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by Richard Critchfield
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The Changing Peasant: Part I: The Magician

It is dangerous to destroy a religion at a single blow, rather than allow it to die from old age and unreality, especially a primitive religion... which is at the same time both a faith and a culture. I believe, in fact, that there is no greater suffering for man than to feel his cultural foundations giving way beneath his feet.

Alberto Moravia, *Which Tribe Do You Belong To?,* 1974

Africans are forever walking, moving along in their fluttering tunics, with an untiring, long-stepped, easy gait habitual with people who, with no apparent goal in mind, seem to tramp endlessly across the big, empty spaces of their huge continent. That is how I met Kuwa, on a dusty country track not far from the small town of Dilling, some 250 miles southwest of Khartoum in the Sudan's Nuba Mountains.[1] My interpreter, a Nuba tribesman and journalist on leave from his newspaper in Khartoum, stopped Kuwa to ask where we could find a village. Kuwa invited us to his own, Neetil, a four- or five-hour walk away. Thus began five weeks of almost daily long treks, as I moved in with Kuwa and his family, sleeping in a grass hut in their compound and spending the days going to distant sorghum fields in the bush, to the river where Kuwa's cattle watered, through weird mountain gorges to visit chieftains and neighboring villages, into the forest to collect firewood and sometimes back into Dilling on market days.

Kuwa, as we came from Dilling the first day, the 3 of us carrying the luggage on our shoulders, told us he was 48 and 3 years before had retired after serving 15 years in the Sudanese army. He looked much younger and, like so many Nubas, was tall, robust, and had a powerful physique (my guess is that the "Nubian slaves" of legend were really Nubas since the people of the southern Nile actually called Nubians today are brown-skinned, much shorter and only partly of African descent). Curiously, Kuwa's diet of sorghum mush, millet, coffee, tea, a little meat and home-brewed *merissa* beer was not very nourishing unless one consumed great amounts; I lost 20 pounds during the time I stayed with the Nubas; perhaps weaker specimens don't survive.

Kuwa had served in Equatoria, Ethiopia, and the Belgian Congo; as a member of the palace guard in Khartoum, he had once shaken hands with Queen Elizabeth II. Though his tribe went completely naked until its conversion to Islam in the late 1960s, still hunted with spears, and had never known the plow, Kuwa had seen the Apollo moon landing on live TV, flown in jets, been injected with penicillin, and was aware a global cosmopolitan society existed where men put their faith in science and technology. He said his main ambition was to educate his nine surviving children (he had four wives). It was something of a surprise then, when he went on to say that in two more years he would become his tribe's magician or *kudjur.*

The landscape of the Nuba Mountains is strange and yet monotonous, as so much of Africa seems to be: small, craggy mountains, starved greenery and red soil, and the hot, sweet smell of Africa with its hint of smoke from the kitchen fires or from those set to clear the ground of brush before planting. The mountains are actually a scattering of about a hundred 1,000-2,000-foot reddish, boulder-strewn peaks that rise from the flat savannah plain like an array of extinct volcanoes from a sea of dry yellow grass. So many enormous rocks and boulders are precariously poised on the upper ridges it looks as if some violent geological upheaval of prehistoric times threw them into the sky and today they remain wherever they happened to fall. Since the region lies just at the southeastern edge of the 3,000-mile sweep of the Sahel, the Nuba Mountains have been affected by drought in recent times; often dense dusty mists obscure the distances. Small settlements of conical grass huts cluster around the mountains' lower slopes and there are acacia forests abounding in hyenas, baboons, and exotic birds, the elephants, zebras, and giraffes having fled to the less inhabited south long ago. The Nuba people, divided into 99 tribes, cultivate fields of sorghum and millet with primitive hoes and slash-and-burn methods

Slash-and-burn agriculture predominate in the Nuba Mountain region. These men are threshing sorghum in a bush clearing. Photo by Richard Critchfield.

and graze small herds of cattle, sheep, and goats on the savannah. The region lies on that great dividing line in Africa that separates the Islamic north from the Christian-pagan south; crumbling Victorian bungalows and ruined churches make it evident that Christianity is retreating southward.

The Nuba Mountains also figure in the Arab world's investment in the Sudan's possibly enormous and unexploited agricultural potential. The Sudan, Africa's largest country with nearly a million square miles—a third the size of the United States—is, except along the Nile, mostly inhabited by seminomads who combine cattle raising with farming rain-fed fields. Its 15 million people cultivate only 15 million acres of a potential 200 million acres of arable land, 30 million of them in the Nuba Mountains (where less than one million are now farmed). While much of this land may never be cultivated, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome estimates 25 million acres more might reasonably be brought into production during the next decade.[2] President Gaafar Nimeiri's government in Khartoum would like to expand agriculture as fast as possible and has been tempted to try for a mechanized shortcut. A Nuba tribal family, using its primitive tools, can grow only 8 to 10 acres of sorghum, the main crop, per year. Keeping the fields free of weeds is, in fact, the hardest part. A farmer with a tractor can grow up to 1,500 acres. State farms, ranging in size up to 150,000 acres, of 1,500-acre individual holdings, have been started. To get such a holding, a man must put up $3,000 of his own money and then is eligible for low-interest loans for land clearance and purchase of tractors and other implements. But his average yield of 400 kilos of sorghum per acre is less than the 600 kilos the tribesman gets.

Kuwa, in many respects a typical Nuba farmer-herdsman, possessed 2 bulls, 6 cows, and 17 goats, aside from those held in trust in his position as a *kudjur*. Each year he harvested about 600 kilos of sorghum on 6 acres he cultivated himself. Each of 3 wives (a fourth was in Khartoum during my visit) cultivated about half this much, for a total of 900 kilos. Formerly, until a gin in Dilling closed, the family had grown a little cotton to sell for cash. They also grew some beans, millet, sesame seeds, groundnuts, okra, tomatoes, onions, radishes, and leeks, mostly for home consumption.

Moving into a money economy, especially to buy clothing whereas before they had gone naked, imposed real hardship on the Nimang tribe, to which Kuwa belonged.[3] Before their food and shelter had cost nothing. Now they bought provisions at a village shop: sugar, 40 cents a pound; salt, 11 cents; cooking oil, 70 cents. Such provisions were bought from day to day and Kuwa's family of 11 bought 10 cents worth of sugar, 4 cents worth of tea and 9 cents worth of coffee. Daily expenditure for food ranked from 23 cents up to $2.50 on days when meat was consumed. Drink was extremely cheap, a 10-gallon tin of *merissa* beer, made from soghum, cost only 30 cents and a bottle of the *aragi* liquor distilled from it, 50 cents.[4]

Only Arab merchants in the towns and government officials, also mostly Arab, have the $3,000 or so to invest in a state farm. They hire tractor drivers, mechanics, and laborers from the towns. The workers, most of them transients, live in improvised camps where there are high crime rates, in part, at least, because there is no tribal system. The Arabs exhaust the land, use their harvests in grain speculation, and strengthen their already entrenched political power over the local Nubas. As the agricultural extension agent in Dilling, a graduate of Khartoum University, complained to me, the new Arab owners get credit, insecticides, fungicides and certified seeds, while virtually nothing goes to the region's true farmers, the Nubas, who he said badly need help in knowing when to plant, how to weed, how to protect their plants and soil, and to improve their seed. "In all these needs, to say nothing of marketing, credit, and cooperatives," he said, "you have to start from scratch in the Nuba Mountains. But we must do it. These Arabs don't build houses on their land; almost all of them stay merchants in the town. Socially, you are not creating a new, progressive farming class. These people here, I don't call them farmers at all."

