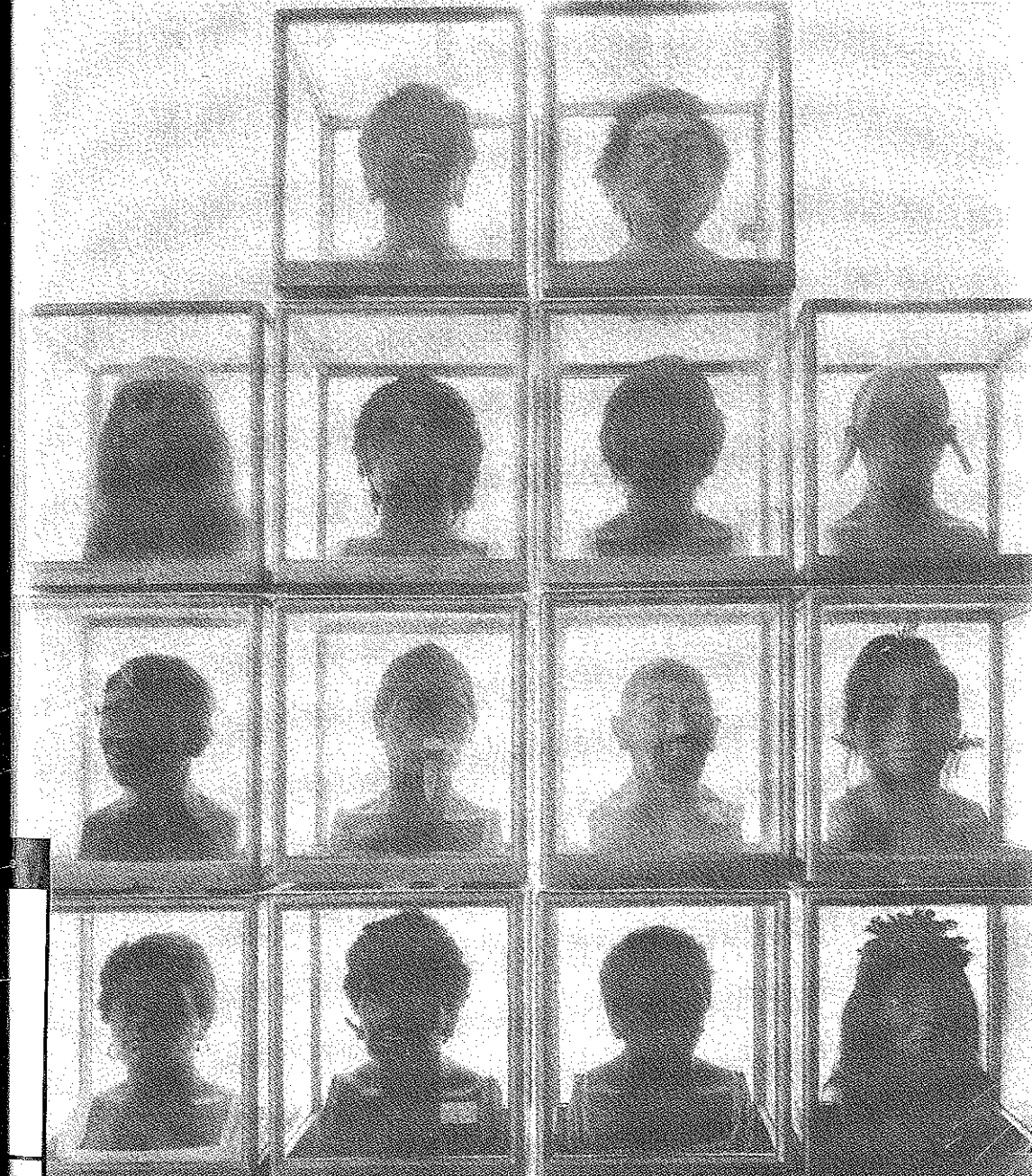


CULTURES OF RELATEDNESS

New Approaches to the Study of Kinship



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Edited by Janet Carsten

- (who may be more difficult to control if segmentary rivalries get out of control).
- 5 So it is perhaps surprising to read the following comments by anthropologists of China. Maurice Freedman: 'The Western literature . . . is full of variations on the theme that the family was the basic unit of Chinese society . . . But this is not significantly truer of China than of most other societies' (1979: 240). Donald DeGlopper: 'To be sure, most people belonged to families and family membership was a very significant aspect of every person's identity, but I fail to see what is so distinctively Chinese about this' (1995: 24). Fei Xiaotong: 'I do not think that [in China] kinship possesses any force of extension by itself and is valued as such' (1946: 6).
- 6 In another article, Wolf discusses the power of women's gossip – again a negative formulation of women's power (M. Wolf 1974; cf. Ahern 1975: 199–200).
- 7 In this she is contradicted by Hill Gates, who suggests that women in mainland China 'still marry principally to establish uterine families' (1996: 202). To my mind this is an extremely odd characterisation of why Chinese women marry. I would suggest that they generally *must* marry in order not to be left out of the cycle of *yang*.
- 8 On the cycle of *yang* (to cite only a few examples), see discussions of the on-going relationship of *yang* between the living and dead (J. Watson 1988; Thompson 1988), and discussions of 'meal rotation' as a way of providing *yang* to one's parents (Hsieh 1985). See also M. Cohen on the process for sons of *becoming* (as opposed to being born as) co-parceners in estates (1976: 70–85), and Chen on the contributions of daughters to their own dowries (1985). On the cycle of *laiwang*, see e.g. Pasternak's discussion of the on-going system of reciprocal obligations between non-agnates (1972: 64; cf. Yang 1994; Yan 1996; and Potter and Potter 1990: 210).

