelations:

*Editors' note:* Text of a paper given at a conference on 'The High God in Africa' held at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ife, Ibadan, Nigeria, in December 1964. (For an account of the conference, including comments on Lienhardt's paper, see Robin Horton, 'Conference: "The High God in Africa"', in *Odu: University of Ife Journal of African Studies*, Vol. II, no. 2 (January 1966), pp. 87-95.) Only very minor changes have been made to the copy of the text surviving in the author's papers, including those on it in the author's own hand. The footnotes and the references have been supplied.

The most and the wisest part, rejecting all these, believe that there is a certain godly power unknown, everlasting, incomprehensible, inexplicable, far above the capacity and reach of man's wit, dispersed throughout all the world, not in bigness, but in virtue and power.... To him alone they attribute the beginnings, the increasings, the proceedings, the changes, and the ends of all things...every one of them, whatsoever that is which he taketh for the chief god, thinketh it to be the very same nature to whose only divine might and majesty the sum and sovereignty of all things by the consent of all people is attributed and given. (More 1951 [1516]: 117-18)

The former, rationalistic view, is expressed by David Hume, in a passage I quote at length since it compresses and clearly expresses an interpretation which many anthropologists later developed more diffusely:

It is remarkable, that the principles of religion have a kind of flux and reflux in the human mind, and that men have a natural tendency to rise from idolatry to theism, and to sink again from theism into idolatry. The vulgar, that is, indeed, all mankind, a few excepted, being ignorant and uninstructed, never elevate their contemplation to the heavens, or penetrate by their disquisitions into the secret structure of vegetable or animal bodies; so far as to discover a supreme mind or original providence, which bestowed order on every part of nature. They consider these admirable works in a more confined and selfish view; and finding their own happiness and misery to depend on the secret influence and unforeseen concurrence of external objects, they regard, with perpetual attention, the *unknown causes*, which govern all these natural events, and distribute pleasure and pain, good and ill, by their powerful, but silent, operation. The unknown causes are still appealed to on every emergence; and in this general appearance or confused image, are the perpetual objects of human hopes and fears, wishes and apprehensions. By degrees, the active imagination of men, uneasy in this abstract conception of objects, about which it is incessantly employed, begins to render them more particular, and to clothe them in shapes more suitable to its natural comprehension. It represents them to be sensible, intelligent beings, like mankind; actuated by love and hatred, and flexible by gifts and entreaties, by prayers and sacrifices. Hence the origin of religion: And hence the origin of idolatry or polytheism. (Hume 1956 [1757]: 46-7; original emphasis)

As you will see, these views, in that both take the superiority of theism for granted, are not entirely opposed; but under the influence of the evolutionary philosophy of the nineteenth century, the disagreement between those who, like St Thomas More and in his Christian tradition, sought to establish the historical and religious primacy of theistic and even monotheistic ideas, and those who, like David Hume, argued that 'the vulgar and uninstructed' would tend towards polytheistic conceptions, became more absolute. I need not go into details; but as you will know there were many influential anthropologists who like Darwin himself could not believe that very 'primitive' people could have the 'superior' religious conceptions of the theistic religions; and there were those like Andrew Lang and,

most thoroughgoing, Pater Schmidt (with his powerful influence over missionary sources of information) who laboured to establish the primacy of primitive monotheism, which would be consistent with the Christian revelation.

Now my point in this introduction is simply this: that this debate (which must still have its influence upon us since we are still here discussing 'High Gods') is so obviously a European philosophical and theological debate, and little more, that it is surprising that it should have continued in various ways to affect anthropology. And that it has done so is largely explained by the fact that only a small fraction of our basic information about the facts of African belief has been unaffected by it. Many of our best reports have been by missionaries or anti-missionaries whose standard of relevance in collecting and presenting their material has derived, not from problems intrinsic to that material, but from disputes within the field of European philosophy and theology. If this conference does something finally to show the irrelevance of many such philosophical ideas for the organizing or understanding of the facts before us in the study of religion, it will have achieved something.