Nimieri's government has set up primary schools, dispensaries (iodine, sulfa, and enteroviaform), and mosques in most of the larger Nuba villages. There are also village courts—to hear cases involving marital relations, assault, petty theft, and defamation—which tend to be overwhelmed by civil suits. But there is little other development. Many wells have gone dry in the long years of drought and water must be carried long distances. Rabies is endemic in the Nuba Mountains but any kind of serum, even a tetanus injection, requires a day-long truck ride across the desert to the city of El Obeid. Most of what money is available goes to the mechanized-agricultural schemes, whose output remains a fraction of what the Nubas produce with their traditional cultivation methods.

So the Sudan is discovering, as all governments do, that increasing food production is only part of the huge, and more difficult, complex of problems known in shorthand as "rural development." In the Nuba Mountains, as in so much of Africa, this means transforming a culture, based upon tribal religion, which has managed to survive until now remarkably intact. Preserving the ancestral faith of the Africans is probably the surest way for social peace, while too rapid a modernization of farming can turn an agricultural people into a mass of culturally uprooted laborers. At the center of the old culture stands the *kudjur*, each tribe's magician, rainmaker, soothsayer, medicine man, priest and social leader, whose power comes from the belief he can control supernatural spirits. Still today physically cut off by the lack of all-weather roads or any direct rail or plane service (travel stops in the rainy season), the Nuba Mountains historically were also closed to all but a few Arab traders and European scholars and missionaries during 58 years of British rule in the Sudan, an isolation continued after independence in 1956 by successive Khartoum governments. Only in recent years has President Nimieri, in his policy to develop the Sudan as fast as he can, opened the Nuba Mountains freely to the outside world.

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At the outset, I must confess a prejudice; I find black Africa, at least in its remote interior villages, peculiarly intimidating. Somehow the sweltering, monotonous plains, the infinite repetition of its desert dunes, prairie acacias, grassland shrubs, and the seldom ceasing sound of its magic and mythic rituals, the innocent but often menacing wildlife, the teeming marketplaces, and deserted missions fill me with an uneasy sense of foreboding I rarely experience elsewhere in the world. Maybe one should expect this; usually, during a journey, a stranger feels uncertain and uneasy because he does not know the people and the places where he is and is afraid of making mistakes and getting lost. The native, on the other hand, who accompanies him as guide or interpreter, is at ease, with the assurance of someone in a familiar setting. Not so in Africa, however, at least not in our case. A champion of the Nuba tribesmen and their customs in Khartoum, where he was a budding journalist, Mohammed Kafi, my interpreter, turned into a nervous critic in the village, which surely he ought to have known well, seeing he was born in the Nuba Mountains. Solitude bothered him; our long daily walks distressed him; the constant talk of magic troubled him. Often I wanted to ask him, "Why so worried? It's your home, you ought to know it." But then I restrained myself, thinking he was frightened precisely because he did know the country so well. As a foreigner, having perfect confidence in Kuwa and his fellow Nubas, I was trustful just because I knew nothing of him or of Africa. At any rate, within days of our arrival in Neetil village, Kafi was gone, fleeing back to Khartoum and taking his city clothes, his camera, and tape recorder with him. Kuwa, who spoke some English, became his own interpreter and we had some help from the village schoolmaster, who had, oddly enough, spent a year in Scotland. As the experience with Kafi demonstrates, it is not the foreigner who necessarily suffers the worst culture shock in villages.

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We first made our acquaintance with the so-called *ju-ju*—magical and fetishistic objects—in the Dilling marketplace. Spread out on the earth, in one stall after another, were dried chameleons in baskets, skulls of monkeys and dogs, feet of gazelles and antelopes, eyes, hoofs, bristles, roots and putrefied fragments, small piles and baskets full of such repellent bits and pieces one was discouraged to ask their purpose. An African goes to the market, buys such things and makes use of them for white or black magic, benign or malignant. How?

There is something about *ju-ju* that suggests fear. Its apologists maintain that *ju-ju* controls fear; it appears, rather, like grotesque African masks, to be a direct expression of it. Kuwa had such objects adorning the gate of his compound: a spear, shield, a huge dried chameleon and bits of bone, roots, and hair; these identified him as a *kudjur.*

Among Kuwa's Nimang tribe there was much to fear. The Nuba Mountains are subject to fierce rainstorms, forest fires, earthquakes, drought, and plagues of disease, aside from the normal whirling dust and often overpowering heat. The new school, the dispensary, the court, and the mosque had come to Neetil only in the past 10 years and the first still lacked books and its barefoot students came in rags and the second had few medicines to heal the sick. It seemed natural for the Nimangs, virtually helpless to control their environment, to have evolved a religion in which ordinary men from time to time were chosen as intermediaries with God, whom they called *aro* or *kuni*, or He Who Lives in the Sky, the power.

A man did not choose to become a *kudjur*, rather the spirit possessed him. It had happened to Kuwa 13 years ago. Once, home on leave

Kuwa, the young kudjur. Photo by Richard Critchfield.

Koreng, a very old Nuba kudjur. Photo by Richard Critchfield.

from the army, he was seen walking alone in the forest one night speaking, the neighbors said, "in a low, thrilling voice." He returned at dawn, slept, and was unaware of this nocturnal journey. When this happened several times and Kuwa began to show amazing gifts of healing and prophecy he was taken to the Nimang's old Sultan, who declared he was a *kudjur*. Now, on his fiftieth birthday, Kuwa would be ceremoniously ordained with a blood sacrifice of 99 goats. Once, after Kuwa fell into a trance, the spirit which had possessed him spoke to his family, telling them Kuwa was Neetil, the ancient founder of the village and that henceforward Kuwa would look after the Nimang tribe's welfare. Death, illness, harvests, even happiness, were to be his concern.

Although as a soldier he had hardly been saintly, having done as much drinking, whoring, and gambling as any man, and still fond of his liquor, Kuwa easily accepted his new status and went about cultivating his fields and hunting, collecting berries and roots, and building grass huts to earn what money he could, just as his neighbors did. His acquiescence angered the village schoolmaster, an Arab from Khartoum. "How can you, Kuwa, as a *kudjur*, provide the young people with the medicine and jobs that matter to them? The *kudjur* can no longer lead the people. No, no, he cannot! He only exploits their fear and ignorance. We must abolish these superstitions!"

The village *maulana*, a sophisticated Islamic missionary trained at Al Azhar University in Cairo, warned Kuwa, "The *kudjur* is a *setan*, an agent of the Devil. It is written in the Koran that such a *setan* will merely play tricks with the people but in the end he will abandon them to burn in the fires of hell. The *kudjur* claims he is possessed by a benevolent spirit from God to take care of rain, war, disease, and so on. Sometimes *kudjurs* do seem to have supernatural powers. The rain can come. A sick person can be cured. The future can be prophesied. But this is mere coincidence. Allah alone created the world, Kuwa, and he is responsible for everything. You must pray directly to him. No one can come between a man and Allah."

When they lectured him like this, as far as I could tell, Kuwa did not openly disagree. He continued sending his children to the school and the mosque, telling me this, to him, was their best hope for the future. But when the neighbors came to him with ailments, he always gave them bits of roots and herbs with supposed magic healing powers.

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In the five weeks I spent with Kuwa and his family, each day began with the crowing of his rooster, who nestled with the hens and chickens under Kuwa's cot at night. Each of Kuwa's wives had her own small grass hut, where she and her children slept; she also tilled her own sorghum field and vegetable patch, preserving the remarkable economic and social independence of many African tribal women. Kuwa, 2 of his sons, 4-year-old Sadiq and Ali, 20, who was home on vacation from Khartoum where he worked in a glass factory (earning $42 monthly) and went to nightschool to learn English, and I slept in the men's hut. At first I was badly bitten by tiny spiders that dropped from the grass roof or came from the wooden frame of my bed. Kuwa said, "Never mind, once they are fed for the night they will let you alone." But I suffered and protested so much he borrowed a steel cot from the village dispensary.