3 Identity and substance: the broadening bases of relatedness among the Nuer of southern Sudan

Sharon Elaine Hutchinson

Questions of boundaries, identities, and connections lie at the molten core of the encounter between local forms of power and understanding on the one hand and increasingly globalised forces of social and economic transformation on the other. The impact of these broader historical forces is often experienced at the local level in conjunction with the introduction of 'new' objects, substances, and vectors of social exchange. All over the world, people are experimenting with everything from bullets to computers in an effort to define and actualise their evolving sense of relatedness to diverse others. What's more, much of this 'experimentation' is carried out, I suspect, in blissful ignorance of the social/biological divide so prominent in anthropological analyses of human interpersonal relations. Grappling with these themes in a war-torn stretch of southern Sudan, I have sought – in other contexts – to identify the specific conditions and practices that have led contemporary Nuer men and women to problematise fundamental aspects of who they are and how they relate to one another (Hutchinson 1996). I have been especially intrigued by the ways they have been critically re-examining the socially binding force of three key exchange media – 'blood' (*riem*), 'cattle' (*ghok*), and 'food' (*mieth*) – in their efforts to comprehend and cope with the massive social and economic changes wrought by more than twenty-five years of colonial rule (1929–55), by eleven years of 'southern regional autonomy' (1972–83), and by two extended civil wars (1955–72 and 1983–present). This chapter focuses on how Nuer concepts of 'blood', in particular, have both shaped and been shaped by intensifying Nuer engagements over the past half-century with powerful 'new' media of relatedness emanating from outside their immediate social world – and, specifically, those of 'money' (*yiou*), 'guns' (*maac*), and 'paper' (*waragak*).

By framing this chapter in terms of the 'substantive vectors' that move between people rather than of people's interactions themselves, I am

resorting unabashedly to a form of 'methodological fetishism' (à la Appadurai 1986: 5) which inevitably obscures how contemporary Nuer concepts and practices of 'relatedness' (*maar*) are the historical product of specific value controversies and power struggles. I will nevertheless adopt this analytical short cut here on the assumption that 'imagined communities' of whatever scale or complexity may be approached, at least in part, as a set of mediated relations that combine complex symbolic and material concerns. I further assume that the subjectively experienced boundaries and connections that uphold all such communities are both reinforced and blurred by the circulation of key 'substances' and 'objects' between persons and groups. With respect to 'human blood', I shall argue that Nuer experience the dialectic between social boundaries and connections more directly as a physically embodied tension between human vitality and human vulnerability. And it is this experiential 'reality' that has continued to shape their evolving interpretations of the socially binding and divisive potentials of 'food', 'cattle', 'money', 'guns', and 'paper' as well.

In advocating a more 'vectorial' approach to the study of relatedness that encompasses the social circulation of imported objects like 'guns', 'money', and 'paper', this essay cuts across some of the central theoretical assumptions guiding Evans-Pritchard's earlier accounts of Nuer 'kinship' and 'social structure' during the 1930s (1940, 1945, 1951). Whereas Evans-Pritchard, like many of his contemporaries, was pre-occupied during the 1930s and 40s with issues of 'unity', 'equilibrium', and 'order', viewing culture as something shared and ethnography as the compilation of those shared elements, my own research has concentrated on evolving points of confusion and disagreement among Nuer, particularly with regard to the historical fluidity of their relations amongst themselves and with the world at large. Evans-Pritchard, for instance, tends to separate his analyses of Nuer 'social structure' – defined as 'relations between groups of persons within a system of groups' (1940: 262) – from his discussion of more individualised 'kinship' networks. He characterises the former as governed by a 'segmentary lineage system' and the latter by the unchallenged supremacy of the 'agnatic principle' (1951: 28). Evans-Pritchard's conclusions in these respects have been extensively reworked by a wide range of scholars undertaking secondary re-analyses of his Nuer ethnographic corpus. Some have stressed the complicating presence of countervailing social values and principles in what must be viewed as a historically dynamic and internally differentiated society (Gough 1971; Holy 1979a, b; Kelly 1985). Others have rejected various aspects of Evans-Pritchard's 'Nuer model' on the ground that it is inconsistent with the

empirical evidence provided (Southall 1986; Kuper 1982, 1988). Here I am less interested in extending academic debates over whether or not Nuer 'lineages' exist than in showing how their systems of relatedness are constituted through the flow of multiple substances. I assume from the start that the dynamic social and cultural systems in which Nuer men and women live and work are inherently unbounded, unfinished, and riddled with uncertainties. Far from being determined by an inherited set of 'value principles', Nuer concepts, patterns, and practices of relatedness are continually being reworked as people struggle – often under extremely difficult and bewildering circumstances – to live valid and meaningful human lives.

Blood: the vital weakness

Contemporary Nuer concepts and patterns of 'relatedness' float on a sea of human blood. For 'blood', or *riem* (pl. *rimmi*), is both the most powerful and most mysterious 'substance' capable of uniting – and thus dividing – human beings. Intimately associated with the powers of divinity (*kuoth nhial*) as well as with the energies and ambitions of ordinary folk, Nuer concepts of blood meander along the experiential boundary line separating what lies within and beyond human control and influence. Although not equated with life (*tiek*) itself, blood is the substance out of which each and every human life begins. Conception is understood as a mysterious merger of male and female 'blood' flows, forged by the life-creating powers of *kuoth* (divinity). Without the direct participation and continual support of divinity, no child would ever be born or survive long enough to bring forth another generation. This dependence on the life-creating and life-sustaining powers of *kuoth* is a reality that cannot be ignored in a war-blighted world where many couples experience long periods of infertility and where at least half of the children born alive die before reaching adulthood. Procreation, moreover, is the paramount goal of life and the only form of immortality valued. Every adult fears 'the true death', 'the complete death': the death without children to extend one's name and revitalise one's influence in the world. For men, the immortality sought is motivated in part by strong collective interests: without heirs, a man acquires no permanent position in the patrilineal chain of descendants from which he emerged. For women, childbirth is the threshold to adulthood, security, and independence. In fact, the comprehensive term for adult woman/wife (*ciek*, pl. *män*) is conferred only on women who have experienced childbirth. From this perspective, blood (*riem*) may be seen as that which unites the greatest of human desires with the profound

sense of humility with which Nuer contemplate the transcendent powers of divinity. In fact, a newborn child is 'blood' and is often referred to as such during the first month or two of existence. Milk, semen, sweat – these, too, are blood. It is as though *riem*, blood, were the mutable source of all human – and hence all social – energy.