For some indication of what has happened to indispensable source material in the Nilotic field, by trying to fit it into an inappropriate framework of ideas—and also to give some direct evidence for the inappropriateness of that framework—I will quote one or two examples. Since the word will appear again, I had better mention now that one widespread word among the Nilotes which has been translated as 'God' or 'Spirit' is *juok*, also *juok* or some recognizable variant of that sound. The first example comes from Mr Heasty, a missionary writing about *juok* in the religion of the Shilluk of the Upper Nile:

He appears to be one, and yet he seems to be a plurality as well, and the native himself is puzzled.... He will say there is but one *juok*, and then he will say of one who has been extremely fortunate that his *juok* is very good, while he speaks of another who is less fortunate as having a bad or angry *juok*. The foreigner is spoken of as *juok* because of the marvellous things he does. He flies through the air, or makes a machine that talks, so he is a *juok*. (quoted in Seligman and Seligman 1932: 76; original ellipsis)

(Here I would interject that a subtle but important shift of meaning in translation occurs, since the language has neither definite nor indefinite articles in our sense. One cannot, therefore, strictly speaking talk of a *juok*, though the sense of some expressions such as *juok tim*, literally '*juok* wood' and *juok nam*, literally '*juok* river', may seem to demand it.) To conclude the quotation: 'A badly wounded animal that is lost in the grass is *juok*, because it walked off dead and could not be found... *Juok* is the creator of mankind, and the Universe...but anything that the Shilluk cannot understand is *juok*' (ibid.; original ellipses).

It seems to me clear enough here, as from my experience in Nilotic societies, that it is not so much the Shilluk who is puzzled by his own religion, as that a puzzle arises when he tries to fit it into a framework of questions deriving from the theological and philosophical assumptions mentioned earlier. This puzzle

arises also for Europeans. It permeates Pater Schmidt's monumental and carefully documented *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee* (Schmidt 1912–55) of course; but also missionaries with the practical experience of Nilotic peoples which Pater Schmidt did not have, recognized the possibilities of error. Father Crazzolaro, one of the most outstanding missionary ethnologists, wrote of the Acholi of Uganda:

It was...taken for granted that the generic term *jok* could not mean something independent from the many particular *jogi* [plural of *jok*] with their peculiar names. Based on such supposition natives were urged by tiresome questions...as to which *jok* among the many had created them. Such enquiries implied suppositions and questions which most probably had never occurred to their simple minds: it puzzled them, as they are still puzzled at such questions. With hesitation they answered...that they did not know, which was more nearly approaching truth but less satisfactory. (Crazzolaro 1940: 135)

Let us take another example, again in reference to the Acholi. The distinguished Italian scholar Professor Boccassino wrote an article, published in 1939, describing the Supreme Being of the Acholi in terms which made it very closely comparable with the Christian conception of God (Boccassino 1939). This view was challenged by another writer experienced in Acholi matters, Mr A. C. A. Wright, who includes in his article a long note from Crazzolaro, who mentions having met Professor Boccassino in Acholi country: 'R. B. came to the, in my opinion, erroneous result as a consequence of his peculiar method of enquiry. His chief assistants during his stay among the Acooli were Christians, and his Acooli texts were written down by them' (Crazzolaro 1940: 136). The word used for the Supreme Being by the Acholi, probably under Christian and certainly Bantu influence, is the non-Nilotic term *Rubanga*. Crazzolaro quotes an old Acholi *Christian convert* as saying: 'The Acholi did not know *Lubanga*, they know *jok*. *Lubanga* means death, he kills people' (ibid.).<sup>1</sup>

Finally, in his work on the Shilluk, by far the fullest we have, Father Hofmayr emphasizes (no doubt rightly within that framework of thought and vocabulary) the monotheistic strain in Shilluk religion rejecting 'dualism' and 'polytheism' (Hofmayr 1925); but his own evidence very fully bears out that if the Shilluk word *jwok* can be made, in missionary endeavour, to bear the meaning of the English word 'God', it is only by excluding very many of the associations of the Shilluk word. I do not deny, I may say, that when a people such as the Shilluk come to view their own religion in vaguely Christian theological categories, then that in itself is a religious phenomenon worthy of anthropological description and analysis. But I do think that the ends of social anthropology (and even ultimately

1. *Editors' note:* In the original text Lienhardt mistakenly ascribes to Wright both Crazzolaro's meeting with Boccassino and his quotation from the Christian convert, missing the fact that these matters are dealt with in the long note from Crazzolaro that Wright is quoting. These mis-ascriptions have been corrected here.

perhaps of creative theology) are best served by seeing what sort of pattern the facts fit into, rather than by importing what anthropologists would call 'a model' from a different religion.