Mornings were cool and we stayed in bed until Sindia, Kuwa's youngest and favorite wife, brought morning tea. Kuwa who slept barechested,

Koreng and author Richard Critchfield.

little Sadiq curled up next to him for warmth, would pull a grimy Arab gown or *jalabiya* over an old pair of army pants, splash some water on his face and wind an old white turban around a bright orange skull cap. By sunrise we were usually crossing the sleeping village market with half a dozen shuttered shops and moving down one of the trails that crisscrossed the mountains around the village. We were always walking somewhere, often 10 or 20 miles before sunset.

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German photographer Leni Reifenstahl has given us a particularly exotic portrayal of the Nuba people, with emphasis on muscular, naked, coal black tribesmen. Such nakedness is rare today; one encounters it mostly among older people far out in the bush. Even this nakedness must be understood, since it is adorned, one might say almost clothed, by tattoos, scarifications, necklaces, bracelets, earrings, feathers, or chalky white dung ash smeared over bodies and faces. One day, in a gorge called Monkey Valley, we met such a naked man, an old shepherd, surrounded by goats. He greeted Kuwa in Arabic, saying "*Salaam aleikum*," and Kuwa answered him in the elaborate ritual of greeting common among converted Sudanese. "*Aleikum salaam*. How are you? What are you doing? Are you good? Praise be to Allah," and so on. Afterward he began chatting with the old man in their Nimang language, a tribal dialect even members of the other 98 Nuba tribes cannot easily follow.

"I heard some baboons killed a goat," Kuwa said. "Whose was it?"

"One! They killed six! Three over in Neema and three more here in Monkey Valley. Just this morning. About two hours ago."

In the dusty mist no baboons could be seen on the rocky cliffs rising on both sides of us. "They look down here and watch us," Kuwa told me. "But we can't see them." He said the old shepherd knew the baboons' ways as much as anybody and had killed several. When three small girls passed on the trail carrying water, Kuwa greeted them in Nimang, "*Ning ada tidar*," and told them, "Be careful today. Don't go alone."

Kuwa told the shepherd he would return to buy a goat as he needed one to sacrifice when Ali returned to Khartoum. "Almost every day lately the baboons come down and try to carry off goats and hens," he told me. "They move about in a big family. You can see them beckoning with their fingers to call their children. If these baboons find a young girl alone, they will rape her. They will catch her and make anything they want. Sometimes they'll follow a man and shake their fists at him. But if he has a rifle they'll run."

The old naked man pointed to a rocky ledge high on the cliff. "They all gather together there at night and sleep in a cave above that ledge. If a hyena or even a leopard comes, they will kill it. At about five o'clock in the morning, they all wake up and start crying out. They'll all go down to the water pond by the dam making terrible noises. Curse your father! What a noise they make! Seven different men have tried to kill them with rifles but when the monkeys see them they run away. They are very clever."

The old shepherd said he had killed two baboons. "I found one in a cave," he said. "It was sleeping and I took a big stick and beat it on the head. Another time I surprised one in a well. It had climbed down to drink. When he tried to climb back out, I beat his head. In the daytime they cross this gorge and go all over the mountains in different directions. They come back and gather at sunset. That's when it's dangerous here."

"The baboon is an old, old, old man," said Kuwa. "Like we were before."

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Almost every stretch of bush seemed to have its own dangers. Once, returning through an acacia forest from a village called Salara, where an abandoned Christian mission lay in ruins, Kuwa told about a rapist who had attacked four women. "Around here nobody lives," he said. "It may be one man or a gang of men. No one knows. Two women were going to Salara and suddenly a man came out of the bush, his head covered with a black cloth. He had a heavy stick and nearly killed them. When the women were found, their clothes were ripped off. One did not regain consciousness until after we carried her back to the village. She had received one blow on the head and

one near the mouth which broke her jaw. She was fortunate not to have died. The other was spitting blood and unable to speak. Some of her teeth were knocked out. It has happened twice since. People around here are afraid at night. One of the girls was famous for her beauty."

Rape is the most common crime in the Nuba Mountains. But it is, Kuwa alleges, usually without violence, committed by a young suitor, sometimes with the girl's tacit consent, as a way of getting her father to agree to a cheap bride price, usually six or seven cows. The price in Neetil village also included 100 Sudanese pounds, the sacrifice of a bull at the betrothal and another at the marriage ceremony, clothes for the bride, and some goats for her father.

Some of the mountains themselves were believed haunted; Kuwa most feared one called Karjung. "It is a bad place," he said. "Lately those who pass by it say they hear noises, but they can't see anything. Devils with bat-like wings live there in caves. They come out at night."

"Have you seen them?" I asked, wishing I were more of a modern skeptic than I felt most of the time in Africa.

"No, if you do, you will die."

One day we passed by the foot of Karjung, which did indeed look frightening with sheer gray cliffs rising into dusty mist. The upper peaks were streaked with white, the offal of vultures, and the gnarled white-barked trees clinging to the lower slopes had twisted branches like claws. I was reminded of Walt Disney's vision of Bald Mountain in *Fantasia*. Crows cawed harshly overhead and in the dense dusty air it was not hard to imagine the mountain peopled with monstrous apparitions. Kuwa claimed the winged devils who lived there sometimes carried off men and women who were never seen again. Some claimed to have seen fires burning on the highest peaks at midnight and that to gather firewood or cut down a tree near Karjung was to invite certain death. Not far from the mountain we came upon a ruined hut; its grass roof had fallen in. Kuwa said, "A widow once lived here. Then she gave birth to two babies, one without ears and one with no stomach. Both were dead within three days. Everyone said she had slept with the devils from the mountain and all her neighbors moved away. They were afraid."

"And left her here alone?" I asked.

"She only stayed alone for a year. Then she went to Khartoum and married. Her husband has a teashop."

There were many such haunted places around Neetil village, most of them forested peaks or bottoms of dry riverbeds. Kuwa was forever telling about having seen eerie lights in the forest, stars moving strangely across the sky (satellites?), certain haunted *tebeldi* trees and *bhatis*, phantoms with long hair, bent legs and a bent body, whose presence was announced by a sudden fall in temperature and an evil smell. Kuwa claimed to have seen several ghosts, men in the village who had died some days earlier. To imitate these ghosts he would roll his eyes upward until only the whites showed and twist his mouth so grotesquely, the effect was more comic than frightening.

Yet it was precisely these bizarre leaps into the supernatural that troubled my interpreter, Kafi. Having been born in the bush, he seemed to have a feeling of repugnance for Kuwa's primitive animism and magic; perhaps it awoke in the citified journalist atavistic memories he preferred to keep sleeping. What Kafi liked was the modern world, with its press conferences and tape recorders and lack of mystery. I thought of him when an article I wrote about Kuwa for the *Los Angeles Times* was denounced by several California Black Studies scholars as "a Hollywood stereotype." Yet Kuwa himself took the greatest delight in those very aspects of his culture the American specialists on Africa objected to being described. This suggests there is something psychologically fragile and guilty about our picture of Africa today. If part of our image of Africa is reassuring, there is equally another reality: the great emptiness of its plains with their wretchedly impoverished villages, lurking diseases, and fearful superstitions.