Moreover, unlike breath (*yiagh*) and awareness (*tiy/tiei*), two other cardinal principles of life, blood passes from person to person and from generation to generation, endowing social relations with a certain substance and fluidity. It is the gift of blood bestowed from parent to child on which the authority and respect of the older generation ultimately depend. Similarly, the perpetual expansion, fusion, and dissipation of kin groups is conceptualised in terms of blood's creation, transferral, and loss. The coming of both manhood and womanhood is also marked by emissions of blood. For a girl, the blood that flows during her first childbirth (not at puberty) ushers her into adulthood. For a boy, it is that shed during the ordeal of the knife at initiation, when six (and sometimes seven) horizontal cuts are drawn across his forehead from ear to ear. The shedding of blood at initiation also forges a brotherhood (*ric*) among age-mates and ensures continuity of the patriline as well as supports a broader sense of community among Nuer as 'the people of the people', the 'true human beings', the *nei ti naadh*.

Though imbued with connotations of vital force, blood is not equated with 'physical strength', *buom puany*. Human strength is never a matter of blood or 'flesh' (*ring*) but derives, rather, from the inherent 'hardness' (*buom*) of a person's 'bones' (sing. *coaa*, pl. *cou*). Indeed, considerable evidence suggests that blood is viewed as the weakest point in the human constitution. Illness, for example, is generally thought to harbour in a person's blood, and thus Nuer practice an elaborate art of medicinal bleeding. Consider also associations between human blood and human vulnerability implicit in Nuer images of *peth* (sing. *peath*), or 'possessors of the "red" eye'. These evil beings, who masquerade as true human beings, are said to relish secretly wrenching out the hearts of others, draining their blood and milk, festering their wounds, and snatching the blood/foetus (*riem*) from one woman only to hurl it into the womb of another. More to the point: one's blood linkages with others are the open portals through which potentially lethal forms of pollution associated with acts of homicide (*nueer*), incest (*ruaal*), adultery (*koor*), and other transgressions may enter and spread to endanger the wider community. In the words of one eloquent Lou Nuer man, 'Blood is like a medicine (*wal*) in that it carries all the indirect consequences of other people's actions.'

Food: blood's twin force

Like blood, food, or *mieth*, is essential for human life. Its social circulation is thus equally bound up with human experiences of sexuality and procreation, of illness and death – as well as with the life-generating and life-sustaining powers of divinity. Fundamental distinctions of age, gender, descent, and community are likewise inseparable from the daily gathering, giving, and/or withholding of food. More important for my purposes, Nuer regard 'blood' as being generated from 'food' and 'food' from 'blood'. The nutritional qualities of different food types are, in fact, assessed in terms of their relative 'blood' contents. Some foods, such as *koang in boor* (white beer) and *beel* (sorghum), are considered far richer in 'blood' than are *koang in caar* (black beer) and *maintap* (maize). Milk (*caak*), of course, is the perfect food – the food that can support human life unassisted. One need only trace the swollen veins running along the underbelly of a cow towards its udder to conclude, together with Nuer, that 'milk is blood'. Even agricultural products are considered blood-based in this sense. A man who has sweated day after day tilling the soil may refer to his crops, once harvested, as 'my blood'.

From this perspective, the perpetuation of human social life depends on the continual transformation of 'blood' into 'food' and 'food' into 'blood'. Nuer concepts of *maar* (kinship or relatedness) are, in fact, founded on this idea: ideally, 'relatives' (*nei ti maar*) celebrate their 'oneness of blood' through the constant sharing of 'food'. It is only after a child matures and begins to develop the unique 'blood' bonds acquired at birth with counter-gifts of 'food' that he or she achieves the status of a true relative among relatives. In contrast, newly created affines (including husband and wife) normally avoid one another completely in matters of food and drink until some time after the birth of a child solidifies the union. Whereas the social bond created through bridewealth cattle is potentially reversible, the birth of a living, healthy child is taken as indisputable evidence of a successful fusion of different types of 'blood'. Restrictions on commensality between the families concerned are thereafter gradually relaxed. Until then, there is no socially recognised blood bond between the families and hence nothing to be solidified and affirmed, as it were, through the sharing of food. But as long as a child of the union survives, a relationship of *maar* exists between the families of the husband and wife – even in situations where the marriage itself later falters and ends in divorce and in the return of bridewealth cattle.

The 'blood brotherhood' forged between age-mates at initiation, *maar*

ricä, also carries with it expectations of uninhibited commensality. In fact, the 'blood' men gain from the common bowl is explicitly equated with that later spent in acts of mutual defence and in communal work projects. One eastern Gaajok youth went so far as to suggest that food-sharing, in itself, creates a quasi-blood bond between people: 'If I have a little food and I share it with you, that means we are brothers. Once we have eaten together, we should not marry each other's daughters or kill one another.' *Maar* thus combines an ideology of shared substance, shared vitality – shared food and blood – with expectations of exogamy and communal peace.