To turn now to some aspects of the religion of several Nilotic peoples. Let me say first that the Nilotes are ethnically, linguistically, and almost certainly historically a large group of peoples with more in common among themselves than with any other African peoples. Nobody who has studied any Nilotic people can fail to be struck by an underlying similarity between them and others, a similarity which must also strike students to whom they are known merely through the literature. The nature of this similarity is as yet not capable of clear definition, since it makes itself felt in such a multitude of details, but that it is there no competent student of Nilotic peoples will, I think, deny.

I must now give you some indication of the major similarities and differences between the Nilotic peoples, more particularly those I primarily consider in this paper—the Nuer, Dinka, Acholi, Anuak, and Shilluk. I shall consider these under the general headings of mode of livelihood and settlement pattern, political organization, and finally, religion.

The Nilotes all show marked traces of having originally been a predominantly pastoral people. All now are mixed farmers, but there is a distinct contrast between (to take only those I have mentioned) the cattle-rich, transhumant, Nuer and Dinka, and the rest, all of whom are primarily agriculturalists settled in permanent villages, in which the whole population remains, on the whole, for the complete year. Except for the Shilluk, who alone among these form a single nation, the effective political community traditionally was considerably larger among Dinka and Nuer than among the others.

All these Nilotes have patrilineal clans and lineages, though their importance politically varies much between one and another. In the case of the Dinka and Nuer, highly segmented lineage systems form the framework of tribal territorial organization. Among the Anuak, the really significant lineages are those which produce village chiefs and nobles, and form a nucleus for the politically distinct villages. Something similar is found among the Acholi, whilst the Shilluk have a royal clan distributed throughout the country, from which a nationally accepted 'divine king' is chosen. All the Nilotes, however, are essentially extremely democratic. Even the nation of the Shilluk is not a state with a highly developed administrative hierarchy like, say, those of the Interlacustrine Bantu. When Jwok (hereafter called Divinity) is spoken of as being 'high' therefore (as it is) that word does not have any of the connotations of height *in a social hierarchy* which it may have among other peoples, and indeed the word 'ahead', not 'high', would be normally used for social superiority.

Here—and it is a striking fact in itself—there are very marked differences as well as similarities which are germane to our theme. It is noteworthy, for example, that although what has been called 'ancestor worship' is a very minor aspect, if an aspect at all, of the religion of the pastoral Nilotes, it is present in the form of offerings to ancestors, especially in the noble families of the Anuak and Shilluk, and seems to be the dominant element in the religion of the Acholi—the

only group among these which has for long been in close contact with Bantu peoples. Totemic beliefs, present to a small extent among all, are centrally important only among the Dinka, where totemic cults form a major aspect of religious practice. All have a term which translated would literally be 'Divinity High' or 'in the above'; but whereas with the pastoral Nilotes sacrifice and prayers are regularly and conspicuously offered to the 'being' with this name, among the others it looms far less large as an object of direct religious attention. Among the Shilluk, this 'Divinity High' is associated with and merged in the cult of the king's ancestors, and of the spirit of the first king. Among the Anuak and, on convincing evidence, it would appear also among the Acholi, 'Divinity High' is less personified (if that be the right word) and is to a marked degree more otiose than among the others. I shall suggest later how this difference may be connected with some differences in the nature of the political community, mode of livelihood, and mythology of some of these peoples.

First though, how are we *as anthropologists* to view the 'spirits'—I have myself preferred the word 'divinities' or 'powers'—which for the Nilotes are active, ultra-human forces acting upon them? Both Professor Evans-Pritchard, in his book on *Nuer Religion* (Evans-Pritchard 1956), and I in mine on Dinka religion (Lienhardt 1961), saw that the facts could only be distorted, and analysis impeded, by regarding the Powers (as the Nilotes themselves perhaps do) as simply 'spirits' in the vague, older anthropological sense, peopling the Nilotic imagination. We saw also that while it would be possible to interpret many statements as indicating a basic tendency towards monotheism, in that the conception of 'Divinity High' in some cases seems in a general way to cover all manifestations of divinity (that is, it is the least specialized and specific of many related conceptions), monotheism, polytheism, and even henotheism were not terms we could very usefully or precisely use. We approached this problem, and came to similar conclusions, from different directions.