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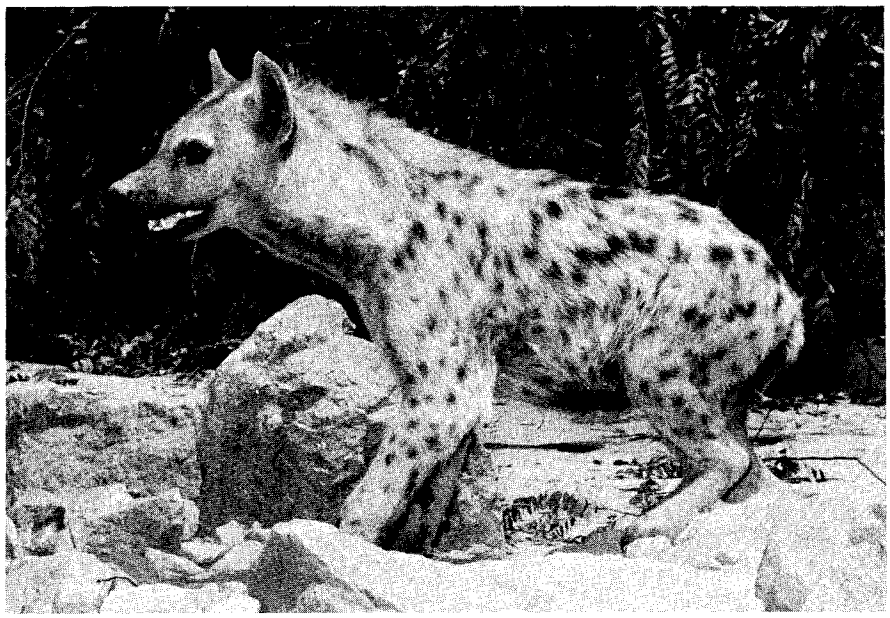
Winged demons were not the only creatures Kuwa invested with supernatural powers. One day there was a noisy commotion as a large group of men burst out of the bush driving a herd of cattle before them. They were dressed in every way: some in fluttering white togas and turbans, others in the ragged shirts and shorts they wore for field work, a few barechested. All were armed: rifles, spears, axes, heavy sticks, obviously anything they could get their hands on. Ahead of them they pushed one man who was bent forward, his hands tied behind his back. Pitch black, powerfully built and muscular, his grimy clothing hanging in shreds, the captive looked at us with a scowling, murderous expression. Then an old man rushed from the village huts in a frenzy, shouting, "Those are my cows!"

The group continued down the road toward Dilling but several men hailed Kuwa and dropped out to tell him what had happened. The prisoner was known as Kuku, the most notorious cattle thief around, who, it was said, could turn himself into a hyena at will and possessed many other supernatural powers.

"I was going out for wood near Sultan Mountain," one man explained excitedly, "and I saw Ahsoo's cows, 11 of them, and recognized them. They were being driven by three men. One was Kuku. I ran to my hut, grabbed my rifle and pulled my wife's cloak over my head so that I would look like a woman. Then I ran back but Kuku saw me and shouted, 'Don't cry out or I will kill you with my spear! These are my cows, not yours!'" I knew he was lying, but what could I do? So I ran into the village to sound the alarm and call all the people. These men



Hyena. Photo courtesy of the Sudan government.

came with whatever weapons they could find and we ran after Kuku and caught up with him in the forest toward Salara. We shouted, 'Why can't you leave our cattle alone?' He said nothing but when he kept driving the cows some men fired. But, as you know, bullets cannot enter Kuku's body. When we saw he did not fall, everyone was afraid but we rushed him and began to hit him and the other two men with sticks. Kuku fell and we caught him.

" 'Don't kill me!' he cried. One man tried to smash his head with a rock. 'No, no!' Kuku begged. 'Take me to the police station. Don't kill me. I was stealing those cows. I will show you the place. But those cows belonged to some Arabs, not our people.' But we knew he was lying. They were the cows of Ahsoo.' "

Kuwa grew as excited as the other men and we decided to follow everyone into the Dilling police station. On the way Kuwa explained that Kuku had last stolen some cows in Neetil two years before. Then, too, he had been caught and sentenced to six months in jail. But he had escaped after 21 days. "Sometimes Kuku is a man and sometimes he is a hyena," Kuwa said. "A gun cannot kill him. He is from the Kolak tribe. They are all dangerous. But Kuku wants to be a big hero. He never minds anybody. He can do what he likes. If he wants, he can escape from jail by making himself invisible. He has the magic to do that for him."

Kuwa said Kuku had a secret place in the mountains where he transformed himself into a hyena. "He puts something into his mouth and eats it. After a minute, he grows a tail and four legs. In a few minutes, he will jump and run. After he runs a long distance, he can become a human again. He has that power."

On the way to town we met an old lady, Ahsoo's wife, who said she was taking some money to her husband in case the police held their cows overnight as evidence. The police charged five piastres per cow for any kept in their cattleyard. She said she also needed to pay the men who captured Kuku in case the police gave them no reward. Being a victim, apparently, was expensive. We also met several stragglers with spears and rifles who reported the other two thiefs had escaped in the bush.

As the walk to Dilling took several hours, Kuwa told many stories of Kuku's exploits, some with more than a touch of admiration. Once, caught while trying to steal an ox, Kuku was so badly beaten while bound that the ox's owner, his assailant, was fined ten pounds. "Kuku's a famous thief," Kuwa went on. "Once he was stealing a lorry in El Obeid and knew how to drive it to a town called Kujuria. There he broke into a shop, took a box full of money and enjoyed himself for a week, drinking and running with the prostitutes. The police caught him and he was thrown in jail with a 12-year sentence. He escaped and cheated a rich merchant in that place. He told the merchant he had smuggled £300 worth of clothes and perfume from Khartoum. But when the merchant brought the money, Kuku took it from him by force and got away. He is a very dangerous man, that Kuku."

The police station in Dilling, though it was a remote small country town, was clean and airy, a British-built bungalow filled with policemen in immaculate, pressed uniforms. The shelves were full of notebooks piled up in perfect order, faded British maps adorned the walls, and there was an air of bureaucratic courtesy mixed with military rigidity. Only Kuku, standing inside a great iron cage, his hands tied to the bars, looked out of place and stupefied.

At Kuku's trial we learned he had been arrested for cattle theft 12 times; each time he had been convicted. The magistrate, a Nuba wearing horn-rimmed spectacles, a black suit, and a black tie despite the heat, asked Kuku why he had stolen the cows.

Kuku, still in his torn garments, grinned and boasted, "Judge, I confess I am a big thief." This drew laughter from the spectators' benches, mostly men from Kuwa's village. Encouraged by it, Kuku went on, "But I never stole a cow in Dilling or from any member of your Dilling tribe, Judge. Therefore I must ask this court to set me free." Kuku, it seemed, was making an appeal to old tribal customs.

The magistrate was unimpressed. He held up a tattered old copy of the British colonial penal code and waved it at the prisoner. "Kuku," he

said in a level tone, "you have committed an offense in the eyes of this law. A crime is a crime wherever it is committed." He opened the book, paged through it and read out a passage concerning cattle theft. When he had finished, the magistrate said, "I have done this several times before, Kuku, explaining the law to you. Yet you keep coming back, always committing the same offenses, using the same means. I sentence you to two years in jail. And I warn you, Kuku, that after you are free if you steal as much as a pen"—he waves his own threateningly—"I will be enjoined under the law to sentence you to ten years."

An expression of anguish came over the cattle thief's face, as if he did not understand why the judge was treating him so harshly.

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Dilling Magistrate Ahmed Ibrahim, as he introduced himself over tea after Kuku's trial, explained that the Nuba tribes had until very recent times lived in isolated self-sufficiency, outside a money system, a proud, warlike people. Kuwa's Nimang tribe had remained unconquered until 1917 when the British quelled its last revolt by seizing the tribe's water wells, starving them out, and hanging their chief, Sultan Adjubna. He suggested I go meet the sultan's last surviving son, Ahmed, who, though a very old man, lived in a valley a day's walk from Neetil.

The magistrate said that even now land was so abundant in the Nuba Mountains anyone could plant a crop of sorghum or millet where he wanted. A man's wealth was measured not by land but by the number of his wives and cattle. In the old days the courage of young men was tested in raids against neighboring tribes for more women and cattle; bravery was still highly prized. Ibrahim said even a cattle thief like Kuku tended to be grudgingly admired by all but his victim.