Although there is nothing shameful about eating or drinking in the company of relatives, to be caught in the act of satisfying one's hunger or thirst before a stranger is everyone's nightmare. For to do so is to admit lack of self-control and physical dependence in a situation requiring, instead, firm displays of inner strength and outward dignity. Rules of exogamy are, in fact, stamped with this principle: unrelated men and women 'respect' each other completely in matters of eating and drinking. Moreover, any act of commensality – even indirect forms conveyed through a neutral third party – is considered lethal for persons related through a 'bone' or 'blood' feud (*ter*). The buried bones of the slain – which remain firm and whole beneath the earth long after all remnants of blood and flesh have disappeared – are thought to create a social rift so deep, so strong, that relations of commensality, sexuality, and intermarriage between the extended families concerned are prohibited, in principle, 'forever'. Active states of intercommunity feuding may be tempered by a transfer of bloodwealth cattle and by the completion of special sacrifices of atonement performed by an 'earth priest' (*kuäär muon*, also known in the literature as a 'leopard-skin chief'). But 'relationships of the bone' (*maar coakä*) endure, like those of agnation (*böth*), for as long as they are remembered. The hereditary powers of the 'earth priest' are capable of nullifying the pollution dangers associated with blood feuds as well as those originating from incestuous contacts, unwitting acts of cannibalism, and other potentially lethal fusions of either blood or food. Indeed, their powers in this regard appear to be based on the implicit premise that, ultimately, all cycles of 'blood' and 'food' meet and mingle in the earth, from which they re-emerge, as it were, afresh. Consequently, the most effective means of voiding 'dangerous' passages of human blood and food is to rechannel them – symbolically, if not also physically – through the earth (*mun*, gen. *muon*). In sum, Nuer experiences of food-sharing, like those of blood-sharing, reinforce the cultural tenet that human vitality and human vulnerability are 'one'.

Cattle as symbolic counters for human blood

Because contemporary Nuer equate so many of their aspirations and fears with delicate states and flows of *riem*, they often attempt to manipulate blood in ways that they hope will promote their wellbeing. Acts of blood vengeance, male initiation rites, and various forms of medicinal bleeding are all motivated in part by the desire to promote specific blood flows. Direct physical attempts at manipulation such as these, however, are rare compared with the abundance of cattle rites and exchanges thought capable of achieving these objectives indirectly. Indeed, the vast majority of cattle sacrificed are offered in the hope of eliciting divine support for either the confirmation, facilitation, extension, or negation of specific states and passages of blood. Among the many types of sacrifices I would include in this category are those performed at marriages, funerals, difficult births, initiations, adoptions, bloodwealth transfers and purification rites associated with homicide, in addition to others intended to promote conception and to rid people of the polluting effects of homicide, incest, adultery, and other dangerous 'blood states'.

Moreover, because the inner state of one's blood connections with others is never immediately apparent, Nuer use cattle as symbolic counters for human blood in numerous contexts of exchange and sacrifice. Otherwise expressed: Nuer concepts of 'relatedness' (*maar*) are founded on the continual equation of the 'vitality' and 'fertility' of cattle with those of human beings. And it is this equation that enables people to extend the potency of human action in tempering the numerous vulnerabilities associated with human blood. Specifically, it enables people to transcend, as individuals and families, experiences of infertility, illness, and death. For example, if a man dies without heirs, his relatives are able – indeed obliged – to collect cattle and marry a 'ghost wife' in his name in order to give children to him. Similarly, should a woman prove infertile, she is 'free' to become a social man, gather cattle, and marry a woman to bear children for her. And were it not for rites of cattle sacrifice, people would stand condemned to a passive forbearance of outbreaks of pollution sickness (*meer*), severe droughts, and other collective hardships. One highly respected Lou Nuer man summed up this continuing dependence on the mediating role of cattle as follows:

Without the blood of the cow, there would be nothing moving in Nuer society. It is the blood of the cow [shed in sacrifice] that brings in the good and takes away the evil. If I were alone without the cow, I could not build new relationships. What this means is that, without the cow, I am not worth very much.

But what is striking about Nuer concepts of relatedness is the extent to which shared human blood and shared cattle are complementary means of defining the same relationships, the same categories of relatedness. Although the primacy of human 'blood' is often stressed, kinship ties are invariably reinforced and specified through some form of shared cattle rights or bridewealth claims. Consider, for example, the transgenerational reach of cognatic linkages among Nuer. These connections are generally conceived as generating themselves out of an apical brother/sister pair whose postmarital relations extend across the generations through 'the daughters of daughters', or *nyier nyiët*. However, the exogamic limits of these and many other forms of enduring social bonds are more easily traced through shared bridewealth claims – the principle being that no man may marry a woman upon whose marriage he may claim a portion of her bridewealth. And thus, just as the transgenerational limits of cognation may be conceptualised either in terms of blood passing and thinning out through chains of women or in terms of bridewealth claims honoured across the generations, so, too, the *maar* binding close affines is rooted in the social circulation of both blood and cattle. In this case, the union of 'blood' binding close affines is realised through the birth of children into the families of both parents. Similarly, the bonds between a genitor and his offspring are both blood- and cattle-based: a genitor has the right to claim the 'cow of begetting' upon the marriage of his natural daughter or, in some cases, upon the maturity of his natural son. So, too, a woman who has suckled and raised another's daughter may claim the 'cow of nurturing' (*yang romä*) upon the girl's marriage. It is thus only with respect to bonds of distant agnation that the overlapping blood/cattle bonds of *maar* wither with time into those of 'shared [sacrificial meat]', or *böth* – into those of the 'blood of the cow' consumed, as it were. In brief, cattle are the primary medium through which Nuer render the mysterious powers of human blood socially significant and stable. Or as contemporary Nuer men and women more commonly express this idea: 'Cattle, like people, have blood' – which is to say that both cattle and people are capable of a parallel extension of procreative vitality across the generations.