Professor Evans-Pritchard started with the least specialized concept *kwoth*—literally here 'spirit' but not strictly a spirit—and interpreted other more specialized and precise 'spirits' as refractions or manifestations of this concept in relation to particular distinct and different aspects of human experience. I started with the different forms of human experience—the experience of clanship, for example, or of diseases—and sought to show a correspondence between these and the Dinka Powers and divinities. I suggested then that what earlier anthropologists would have called 'spirits' might be better understood, from the point of view of those not believing in their objective existence, by regarding them as conceptions—'images', I called them—by which different complexes of human experience could be summed up in a single name, communicated about, and acted upon. I thought thus (and I think now) that from the anthropological point of view the 'spirits' of other peoples corresponded to the lived experience of those peoples in something of the same way as a concept corresponds to a range of direct perceptions. This is not to say, as some seem to have understood it to mean, that in the manner of Tylor I interpret the Nilotic spirits only, or even primarily, as *explanatory* con-

cepts, 'personified causes'. First, there is no way of proving that they do not objectively exist, and all of them, in just the way the Nilotes say. But they do not exist for the foreigner in that he is not affected by them as presences acting directly upon him. Hence the Nilotic account of them cannot be universalized, and is theological, not scientific. Secondly, by referring to 'images' of lived experience to try to analyse the meaning of these Nilotic religious concepts, I really mean that for one *living* fully as a Nilote, in his particular circumstances, the 'spirits' might well be mental images (in the ordinary sense of that word) formed from whole complexes of sensory and mental experience. And, although I shall not go further into this here, I think that this interpretation does not conflict with the Nilotes' own interpretation. It merely presents it on a different plane of intellectual and imaginative activity. And on this interpretation I suggested that 'Divinity High' was the least precise of many images of a similar kind.

With this in mind, we can now turn to some of the information about the image 'Divinity High' among these five peoples. I have said that among all it represents the most generalizing concept of its class. Even among the Nilotes for whom the high divinity is most otiose—the Anuak and the Acholi—and whose attention is primarily directed to divinity with other more specialized attributes, 'Divinity High' is not simply one among many equals of the same kind. But this, I suggest, is because the human experiences referred to it are themselves more universal and aspecific than those attributed to divinities with different qualifying objectives. These experiences tend to be those of creation and of death in general, and those human conditions outside any technical control. It is true that among many, perhaps all, of these peoples, creation and birth, and certainly death, may also be attributed to other 'spiritual agencies'; but even so, in these cases the more specific agents are often closely connected with 'Divinity High'. Whatever other agents may be conceived of as the sources of special instances of creation or destruction, 'Divinity High' among the Nilotes is ultimately Creator and Destroyer, and (here it is more difficult for peoples with more developed dualistic theologies to grasp) this does not seem to involve, for the Nilotes, a *conflict* between two opposing principles. There is no evidence that thought is given to supposed relations of the separately named divinities among themselves, as in Christian teaching about God and the Devil, for example, and it is clear from much writing on the Nilotes that the missionaries found it particularly difficult to make such a distinction between 'good' and 'bad' divinities within the terms of the languages they were forced to use.

This, as I have pointed out elsewhere (Lienhardt 1961), is consistent with the fact that human experiences of such matters, for example, as birth and death, though different and in a sense opposed, are not in conflict. Even the major division of the world, between earth and sky, with which Nilotic attributions of sky or earth qualities to divinity and divinities are closely connected, is obviously not a *conflict*. What in some other religions, then, has been seen as a battle between forces of good and evil, life and death, light and darkness, and so forth, is not found among the Nilotes. And although there is much evidence among the Nuer

and Dinka particularly that there are occasions when Divinity with the attribute of height is represented as a father, a helper, a judge, the guardian of truth and the rest, these aspects are not as it were cut off from others to form together a single image of all forms of 'goodness', as they are in Christianity. The theological position of Nicolas of Cusa, 'God is the coincidence of opposites', for which he was charged with pantheism, is much nearer to the facts reported from Nilotic societies than any discussion of primitive monotheism and polytheism. It may be significant that his supporter was the scientist Bruno.<sup>2</sup>