The young magistrate, a law graduate from Khartoum University, said another peculiar problem faced by his court had to do with slavery. The Nuba Mountains, situated as they are are on the edge of the Sahara desert, were long a center of the African slave trade. Ibrahim suspected children were still sometimes carried off by itinerant Arab camel caravans, who severed their ankle tendons to prevent them from escaping. Once, he said, he arrested 31 vagrant children hanging about Dilling's only cinema house. He held them in jail for 10 days. "Nobody asked for any one of them," he went on. "These children could be carried off by the camel Arabs without anybody knowing about it. I'm convinced some of them are."

Another survival from the days of slavery, he said, was the still common practice of poor Nubas indenturing small sons to seminomadic *baggara* or cattle-raising Arabs in return for a cow each year in payment. The fathers visited their sons once each year to collect the cow and make sure the boys were not mistreated. Ibrahim said thousands of such indentured herdsmen still existed in the Nuba Mountains, growing to manhood with only a few rags to wear, subsisting on sorghum gruel and milk twice a day, sleeping in the bush with spears to ward off hyenas and baboons, and knowing little else of the world but the savannah where they grazed their cattle and the rivers where they watered them. He said there was little he could do to combat this system unless an Arab refused to pay the annual cow and the herdsman or his father brought the case to court.[5]

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On a shelf in the police station I found a report, dated 1906, or 11 years before the Nimangs' last revolt, written by a J.R. O'Connell, the local British military administrator, to his superiors in Khartoum. O'Connell reported that the local Nubas refused to surrender people or cattle collected in tribal raids. He was unexpectedly sympathetic:

To expect a brave, warlike and war-loving people to give up their old habits and surrender what they regard as their right, much less to give up their property without a struggle, is manifestly to expect the impossible. Vendettas, quarrels over women and cattle, and often pure devilment, must give rise to disturbances from time to time. Moreover, a generation of young men has grown up who have seen no fighting. The young women taunt them with this and say they are not half the men their fathers were. As a result, the youngsters look out for the first opportunity for a fight as a means of winning favor in the eyes of the women. I cannot think the worse of them for it. There is much more hope for the future of such a race than for a people who accept every change with passive docility.

Then, perhaps feeling he had gone too far, O'Connell added, "As people get to know the government, they will settle down." But they will still long, as Kuku the cattle thief must, for the extreme, unrestricted freedom of the past.

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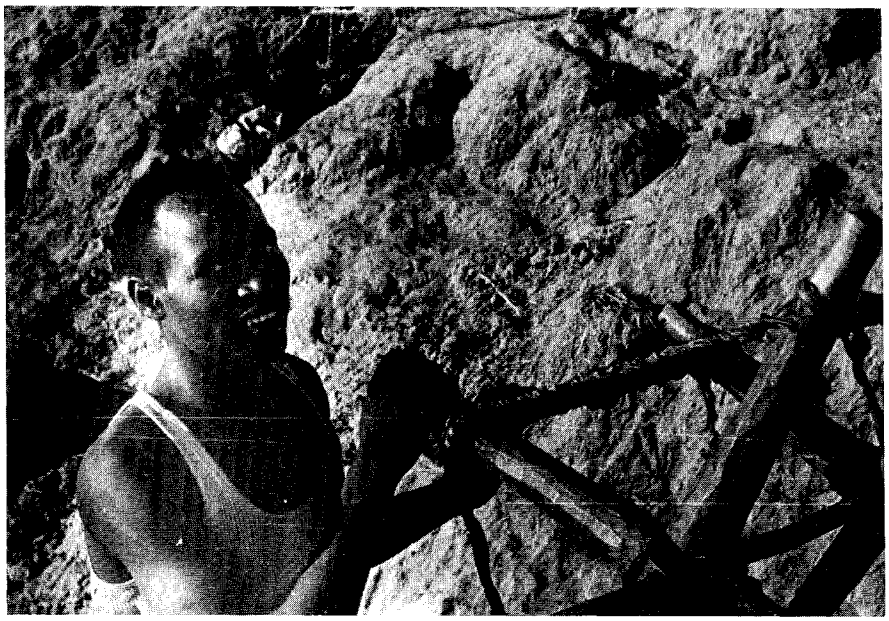
I never saw anyone so much at one with nature as one of the indentured herdsmen known simply as the Wali, after the name of his distant tribe. Powerfully built, with fine white teeth and a round good-natured face, the Wali had been "sold" by his father to an Arab cattleman when he was six years old. Now in his 20s, he had spent at least 15 years doing the most monotonous task, turning a wooden wheel over a well in the dry bottom of the Rope River, where Kuwa watered his cattle, drawing up goatskins to fill 3 troughs of water. His only relief came in the rainy season when the river filled and his owner, a gray-bearded Arab named Suleiman, took the herd south for three or four months to the city of El Obeid to sell milk.

The Wali's silence and the solemn expression he wore gave his endless labor an unusual strength and dignity. When he did speak, in a



The Wali. Photo by Richard Critchfield.

slow, ponderous way, it was to state some simple fact, such as "The afternoon has started," "It is time for the cows to come," or "The cows come late today; the air is cool and they do not grow thirsty." Once he told me (quite accurately), "Your hair blows in the wind like dead grass."

Suleiman, like most of the *baggara* or cattle-herding Arabs (as distinct from the camel Arabs of the Sahara), was a fanatic Mahdist, or adherent of the late nineteenth-century Mahdi who temporarily drove the British from the Sudan. He also was forever going on about women and how they were not to be trusted. "They are like dogs," he would say, "who will follow you if you give them a bone. But the minute you go away a woman thinks of sex and cannot wait. She'll accept anybody, even one of these cowherds." Once the Wali protested, "If the owner of the cattle is good to his herdsmen, they will not accept the wife's advances." "Hah!" Suleiman snorted, and launched into one of his long, medieval Arab legends about faithless women.

The Wali's mystery was that he seemed to be perfectly contented. Kuwa said he was no better than a slave. "If he had not been kept in ignorance so long he would leave that Arab. But now he knows nothing else. He is afraid to go."

His father had stopped coming to collect his annual cow five years before and now the Wali claimed them for himself.[6] He did not know his age. "We have only to go with the cows, to graze them and water them, that's all," he told me. "If your father doesn't tell you how old you are, you would hardly know." He agreed his lot was hard. "Maybe someday I'll go north. I came here long ago and never went back to my family. My master would not let me go when I was a boy. Now, perhaps, when I have five more cows, I will go back to my tribe and marry. And cultivate some fields and die there." Often, when resting, the Wali would pluck the steel strings of a simple, homemade *rababa*[7] and sing in a strange high voice, "*Jibee, jibee, jibee....*" Or he would look forward with pleasure to the sorghum harvest. "Then there will be many dances. People will be free, happy and proud of themselves." But he was intensely fatalistic. When another herdsman was stung by a scorpion in his sleep and was still in pain the next day, the Wali said, "If a scorpion or poisonous snake gets me, my time is finished. It is right. Sometime a cow will die of disease or if it's muddy get stuck when it comes to drink. If no one finds it and helps it, it may die. If someone comes, it may live another 20 years." His own fate, he felt, would be as fortuitous as that.

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The sound of drums, from all-night dances at near or faraway villages, is one of the strangest aspects of night in the Nuba Mountains;[8] the rhythms almost never cease. One night there was a *festa* in Neetil village and Kuwa and I went to watch. It was to be held in a big open space just outside the village and when we arrived it was already black with a compact crowd of people, mostly young girls who at first sight seemed to have gathered there for the simple enjoyment of being crushed together. Most of the men stood to the side, under the shadows of an enormous *tebeldi* tree. Then the sound of the drum gradually emerged from the confused hum of the crowd, imposing its own deep, monotonous, meditative beat. We made our way through the girls to one of the drums. There we saw an old man banging his hands against the ends of a cylindrical drum which he carried around his neck; and there were two young men striking the palms of their hands on two drums placed upright on the ground. The girls formed a circle round them, motionless, all eyes wide open and intent. Then suddenly, as though on impulse, a tall young man moved forward and started to dance. He had not made this decision, one felt, because he felt any desire to do so; but because the drum, magically, had forced him to do it, almost against his will. Soon the youth fell back into the circle and others slipped into it and the dance really began.