Money is bloodless

This 'blood'-based interpretation of the unique ties binding Nuer to their herds appears, if anything, to have become more pronounced following the introduction of currency and the concomitant development of regional cattle and labour markets during the colonial and post-independence eras. 'Money', as Nuer put it, 'has no blood' (*yiou thilke*

riem) – which is to say money has no potential for transgenerational 'growth'. The concept of monetary interest, I should stress, is entirely unknown to all but a few highly urbanised Nuer. If anything, Sudanese currency appears condemned in people's eyes to a continual loss of force, to a perpetual withering in the face of mounting inflation. And for this reason, most contemporary Nuer men and women reason that money is an 'inappropriate' medium for certain exchange contexts because it cannot bind people together like 'blood' – whether such blood be thought of as human, bovine, or both with regard to particular social bonds. Money's ascendancy is thus associated with a world of transitory ties, a world that has neither a centre nor boundaries.

For these reasons, cattle's roles as sacrificial surrogate and indispensable exchange object in times of initiation, feud settlement, and, to a lesser extent, marriage have scarcely been affected by the increasing circulation of money through Nuer hands over the past half-century. This is not to say that Nuer attitudes towards these rites have remained unchanged. On the contrary, cattle's sacrificial importance, in particular, has been seriously undercut in recent decades by mounting waves of Christian conversion among Nuer. But money has still not developed into a generalised medium of exchange among Nuer. Rather, Nuer have incorporated currency into a weighted exchange system in which cattle remain the dominant metaphor of value.

Although contemporary Nuer men and women have rejected the idea that cattle and money are wholly interchangeable, they have actively sought out and used money in other contexts to temper perceived instabilities and inequalities within their cattle economy itself. As a result of the massive dislocations and deprivations experienced during the first and second civil war eras (1955–72 and 1983–present), many men and women have come to regard cattle wealth as far too fleeting to be dependable. It is thus considered essential for a person to marry or remarry as soon as the size of the family's herd makes this possible. Were a man to delay, his relatives, I was told, would pressure him into marriage with the argument that his cattle might otherwise be lost 'for nothing': *Bi thul ke jiek* ('A stormy wind might engulf them'). When an immediate investment of cattle wealth in marriage and children is not possible, money can serve as an important, if temporary, store of cattle wealth in times of severe hardship. In fact, there is a well-known expression that runs *Baa ghok tolkä koam* ('The cows will be broken up into small pieces and stored in the light wooden carrying case'). This expression was allegedly coined by a man named Kolang Toat who recognised long before many others that the forthcoming floods of 1961 were likely to devastate the local cattle population. He thus sold his

herd and stowed the money in his ambatch carrying case until the floods finally receded eleven years later, whereupon he used the money to purchase other cattle in the marketplace. Since that time other people confronted with spreading cattle plagues or other natural or political disasters have attempted to follow Kolang Toat's example. The potential benefits of this protective strategy, however, have been steadily eroded by the post-1983 collapse of the cattle market coupled with skyrocketing inflation generated by the continuing second Sudanese civil war.

When times were better and markets more operative, 'money' could also 'protect cattle on the ground' in the sense that a person with money could keep his cattle with him longer. In fact, in exchange for grain, cloth, guns, and medicines, as well as in the payment of taxes, court fines, and school fees, most people gladly substituted money for cattle whenever they could. Ideally, cattle are to be reserved for more important occasions, such as for the creation and affirmation of 'enduring social bonds' (*maar*).

But then again, not all 'enduring social bonds' are 'positive' or 'desirable' in Nuer eyes. Feuding ties, or 'relationships of the bone' (*maar coakä*), as Nuer refer to these, are certainly 'enduring' in the sense that they are recognised across the generations. However, they are also defined as inherently 'dangerous', even in situations where open hostilities have been tempered by a successful transfer of bloodwealth cattle from the slayer's family to that of the slain. With respect to relationships such as these, Nuer can sometimes use the bloodless currency of money in an attempt to rupture, symbolically and materially, human blood linkages and/or cattle connections perceived to be 'socially negative', 'death-ridden', and 'potentially polluting'. Some contemporary Nuer men and women argue, for example, that the divinely sanctioned prohibition on the return of cattle earlier offered in bloodwealth compensation to the slayer's family (via third-party bridewealth transfers or any other type of exchange) can be eluded by immediately selling the cattle received and purchasing market substitutes. By passing briefly through a monetary phase, the potentially lethal form of pollution (*nueer*) normally provoked within the slayer's family by a direct or indirect return of bloodwealth cattle could be avoided, these people reason, because 'money has no blood'. Similarly, I was told that the tainted status of cattle received as adultery compensation – cattle that never sit well in the cuckolded husband's byre – may be removed by swiftly channelling them through the marketplace. The symbolic logic of these – albeit socially contested – assertions is especially intriguing because it suggests an implicit analogy between 'money' and 'the earth'

as terminal points at which the social circuitry of human and cattle blood may begin afresh.

Over this same half-century period, Nuer men and women have also developed a unique system of hybrid categories of cattle and monetary wealth that facilitates movements of money and cattle between 'blood' and 'non-blood' spheres of exchange while simultaneously maintaining a value distinction between these spheres. It is now generally accepted, for example, that cattle purchased in the marketplace ('the cattle of money') with money earned through wage labour ('the money of work') may be owned by individuals. In contrast, cattle received through bride-wealth and/or inheritance ('the cattle of girls') as well as any money acquired through the sale of such cattle ('the money of cattle') are collectively owned by groups of relatives. Whereas the two former categories have given wage-earning younger brothers and sons a bit of turf to begin negotiating for a greater share of status and autonomy within the family fold, the two latter categories have continued to support more 'traditional' age-, gender- and descent-based differentials of power and wealth within and between Nuer families. Nevertheless, as issues of power have become increasingly fused with those of definition – fused, that is, with potential disputes over who has the right to define the 'type' of money or cattle in question – cattle ownership rights have, in general, become less clear-cut, less collective, and less age-stratified. Whereas the sense of self people cultivated through their relations with cattle before the introduction of currency invariably implied the support and participation of a wider collectivity of persons (including ancestors and divinities as well as many contemporaries), cattle's role in creating this socially expanded sense has been seriously weakened in recent years by emerging opportunities for the individual acquisition of cattle. As a result, it is increasingly difficult for senior Nuer men to monopolise power through the manipulation of cattle wealth.

