AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF 'BITTERNESS':
CUCUMBER AND SACRIFICE RECONSIDERED*

BY

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1. ‘A WILD CUCUMBER IS AN OX’

In *Nuer Religion* (1956) Evans-Pritchard writes that the Nuer of the southern Sudan may sacrifice a wild cucumber in place of an ox. If no beast is available Nuer may sacrifice the *Cucumis prophetarum*, a knobbly cucumber called *kwol yang*, cow's cucumber.

When a cucumber is used as a sacrificial victim Nuer speak of it as on ox. In doing so they are asserting something rather more than that it takes the place of an ox (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 203, 128).

This ‘a cucumber is an ox’ proposition, together with the ‘twins are birds’ proposition (Evans-Pritchard 1936; 1956: 80, 128-33, 141), has puzzled and charmed many philosophers as well as anthropologists. Some thought this issue was relevant to the problem of rationality or ‘prelogical mentality’ in ‘primitive thought’ (see articles by Gellner and MacIntyre in Wilson 1970; Firth 1966). Hayley tried to explain it through a psycho-analytical approach (1968). Levi-Strauss referred to it from his own perspective on totemistic thought (1962a; 1962b).

Evans-Pritchard’s own interpretation of the proposition is as follows. The resemblance between a cucumber and an ox is ‘conceptual, not perceptual’. So the equation ‘rests on qualitative analogy’. And ‘the expression is asymmetrical’ as ‘a cucumber is an ox, but an ox is not a cucumber’ (1956: 128). Then his argument is focused on the ‘twins-birds’ proposition. The point is that a statement of ‘A is B’ expressing a dyadic relation can only be understood in a triadic relation by referring to the third party, C. And this C is God (*kwooth*). That is, as both twins and birds are classified as children of God, they have a similar character in respect to God. Evans-Pritchard extends this argument and writes,
'A cucumber is equivalent to an ox in respect to God who accepts it in the place of an ox’ (1956: 128-42).

Evans-Pritchard took pains in the construction of this argument, while discussing issues of totemism on the one hand and criticizing the theory of the prelogical mentality on the other. His explanatory model, however, is not fully conclusive, as he himself admits (1956: 140). What is the ‘conceptual resemblance’ and ‘qualitative analogy’ between a cucumber and an ox? Why can they be equivalent in relation to God? Why is one specific wild plant chosen rather than another wild or cultivated plant? These questions remain unanswered.

In this paper I would like to go back to these basic questions and try to account for them. In doing so references are made to other relevant ethnographies on Nilotic peoples other than the Nuer, particularly the Dinka (Lienhardt 1961), Atuot (Burton 1981) and Pari, all of whom use wild cucumbers in sacrifices. The data on the Pari were obtained during my field research among them. I do this not only because the data presented by Evans-Pritchard and the interpretation by him on this issue may not give us a satisfactory answer, but because I believe comparison on a limited ethnographical issue among a related set of peoples may, as Evans-Pritchard argued (1951: 91-2; 1965: 29), lead us to a profounder understanding of each case. First, I discuss in detail the actual way and the ritual context in which a cucumber is sacrificed in each people. It will be shown that a cucumber is used in specific contexts, not in all sacrifices. Second, I try to argue that the notion of ‘bitterness’ which is found among the Dinka and Pari may be a key to explain not only the ‘cucumber and ox’ issue but also Nilotic religious philosophy in general.

2. WILD CUCUMBER AND SACRIFICE AMONG FOUR NILOTIC PEOPLES

Dinka

Godfrey Lienhardt’s Divinity and Experience reports that a ‘sacred healing cucumber’ which is called kuoljok (Cucumis prophetarum) may be sacrificed as a temporary substitution for an animal victim. When sacrificed, it is split and cast aside (1961: 257). This cucumber is also used for protection against sickness. When used, it is ‘rubbed on the chest, head and back of a sick man’ (1961: 209).