One, two, or three young men would enter the circle, advance toward some favored girl, nod and mutter a word of invitation, and then move back again. Then as the drumbeat quickened, each man, his body held loose, chest thrust out and shoulders back, began plunging his right leg up and down from the knee, in a pounding, throbbing

Old Nuba Mountain man, playing rababa. Photo courtesy of the Sudan government.

movement that carried his entire body forward in the same rhythm. Then girls also began to dance, facing some man and following the same movements, but with less violence. The dance was unmistakably sexual and yet completely chaste. A spectator could not but be fascinated by the grace, the elegance, the self-possession, the rhythm, the intense expressiveness of these African dancers and their incredible endurance, their faces shining and streaming with sweat and stamped with expressions of fatigue and distress.

The dance's sexual suggestion, Kuwa explained, was intended to be all see and no touch. Though dances did sometimes lead to sexual encounters, this was rare; if a girl became pregnant, a boy faced a two-year jail sentence. Or a girl's father might punish her by arranging her marriage to an older or ugly man. Kuwa said it sometimes happened. He himself felt the pull of the drum's rhythm and badly wanted to dance. But almost everyone in the crowd was young and unmarried. "They're babies," Kuwa complained, though, his body swaying to the rhythm, he seemed to feel real anguish at not being able to join.

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Like most tribals, the Nubas have no written language and history is handed down in songs from generation to generation, so that even the distant past possesses an immediacy. At home, sitting outside the huts at night, Kuwa would often take his *rababa* and sing of great past battles, when the *kudjur* would urge the young tribesmen into war against neighboring tribes and they would return to Neetil victorious with cattle and slaves, singing the praises of the *kudjur*. Kuwa acted out all the parts so that his voice became now loud, now soft, he would chatter like a baboon, warble like a bird, complain in the nagging, querulous tones of an old man, shout, whisper, let his voice fade away into an ominous mutter, then drift off in a low eerie moan. Sometimes Kuwa's elderly mother, a wizened, bent woman in her 70s, would hear the singing and come to listen, bursting into sudden shrieks or high-pitched cries in accompaniment.

A favorite song told of the Nimang tribe's origin: it began, like *Paradise Lost*, with a rebellion of angels in Heaven. These angels, banished by He Who Lives in the Sky, dashed to earth to make a new place for themselves, reaching the Nuba Mountains through a gateway in the stars. Soon disenchanted, they fled back to Heaven once more, leaving behind a single pregnant woman. When her time came, the child within her spoke, telling her to go to Teema Mountain, where he would be born. "That man came as a kind of power, he came from Heaven," Kuwa would explain, resuming his normal tone. "And in Teema Mountain, he dove into the earth and traveled very far in underground caverns until he found his way to the surface here below Neetil Mountain. He called his first-born son Neetil and Neetil is the great-grandfather of us all. When Neetil was very old, he called his children to him and said, 'I am going to die. But I want to climb the mountain. And no one must follow me. Because I want to take my leave of you, my children, in human form. If you follow me, you will be afraid.' Grieved, the children returned to the village and sacrificed a bull. But soon they grew anxious for their father and went into the mountain, at last finding the cave where he had gone. They stopped and called, 'Father!' and his voice answered them from the darkness, 'I will not come out or some of you will die of fright.' But his children begged him, 'We must see you. We will not go, father.'

"So Neetil appeared, first his head and they saw he had not changed. But his neck and legs and feet were gone and there were only scales; he had the body of a snake."

Here Kuwa's old mother interrupted, "And some of those children dropped dead of fright and some escaped and some are still running. The old snake man himself may still be crawling around the mountain. Nobody knows."

It was this spirit of Neetil who sometimes possessed Kuwa and gave him his powers as a *kudjur*.[9] The villagers had made offerings to Kuwa in his role as magician: these, 6 cows and 12 goats, along with spears and shields, ancient swords, magic stones, roots, and herbs, and other *ju-ju*, or objects used by Kuwa to make magic, were to be kept in his mother's hut until he was 50. Once

Wars of the past are recalled in dances today. These young Nubas are on their way to a celebration (festa). Photo courtesy of the Sudan government.

he underwent the ceremonies of a magician, others would tend his fields, graze his cattle, and repair his fences. They would also bring offerings for the spirit, but these would not materially benefit Kuwa, as they belonged to Neetil and he could only lend them to others.

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The most often sung history while I was with the tribe was about the Nimangs' defeat by British soldiers in 1917; this was treated as such a recent event that Kuwa never allowed me to walk in the countryside alone, for fear I might be taken for an English soldier, the only foreigners most Nubas knew about. One of Kuwa's neighbors, a man in his 80s, told me the story:

"I was just a boy when Sultan Ajubna used to speak to the people, telling us to go and make war and raid the other tribes, the Teemeen, the Wali, and the Jelut, and bring back all the cattle and slaves we gathered. In those times there was no government ruling us; we had our freedom and the British had not yet come. There were *kudjurs* of war in those days, Turmar, Juna, Dirir Tam, Darjar, Wulit Bilay, Jahdir, oh, so many *kudjurs* of war. They would prophesy when it was time to go down and make war. If the Nimangs were victorious, the Sultan gave us the cattle and pigs. He kept the women and slaves for himself.

"When the British came they asked the Sultan to pay taxes and return the cattle and slaves. He refused. In 1917 he learned the British were preparing to suppress our people and he gathered them and told them there would be war. We fled into the mountains with our families, cattle, goats, and provisions. We lived in caves. We were armed only with bolt-action rifles, spears, and axes in those days. But in the forest we could pick off patrols of British and they suffered many casualties. But the British were clever. They surrounded all our watering places and built thorny fences around them. So they cut off our water supply. It was the hot season and soon we were in a very bad condition. Then the British threw our dead into the wells to contaminate them. How we went crazy for water! Anyone who tried

to slip down to a well got shot. Our provisions in the caves ran out and we became terribly hungry also. The British soldiers saw how bad it was getting for us and they sent word that every man who brought his rifle out would be allowed to surrender with his family. One by one, men gave up. They gave up their weapons. Those who stayed in the caves died. You can still see their skulls and bones in the caves.

"But the British could not find Sultan Ajubna. They promised everybody rewards. Maybe someone told them because they found him and took him to their camp. The British asked Sultan Ajubna, 'Why didn't you follow our laws?' He replied, 'I do not recognize your laws. I lead a government also. I cannot accept yours. There is no person on earth greater than me for my power comes from God. If you let me go, I shall wage more war against you. I must.' So they hanged him, the Sultan."

"Why?" I asked.

"Hah! If we had known that the Sultan was alive and in the hands of the Englishmen, we would have risen again and killed them all."

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Sultan Ajubna's last surviving son, Sultan Ahmed, was a powerful *kudjur* and the Nimang tribe's spiritual leader, though he had never been allowed to rule it politically as his father had done. He lived deep within a forested gorge far from the village; to reach his large compound of huts we had to pass through baboon-infested Monkey Valley and then walk several hours more around the base of a high rock-strewn peak known as Sultan Mountain. We began at dawn to avoid the heat. Not far from the village we came to a plateau beneath Neetil Mountain which Kuwa identified as the place where Sultan Ahmed came to make rain. If there was a drought the old man knew how to persuade God to end it. All the people would go to the plain beneath the plateau in solemn procession, singing incantations and sacrificing a bull. Then the old man would climb up the cliffs to the plateau and plunge his spear into solid rock. "The blade will enter the rock and stand alone quivering," Kuwa explained. "After that the *aro* (power) possesses the Sultan and he asks the blessings of God so that rain will come. If all is well, and God agrees to give rain, Sultan Ahmed withdraws his spear and comes down to the people." Then he would return home and everyone would celebrate with *merissa* beer, drums, and dancing. Kuwa insisted that rain always followed, unless there was some mistake in the ritual, as sometimes was the case. The sheer cliffs that fell from the plateau were streaked with white offal and huge vultures swooped about; it must have taken courage to ascend it.