Blood and guns

Significantly, Nuer men and women perceive a fundamental difference between the force of a rifle and that of a spear: whereas the power of a spear is said to issue directly from the bones and sinews of the person who hurls it, that of a gun is eerily internal to it. Outside of the minimal guiding effort required to hoist and fire it, a rifle's power is seen to be completely independent of its human bearer – 'all a person does is aim it'. Hence the force of a gun, they reason, demonstrates nothing definitive about the human being behind it. The contrast Nuer perceive between the power of guns and that of spears has not only shielded their

warrior ethos from occasional crushing defeats by government troops but, more important, has provoked broader reassessments of the meaning of violent deaths as well as of the ethics and tactics of local forms of intercommunity fighting and feuding. As firearms have burned deeper and deeper into regional patterns of warfare, many people have begun to wonder whether the spiritual and social consequences of inter-Nuer gun slayings are identical to those realised by spears. Whereas everyone seems to agree, at present, that to kill someone with a spear is to accept full responsibility for that death, matters are less clear in the case of inter-Nuer gun slayings. Not only are bullets (*dei mac*, lit. 'a gun's calves') more prone to unintentional release, but, once having been fired, their trajectories – and hence fatal consequences – are often difficult if not impossible to trace accurately in the context of major intercommunity confrontations. Unlike an individually crafted spear, the source of a bullet lodged deep in someone's body is not easily identified. Relationships of 'the bone' have thus become far more ambiguous and impersonal, since the exact scope and intensity of the pollution risks associated with them are impossible to specify without clear knowledge of the slayer's identity.

In order to understand the historical significance of this difficulty, it is important to realise that, prior to the widespread dissemination of firearms during the first civil war era (1955–1972), Nuer conceptualised relationships of the 'bone' or 'feud' as emanating outwards from a mysterious 'blood' bond forged between slayer and slain at the moment of death. Specifically, they believed that some of the blood of the victim passed at death into the body of the slayer, being driven forth, as it were, by a mission of vengeance (*Bi riemde lony ke je*). Were the slayer to eat or drink anything prior to having this 'embittered' blood released through a small incision (*bier*) made on the upper arm by a *kuäär muon*, or 'earth priest', he was sure to die from a highly contagious and lethal form of pollution known as *nueer*. However, as a direct consequence of the brutal realities experienced during the first and second civil wars, many people have begun to wonder whether the dangers of *nueer* are equally grave in all cases of inter-Nuer homicide. Some people, particularly eastern Jikany Nuer, now maintain that the blood curse of the slain is only operative in situations where assailant and victim are known or related to one another. Nor are people in complete consensus today about the specific rites required for the removal of such pollution. While it is still widely accepted that inter-Nuer spear killings necessitate the ritual intervention of an 'earth priest', many eastern Jikany Nuer consider the blood-letting rite of *bier* insufficient to eliminate the dangers of pollution when the victim (whether related or not to the

killer) has died of bullet wounds – though some people argue that it might be carried out as a secondary precaution. The principal rite, however, is called *piu thorä*, or 'the water of the cartridge shell': the slayer, I was told, must pour some water (preferably mixed with a few grains of salt, if available) into an empty cartridge shell and drink it. It is noteworthy that the word for rifle or gun in Nuer means *mac*, 'fire' – an image that suggests that a cross-flow of 'heat' is established between victim and slayer (either in addition to or in place of 'blood') which must then be 'cooled' by drinking the 'water of the cartridge shell'. This association between 'cooling' and curing is also apparent in the blood-letting ceremony of *bier*: the drawing of 'blood' in this context is explicitly directed towards restoring the 'bodily coolness' – *koac puany* – or 'health' of the slayer. Indeed, all curative operations involving the extraction or transfer of bodily fluids are spoken about in terms of the removal of 'heat' (sickness or pollution) from the body of the afflicted. From this perspective, a shift from 'blood' to 'temperature' as the dominant metaphor of purification rites for homicide is not as radical as it might appear. Rather, the central prohibition on the drinking of water at the heart of this pollution state has been incorporated into the curative rite of *piu thorä* along lines similar to preventative inoculations in Western medical practices. Moreover, fighters who are in doubt as to whether or not they have killed someone can easily take the precaution of sipping some water of the cartridge shell and thus avoid the immediate danger of pollution. From a historical perspective, it is, perhaps, not surprising that a purificatory rite that could be performed by anyone, anywhere, at any time, without disclosing the identity of the slayer would have been 'discovered' during the late 1960s in the region most heavily devastated during the first civil war (1955–72) and thereafter avidly adopted by the eastern Jikany Nuer.