But given among all these peoples the fact of such a conception of High Divinity, and given their comparability in many respects, the part played by that conception in their social lives varies from one to another in a very striking way. It is difficult to know what the significant variables in this respect are in a diffuse mass of information of very uneven quality, but some correlations may be suggested. Of the five peoples I have mentioned, only the Nuer and Dinka are transhumant pastoralists; only they have a large-scale political organization based upon a highly developed segmentary lineage system; and only they have nothing which could be called difference in rank. They also are the peoples who have the most highly developed religion of a High God, to whom sacrifice and prayers are regularly offered. It would appear, also, that though all Nilotes have some form of myth accounting for, or referring to, the division and distance between earth and sky, man and Divinity, a myth explaining this present division in terms of an original conjunction of earth and sky is of central significance and consistency only among Dinka and Nuer. This myth tells, to put it briefly, how sky and earth, Divinity and man, were once conjoined by a rope by means of which man had access to Divinity. There was no death, and a tiny portion of food sufficed the first man and woman for each day. Then the first woman (in the Dinka myth) pounded more grain than Divinity permitted, and he fled to his present distance from earth, and the rope connecting them was severed. The purpose of their prayer and sacrifice to Divinity is to restore that original closeness.

How different from this seems to be the far less developed cosmogonic myths of the other Nilotes here considered. The Anuak, who actually border the Nuer, provide the best example. Among the Anuak, the first man and woman were 'born' of Divinity, but he did not like them and gave them to Dog to throw away. Dog, however, gave them to Crow to suckle, and thus despite Divinity's wish, they grew up, with Dog as their friend. Further, in the Anuak story, Divinity really favoured the wild animals, and man received such strength as he has only by the trickery of Dog. The Anuak divinities one hears most of are associated with natural features. This story is not reported from the Acholi, but neither is any account of an original conjunction of man and Divinity. The point may also be worth making, for those influenced by Max Muller's idea that the notion of God

2. *Editors' note:* Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64) was a cardinal, theologian and influential philosopher. Giordano Bruno (c. 1548–1600) was a philosopher, astronomer and mathematician who became a Dominican at Naples.

comes from contemplating the sky, that the Anuak, with little emphasis on the sky divinity, have a much more developed interest in the stars and sky-phenomena than the Dinka, whose 'Divinity High' is literally 'in the sky' or 'in the above'. The Shilluk present a rather different problem since their religion, unlike that of the others, is entirely, or almost entirely, centred around the cult of their kings, who are intermediaries between their people and divinity. Shilluk mythology thus seems to tell us little about divinity as such in relation to man; it is centred on the kings, and especially the first, who has become fused in thought with Jwok. He is spoken of as Jwok on earth.

And here, as far as the Nilotes I have been discussing are concerned, is a point which may be of some importance. The Anuak also have noble rulers but many, who are all theoretically equal, ruling over small villages, and who are themselves thought of as 'spirit' (*jok*) since their ancestor was himself a spirit. Among them, of the Nilotes of whom I have some experience, the notion of 'Divinity High' seems mostly to be one of an otiose being. The Acholi also live in relatively small political communities, with chiefs. I never saw a sacrifice of any kind in over a year among the Anuak. Although the literature is contradictory on this point, some of it at least suggests that the 'Divinity High' concept plays a relatively small part in Acholi religious thought and practice. The same seems to be true of the little segmentary states of the Alur of Uganda and the Congo (see Southall 1956).

The purpose of this paper has only been to find out whether conclusions which the Nilotic material would support have any bearing on those which might be reached from the study of other peoples in Africa. Divinity is most diversified in societies where either there is most diversification of rank, occupation etc., or where the effective moral and political community to which a person feels himself to belong is smallest. And the converse, whereas with Dinka, Nuer, and to some extent Shilluk, the first two acephalous and the last a 'divine kingship', people are conscious of belonging to a relatively large moral community (*all Dinka, all Nuer, all Shilluk* are morally unified in this way, but by different political arrangements), there 'Divinity High' plays a larger part in relation to other agencies of the same class. I suggest in fact that the relation of the size of the moral and political community to the extent of diversification of rank and role seems, among the Nilotes, to have a significant connection with the balance between unification and diversification of the divine. No rulers, or a single ruler, within a homogeneous population, seems to be consistent with emphasis upon height and unity in Divinity; the existence of many small and equal rulers among a whole people seems consistent with a more atomized set of conceptions of divinity.

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