The gorge we passed through gave an impression of geological turbulence. There were fissures in the earth left, Kuwa said, from an earthquake in 1965. He claimed one rock outcropping we passed was rising upward at the rate of 10 to 20 feet a year; there was said to be gold beneath it

"The Sultan will have dreamed we are coming," Kuwa said as we approached our destination; this could not be tested as a small boy appeared on the trail and Kuwa sent him ahead to announce our visit. Then we came to the Sultan's compound, a dozen grass huts enclosed in the usual fence of thorny bush. It was much larger than those in the village but badly neglected: refuse lay about, the grass roofs were black with age, and the place had a general air of decay. A young girl met us at the gate, invited us to enter, and led us to string cots under a shade of sorghum stalks. She brought water in a tin but it looked so yellowish and dirty, with bits of sediment floating about, that despite our thirst we just rinsed our mouths. The girl complained their well was almost dry. The Sultan was sleeping but would be awakened.

At last a figure appeared at the door of one of the huts, a very tall, straight old man dressed in a grimy Arab tunic but with a clean, white turban wrapped about his head. As he came closer, I saw he wore an ostrich eggshell necklace and several silver rings pierced the lobes of one ear. His arms were adorned with silver and copper bracelets and rings and a large red ruby hung from a golden cord around his neck, which Kuwa later explained was to protect him from the ghosts of all the men he had slain in battle. Like his father Sultan Ahmed had been a famous warrior; he was said to be almost a hundred years old. He seemed very frail and the girl had to help him across the yard; his wrinkled face was ashen, his eyes bloodshot, and when he spoke his voice was faint and hollow; he gave an impression of great age and weariness and from time to time closed his eyes as if he were falling asleep.

At Kuwa's urging he retold the story of his father's defeat by the British, ending it, "When my father saw our people were suffering and dying, he went to the British and said he would stop the war against them. He went to them but they killed him." Then for a long time he said nothing. Finally he made a hoarse, croaking sound which turned out to be a kind of laugh and directing himself to me said, "Once a British officer came to visit me. It was long after the war and there was peace here. After the visit was over, the officer told me he would return to Dilling in his car. I told him, 'Don't go. There will be rain.' The officer said, 'No. How can there be? There are no clouds in the sky.' He drove off. I made a tremendous thunderstorm and he had to come back and spend the night. After that I let him go." The Sultan gazed off into the middle distance and it was easy to see that, as with most people of extreme age, the distant past was more real to him than the present.

"Whenever the people come to see the Sultan and ask for help, he will ask God to bless them," Kuwa said. "If they don't come, he will forget about them." From the abandoned

look of the place, my guess was few came anymore.

As if reading my thoughts, the Sultan opened his eyes and said, "Once I was possessed by my father's power, I wanted to do good for the people. Whenever a man came to visit me, I would allow him to come, if he came with good in his heart. If a man is ill, the *aro* will speak to me, the power will show its will and that man will be cured." He closed his eyes and there was another long silence; he seemed to have fallen asleep and I felt uneasily we should go.

Then he opened his eyes, leaned forward, and fixed them on Kuwa's face. "I am dreaming again of famine and disease, Kuwa," he said. "I have had such dreams for seven years now. What does it mean? Through my dreams at night the prophecies have always come to me, whether there was to be an illness or famine or evil in the land, all these things. Seven years ago we used to go down to the river places at night. There we made our sacrifices. The *aro* spoke to us and we followed its ways. In the past times, the people used to come to me and we would go to the river at night to make sacrifices and follow the *aro*. Whether they were ill, or going to die, or some evil was going to come to them. And I cured those men there. Now the harvests are poor and the land is not fertile and the rains are few these seven years. The people have become Muslims. They are leaving their traditions. They do not follow the counsel of the *aro*."

Though his voice was scarcely more than a whisper, the old man spoke with a kind of inner fury and Kuwa gently reassured him, "There is a change in the ways of living, Sultan. Different cultures have come into the Nuba Mountains."

"Because of these schools and modernization," the old man, the bitterness welling up in his voice. "The people became Muslim. I myself call myself a Muslim. But the way of the *aro* comes from our ancestors. The power chose to work through my grandfathers, my father, and myself. Now, Kuwa, the power chooses to work through you and other younger men. You cannot say no. You cannot say yes. You cannot refuse or the power can kill you or do you any evil. We can be Muslims if the people will it but at the same time we must not leave the ways of our ancestors. As long as we live, we must follow the way of the *aro*. And in my dreams, it speaks of drought, famine, and death. The people will be punished." There was an expression of great pain on the old man's face and as if overcome by it he abruptly rose and, without any word of farewell, limped slowly back to his hut. The sun was overhead now and its harsh light was blinding in the squalid, debris-strewn compound. Kuwa started to explain, "The people have always seen the Sultan as the instrument of God. When his power spoke to the people, it declared, 'I have come from God to bring you rain and what you desire.' " Kuwa groped for words, then fell into troubled silence, sharing the pain that springs from the destruction of an old, old, culture.

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Sheikh Idris Ibrahim, the Cairo-educated Muslim missionary in Neetil, also felt little triumph, though he had seen the mass conversion of the Nimangs to Islam in his 13 years in the village; the last of the English missionaries were gone, their bungalows falling into ruined decay.

Christianity, as the religion of the white man, with its emphasis on original sin, its prohibition of polygamy, its ethereal concept of heaven, and the European clothes and houses the missionaries had introduced, had proved too alien to tribal culture. Islam had been more attractive: the Nubas, with their concept of He Who Lives in the Sky, could comprehend Allah; there was no elaborate initiation or ritual, in tribal custom they already practiced circumcision and polygamy; and the Muslim paradise with its cool gardens inhabited by beautiful women, with the gratification of every physical desire, promised those same sensual delights that preoccupied the tribesmen on earth. The Koran prohibited alcoholic drink but Sheikh Idris shrewdly did not try to enforce this.

Yet Islam's victory, Sheikh Idris felt, was only one aspect of the cultural crisis facing the tribesmen. Unlike the departed English missionaries, who had seen themselves elevating an African tribe from the obscurity of barbarism to the light of civilization, this sensitive Muslim was aware too rapid a transformation could bring the Nimangs social catastrophe. As he told Kuwa and me: "In the coming years there will be many changes in the Nuba Mountains. Most of the people, I suppose, will become what is usually called civilized. After the old men, like Sultan Ahmed, die. The coming generation, the children now entering our new village school, will not hold to the old traditions. They will fade away. But at the same time I cannot predict the outcome will be in favor of Islam. The struggle is no longer with Christianity or even the ancestral tribal religion. The danger is that people will become altogether godless. The Nimangs may lose their old culture without truly becoming Muslims either. Then they may lose their belief in any God and believe in nothing at all."

Cultural change, the Islamic teacher felt, must come slowly. "There is much good in the tribal religion. The Nimangs have to care for their neighbors. A man cannot sleep with his neighbor's wife and commit adultery or commit theft or murder for tribalism teaches he will be punished with impotency, give birth to deformed children, or suffer other evils. So all the people must behave well. Tribalism is strongly moral; in it, no one escapes a system of rewards and punishments from the moment he is born until he dies. For instance, though the young men and girls move freely together and dance all night when the moon is full, it is very rare for a boy to sleep with an unwed girl. Even when they go to follow cattle in the bush. For to do wrong in the tribal religion is to

be fated to die before one's time or suffer these other evils. Islam is very happy with these customs and we must hold to them."