Contemporary Nuer living west of the White Nile, in contrast, have continued to rely on the purifying powers of 'earth priests' in all cases of inter-Nuer homicide through the outbreak of the second Sudanese civil war in 1983 – regardless of the type of weapon used. Since that time, however, they have begun to develop an elaborate analogy between gunfire and lightning – the deceased victims of both being thought to create a uniquely direct spiritual linkage with divinity (*col wic*) which can be actively cultivated through cattle sacrifice and, thereafter, effectively called upon in times of danger by surviving kin. And thus, like their eastern cousins, contemporary Westerners have also turned to metaphors of temperature (as opposed to those of blood) in their efforts to comprehend the mysterious inner force and ambiguous impact of guns. In both regions, moreover, feelings of increasing vulnerability to gun

warfare have been symbolically transformed into assertions of greater individual control over the social and spiritual consequences of homicide. However, the fact that these spiritual developments have occurred at a time when the frequency of violent deaths has been rising and the size of local cattle stocks diminishing has significantly reduced the ability of families to ensure the procreative immortality of kinsmen slain in battle through the provision of 'ghost wives'.

Beginning in the mid 1980s, moreover, leading Nuer members of the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (and its subsequent spin-offs) have sought to persuade local citizens that violent deaths resulting from the current civil war should be completely dissociated from the pollution forms and spiritual consequences of homicides generated by more local forms of intercommunity feuding and fighting. In essence, the southern military elite is arguing that the overarching political context of the present war – which it defines as a 'government war' (*koor kume*) – should take precedence over the personal identities and interrelations of the combatants concerned in assessing the social and spiritual ramifications of homicide. These developments have further undermined the procreative and moral obligations binding together communities of kin – and, in particular, fellow-agnates.

Above and beyond their increasing use as weapons of intra- and intertribal warfare, guns have also become key value referents in the definition of many contemporary social relationships and distinctions. Rifles now being commonly used as an element of bridewealth payments, an offer of a rifle sometimes confers a competitive advantage over full cattle transfers. With the cattle exchange values for most models having doubled during the years of relative peace (1972–83) separating the first and second civil wars, Nuer now consider guns sound economic as well as sound security investments. More important, guns are not considered individual possessions but rather are owned collectively by families – or, more commonly, by groups of brothers. And thus, unlike the 'money of work' or 'the cattle of money', guns continue to reinforce strong bonds of mutual dependence among close kinsmen. More uniquely, the eastern Jikany Nuer have also adopted guns as fresh focus for a culturally creative aesthetic deeply entwined with local concepts of male potency, beauty, and strength. Their phallic forms are scarified on women's bellies, their golden bullets are girded to the right arms of men – indeed, gun displays had even replaced the imitation of cattle in male dance forms throughout the East. Rifles are also an increasingly indispensable item in courtship display, often being fired off as celebratory acts of self-affirmation during rites of engagement, marriage, and sacrifice.

And yet this ideological glorification of the relationship between men and guns would appear to be in large part defensive. Eastern Nuer men, it would seem, have latched onto guns as a fresh rallying point for their otherwise flagging sense of self-esteem. For the fact remains that the weapons and ammunition to which they currently have access are profoundly inadequate for the protective challenges they now face with respect to their families and herds. In brief, no amount of ideological bravado can cover up the fact that the material gap separating their own military capacities from those of successive state regimes has widened considerably during the colonial and post-independence eras.

Paper and blood

Because the vast majority of contemporary Nuer men and women remain as yet totally uninitiated into the mysteries of 'writing', 'paper' is becoming an increasingly powerful – if not 'fetishised' – symbol of their simultaneous dependence on and estrangement from the powers of 'the government' (*kume*). Movements of 'paper' now mark the conclusion of each new court case and the passing of each taxation season. Indeed, when attempting to enlist the support of higher-ranking administrative officials affiliated with the Sudanese People's Liberation Army or the national state government in Khartoum, most Nuer men and women, whether literate or not, operate under the assumption that the written word is far more potent than the spoken. 'It is better to talk to the *Turuok* (persons wielding 'foreign' powers) in their own language', one woman explained, 'which means you must speak to them through paper.' Touring government agents and their SPLA counterparts are thus normally pursued wherever they go by a steady swarm of little white 'papers', each carrying a personal plea for attention and assistance. Court clerks and other literate members of the community are constantly being asked by their non-literate associates to inscribe their requests for assistance on 'paper'. Through their mastery of 'paper', the literate elite is capable not only of speaking to the *Turuok* in their own language but of helping people, more generally, to transcend their 'second-class' status within the profoundly 'racialised' structure of the contemporary Sudanese state. Everyone recognises the pressing urgency of developing a large Nuer-speaking literate elite for these purposes. Indeed, of all the hardships caused by the current second Sudanese civil war (1983–present), it is the total collapse of local educational opportunities – the absence of schools, teachers, books, paper, and pens – that most distresses many of the rural Nuer villagers. For without access to the hidden powers of 'paper', Nuer women and men remain profoundly

vulnerable to arbitrary interventions by national, regional, and rebel governments. As a young man named Machar explained:

You could be presenting your case before the District Commissioner, when, all of a sudden, he reaches into his breast pocket and pulls out a piece of paper, saying: 'It says here you are lying!' What can you do? You didn't see the paper written. How can you argue with a piece of paper? Your case is finished!

In brief, 'paper' is the principal medium through which contemporary Nuer men and women seek to tap the powers of 'the government' (*kume*).

More interestingly, where one sends one's tax papers – that is, to which chiefs and which courts – is increasingly viewed by many Nuer as a political commitment as to where one's loyalties will lie in the event of an eruption of intercommunity fighting. This is partly because membership in any particular administrative 'community' is defined on a voluntary social basis rather than a territorially circumscribed one. In fact, I witnessed several cases among the western Nuer in which local government chiefs arrested and publicly reprimanded individuals who had 'crossed over' community lines (*caa ro wellcaa kai kuic*) in order to support relatives on the opposing side during major intercommunity battles. As far as the arresting chiefs were concerned, the key question was 'Where does he send his papers?' (*Waragaanike, baa ke jak nika?*).