What Idris could not accept, however, was the idea that a *kudjur* could interpret God's will. "No mere man, call him a magician, wizard, *kudjur*, or witchdoctor, can come between God and another man." He told Kuwa, "We two are on the same side and must be in alliance in the struggles to come. You believe in the same God and that he created the universe and is all powerful. But you must tell the people you are a mere man; you cannot speak for God."

The village schoolmaster was less sympathetic. "We must break the *kudjurs*' grip on peoples' minds, especially the children's. If only the *kudjur* led the people in good things, we would tolerate him and allow these beliefs to die out naturally. But he's fighting back. The villagers don't go to the dispensary when they should. And the *kudjur* is a fraud. Sultan Ahmed has gone to the village dispensary for medicine, yet he dares to treat others with *ju-ju*. He won't admit he's a failure. But we have to go slowly. The *kudjurs* have a cunning way of establishing good relations with everybody. And everyone enjoys the rainmaking when they can dance and drink. Nor can we hurt the old people and show disrespect. We will win in the end. Even now there is some disrespect for Sultan Ahmed; in the past he was all in all; everyone feared him. And he used that fear, telling them that if everyone didn't take part in the rainmaking, drought would come. Or if they found money they must immediately take it to him or evil would befall them. Or if a sick man did not take his herbs and roots the illness would worsen. We teach the children these fears are groundless; that it is all superstition."

The school attacked the tribal religion directly, putting on plays to ridicule the *kudjur*, with a comic figure in a white sheet portraying the *aro* or power. Kuwa went to such shows and laughed as much as anyone. He told me, "The future lies with education. My children will leave the old ways." He was proud one day when the schoolchildren marched around the village to celebrate a government holiday, shouting the slogans, "To the students belongs the future! Science not superstition!"

Kuwa believed in this future too, but, unlike the children, he saw it was not yet.

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My stay in Kuwa's village ended suddenly one day when, as we were walking through the bush, a rabid dog came plunging out of nowhere and sank his fangs into my right leg. It was a three-day journey back to Khartoum: a day's walk into Dilling, an agonizingly slow truck ride across the Sahara on a desert track to El Obeid, and from there the next day an hour's flight to Khartoum—luckily there was a plane going and there happened to be a seat available—where antirabies injections could be had at an English-run clinic. It was an excruciatingly long three days, partly because I did not know that one had 14 days in which to begin the series of injections. But also because Kuwa, who insisted on coming along and staying with me until I boarded the plane, refusing all money, even his fare back to Dilling, was just as aware as I that neither he, his family, nor any of his tribe had such an option, could not rush so easily to the modern world if the same thing had happened to them.

We did not speak about it but I'm sure it was on his mind as well as mine. It brought home to me why Kuwa would become a *kudjur* and why he sympathetically listened to the village schoolteacher, Sheikh Idris, his mother, and Sultan Ahmed, with all their contradictory ideas. For somebody had to be the bridge between the archaic African past and those still dispossessed of the benefits of the modern present, a present to which I, underlining the enormous gap between us, so urgently fled.

(May 1979)

NOTES

1. This is the first of a planned series of case studies of cultural change among poor people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This report deals with an African moving out of tribalism into settled village life. Future reports will examine the lives of the true peasant, modern farmer, urban migrant, guerrilla, victim, refugee, criminal, aboriginal Indian, herdsman, fisherman, and frontiersman. My intention is that, taken together, these studies will provide something of a comprehensive portrait of the peasant's world and what is happening to it today. The theoretical basis of these case studies was offered in two previous papers, the three-part *Look to Suffering, Look to Joy* and the two-part *The Peasant and the West.*

2. See John Waterbury, "The Sudan in Quest of a Surplus" (3 parts) [JW-5,6,7-'76], *AUFS Reports*, Northeast Africa Series, Vol. XXI, Nos. 8,9,10, 1976.

3. Unlike the Sudanese Arabs, the Nuba tribesmen rarely spent money on cigarettes; most, like Kuwa, took snuff or chewed home-grown tobacco. Clothes, purchased from Arab merchants in Dilling, were the main expense: Kuwa's white Arab gown, or *jalabiya*,cost $8 for the cloth and another $1.50 for tailoring; he had three. His silk skull cap cost $5.60. Shoes went from $1.25 for a cheap pair of Bata sandals up to $25, of which Kuwa had one pair he always wore. A simple cotton dress, such as his wives wore, took 3 meters of cloth, or about $4 to $5 a dress; in the tribe women wore tight-fitting, low-cut, short-skirted dresses to save money; they also liked this style. If they visited town, where Islamic custom was stronger and there was an Arab merchant population, tribal women wore 9-meter long, transparent cotton *tobes*, which went from head to ankle and cost anywhere from $8 to $50.

Since Nuba men tended to squander their money on snuff, *merissa*, and *aragi*, most women earned enough cash to clothe themselves and their children. Many collected wild *okra*, which fetched $20 per 100-kilo sack (and sold for $40 in Khartoum). On market days, most village women went to market squatting in the dust and spreading their wares in front of them. This revealed much enterprise: some sold roots guaranteed to possess magic protective powers, or to cure diarrhea, coughs, asthma, and other ailments or to ward off knife attacks. Other women sold brooms and rope made from savannah grass, *karkade* seeds, *aradeb* tree pods said to be rich in vitamin C, dates, watermelons, beans, onions, sorghum cookies, wooden footstools, ankle and wrist bracelets woven from palm leaves and filled with grains of sand to make noise while dancing, leopard skins, hens and chickens, palm baskets, rope fiber from palm trees, woven grass mats, hyena oil, earthen jugs, charcoal, snuff, and chewing tobacco. Along the road from Neetil to Dilling on market days were also what Kuwa called "filling stations," girls sitting under shade trees selling *merissa* beer.

4. As a retired soldier, Kuwa was better off than most Nuba tribesmen; he received $14 from the government each month. On retirement he had received $1,440, which he had spent on cattle, a brother's marriage, clothes, and food. In the army he had worked himself up to sergeant and earned $98 a month. He was accustomed to eating well, was extravagant and drank quite heavily, sometimes having a glass or two of *aragi*, a fiery crude liquor, early in the morning. My impression was that his three wives, with their thrift and hard work, kept the family prosperous. Kuwa also hunted hyena or leopard from time to time with his army rifle and collected honey from beehives.

5. The Nubas are thought to have originally inhabited open savannah plains, not fleeing into the mountains until the arrival of successive waves of Arabs 700-800 years ago. The Arabs diverged into two distinct lifestyles, those in camel caravans, who are still widely feared as possible kidnappers and slavers, and those who settled down to a seminomadic existence raising cattle (the *baggara* or cattle Arabs). These claim to be natives of the Nuba Mountains but have never been completely accepted by the black tribals, who inhabit the mountain region for safety and because the soil is more fertile and there are better water supplies.

6. The value of the cow, sometimes little more than a calf, the Wali received for a full year's labor, was between $30 and $40, making him the most underpaid worker imaginable.

7. A *rababa*, after the drum the most popular Nuba musical instrument, is made by stretching five steel wires across a goatskin sewn to a hollow gourd.

8. Dances are held on all manner of occasions, but always on nights of the full moon.

9. The only evidence I had of Kuwa's magical powers came one night as we were walking home for the bush and he fell silent and seemed to be ill and asked to rest for some time in a clearing. I was worried as darkness had fallen and I was anxious to reach the village. Suddenly Kuwa told me there was a message for me at the Khartoum telegraph office. I assumed someone had passed word along to him and it was only when collecting a telegram the next day in Dilling, from some friends in Cairo, that I was told it had arrived late in the night. When I asked Kuwa about this, he could not remember saying anything at first and then confessed he had fallen into a trance there in the bush. It was the spirit which possessed him who had spoken, Kuwa said, not he. I once saw him remove roots, bits of bone and other *ju-ju* from what had seemed to be an empty gourd which he had placed on the stomach of a man complaining of some digestive ailment. The man claimed to be cured but it could have been the suggestion and sleight of hand. The other episode was harder to explain.