In many ways the emerging symbolism of 'paper' mirrors that of 'blood'. For people experience both these social media as 'substances' that bind their individual and communal welfare to distant – and largely inscrutable – suprahuman powers. Like 'blood', 'paper' is a deceptive medium in that it conveys hidden inner distinctions despite its outward uniformity. Indeed, many contemporary men and women have begun developing this analogy explicitly. I recall, for instance, a situation in which a young non-literate western Nuer man attempted to explain to me how a man could have many 'loves' while still favouring one above all the rest. 'Why, it's like paper', he remarked: 'A person can have many pieces of paper and still have one piece that s/he likes very much.' On another occasion, I was discussing the relationship between menstrual blood and the human foetus with a non-literate Gaajok mother, who firmly maintained that 'the woman's blood is the child'. When I then asked about what role 'sperm' (*dieth*) played, she laughed and said: 'Oh, it's like [that of] paper'. I interpreted her enigmatic comment to mean that sperm, like 'paper', is *puale*, or 'light' – which is to say that it is insignificant in comparison with the mother's contribution of blood to the child. On yet another occasion, an elder eastern Gaajok man invoked a 'paper' metaphor to explain to me how so many thousands of Dinka men could have been absorbed by the Nuer as 'Nuer' during the

nineteenth century. 'It's like this, Nyarial', he began: 'If you take a piece of paper and it is a "real person" (*raam mi raan*) and you place it down here on the ground. Tomorrow, when you come back you would find a whole stack of papers and the top piece would look exactly like the bottom one.' I found the implicit 'reproductive' imagery of these metaphors fascinating. For though Nuer have defined money as 'bloodless' and thus as lacking the procreative capabilities of both cattle and people, their images of 'paper' and the mysterious powers of literacy it embodies appear more ambiguous.

Significantly, some people have begun to develop metaphorical linkages between 'paper' and 'cattle'. For example, a person who has succeeded in acquiring cattle as a direct result of his or her literacy skills will sometimes refer to such cattle as *ghok waragak* (the cattle of paper) – this being a subcategory, as it were, of the more general category 'cattle of money'. Furthermore, when significant numbers of such cattle are used by their owner to marry a wife, it is not uncommon among the western Nuer for the first child born to the union to be named *Waragak* if a boy, or *Nyawaragak* if a girl. This is done in recognition of the fact that, had it not been for the father's knowledge of 'paper', that child might never have been born. Clearly, *waragak*, or 'paper', holds the promise of becoming an increasingly important symbol of interpersonal relations for Nuer in the years ahead. For like 'blood', 'paper', too, is capable of spanning, whether as metaphor or medium, the experiential extremes of social intimacy and social distance and of human vitality and human vulnerability. Its ascendancy, however, is inextricably linked to distant political forces which, as one non-literate man lamented, 'have come to know people in ways that we cannot know'.

Conclusions

Nuer images of 'blood' revolve, as we have seen, around an experientially embodied tension between human vitality and human vulnerability that, potentially, runs through all forms of enduring social bonds. This tension reverberates through people's attitudes towards and daily interactions with 'food' and 'cattle' as well – these being the two primary media Nuer use to render the mysterious powers of human blood bonds socially significant and stable. By helping to ground more abstract social distinctions and connections in the immediacies of bodily experience, evolving Nuer concepts of 'blood' lend greater substance and flexibility to contemporary processes of 'identity' formation. More important, the profound aspirations and vulnerabilities that people associate with specific states and passages of 'blood' have also coloured their attempts

to understand the socially binding and divisive potential of 'money', 'guns', and 'paper'. As part of their more general efforts to intervene, consciously and actively, in the broader historical forces shaping their immediate life circumstances, contemporary Nuer men and women have selectively incorporated these three media, as we have seen, in ways that attempt both to enhance the 'vitality' and to reduce the 'vulnerabilities' inherent in their changing interpretations and experiences of human blood connections as well as of their evolving engagements with the world at large.

Note

A highly simplified system of spelling Nuer has been used in the text to facilitate easy publication. For those interested in more accurate transcriptions of the terms used, please see Hutchinson 1996.

4 Sentiment and substance in North Indian forms of relatedness

Helen Lambert

Indian kinship as described by anthropologists has usually been taken to comprise only those relationships produced by marriage (affinity) and birth (descent), and in northern India kinship thus described appears as a bounded sphere which is closely structured by certain well-known characteristics: patrilineality and patrilocality, the centrality of alliance in the perpetuation of patrilineal descent groups, status distinctions between wife-takers and wife-givers, and village exogamy. I first began to think about alternative forms and understandings of relatedness through some observations about the salience of locality and gender in the formation of cross-caste relationships in Rajasthan that suggested there are ways of being related other than through birth or marriage (Lambert 1996). In this chapter I attempt to offer a wider consideration of relatedness and to ask what this suggests about conventional views of kinship.

Such conventional views, as Carsten (this volume and 1995a) has indicated, rest on a narrow definition of biology to circumscribe what kinship entails, and in the Indian context, this has produced particular difficulties in thinking comparatively about Indian kinship because of the existence of caste. The endogamous character of caste groups has produced a very limited treatment of kinship as necessarily confined to the relationships that exist within castes (Mayer 1960), since most studies in the region have implicitly presumed that a (putative) hereditary principle – that is, subcaste membership – is coterminous with the outermost limits of kinship. The resultant separation between 'caste' and 'kinship' in Indian sociology bears comparison with Stafford's description in this volume of the conventional segregation of 'kinship' and 'family' in Chinese studies. As another society characterised by patrilineal descent, kinship in northern India too has generally been treated as entirely discrete from 'family', with the latter given far less importance in studies of social organisation; but 'kinship' has in turn been taken as subordinate to, and discrete from, caste (witness the number of volumes entitled *Caste and Kinship in . . .*).