Postcard from Southern Sudan, May 2006

Although in theory there is a peace agreement, Southern Sudan is not an easy place to visit. You need a permit from the SPLA and someone to look after you, otherwise it is nearly impossible to travel around. It is also incredibly expensive, as it is UN country and all supplies have to be flown in from Kenya; even water. But to an anthropologist trained in the old ways it is a place of false-memory syndrome; peoples consigned to the post-modern dustbin of history rise up from the grass in front of you. You might be inclined to exclaim, with the king of Rohan, 'Do the people we thought existed only in legend spring up from the grass'? The Nuer, Dinka and Shilluk have not gone away but have been developing their own histories away from the safe colonial verities of Evans-Pritchard and co. I doubt even the most prescient anthropologist could have foreseen the Nuer organising their cattle-raids by satellite phone.

The background is that a CPA (Comprehensive Peace Agreement) was finally signed in January 2005 after many tortuous years of negotiation and probably only because both sides wanted to get their hands on the oil, which is being detected in ever greater quantities in the zone between the North and South. This has not exactly led to peace, since the huge numbers of guns in circulation have meant that much more traditional enmities are now being played out through the medium of the AK-47. Moreover, the Khartoum government has hardly demonstrated good faith, both by ramping up hostilities in Darfur and by funding the evil Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which although it is supposed to mainly operate in Uganda, has increased its attacks in Sudan. The decline of formal hostilities in the centre of the country has given the informal militias new opportunities to increase raiding, and pastoralists such as the Fellata and Rezeigat seem to have acquired new and more powerful weapons during the last year. They are using these to establish migration routes for their herds, but also to ensure the way is clear for further oil exploration mounted by companies based in Khartoum. At the same time, refugees from the south living in the north have begin to make their way south again, regaining their old villages and beginning to rebuild their houses.

The peace has also been anxiously awaited by the big donors, the US et al. for reasons that are not entirely to do with humanitarian concern. Southern Sudan is seen as a Christian bulwark against the southern expansion of Islam, and much US policy has been driven by right-wing fundamentalists embedded in the State Department. Similarly, the expanding activity of doubtful countries such as Malaysia and China in the oil business in the north may be countered by contracts going to friends of the US further south. In fact, all sorts of operators seem to be in the business. Right now there are Moldovans, squat swarthy men who clearly live on sausage and cabbage, doing seismic surveys with permits of unknown provenance. However, the plane that flies daily from Nairobi to Juba, the new capital of the South, is full of a wide range of suspicious characters, Italian businessmen with flashy gold jewellery, Arabs, Indians, weary-looking Brits and diplomats of every colour and race.

Juba itself is a rotten fabric stitched together by the peacekeeping and development industry. An old provincial capital with some pleasant buildings from the British era, it is being rapidly developed with new piled-up boxes, to house all the incomers. There is no central electricity, so every street is a polyphony of varying generator tunes. The UN is the biggest player here, with hundreds of white Toyotas busily patrolling the streets, looking for problems to solve. The UN compound is a huge camp, with lines of tents inhabited by enormous solders of many nations and weedy-looking administrators cultivating inflated salaries. The US dollar is the main currency, although each bill is inspected for signs of forgery. The NGOs are just establishing a toehold here and live in collective bliss, reproducing only too accurately the ethos of a sixties' commune.

And what about the Nuer, Dinka et al.? I think this must be the only time in my life when I have worked with people consistently taller than me; even the women are often half-a-head taller. Needless to say, they are not as picturesquely undressed as in the old monographs. The men wear European dress, whereas the women mostly affect the bright colours and diaphanous textures of Arab women. But much else is very

familiar. Prophets arise and sweep up branches of Nuer with their prophecies, except that now the upshot is often to head to the next clan and raid their cattle, burn down their village. The herders remain completely obsessed by their cattle and most of the discord can be traced to cattle-raids and the cycle of revenge that follows them. You only have to be here for a few days to hear endless tales of stolen cows, and abductions of children (in many ways more disturbing than the cattle, but clearly of lesser importance). Compared with the colonial era the other thing you notice are the churches. Every village has a large church, and it seems to be occupied for much of the day, especially by women, beating drums and endlessly reeling out screechy hymns. The churches are also multiplying like loaves and fishes and every meeting is attended by a venerable reverend or two, sometimes with gun in hand.

Like so much today, Southern Sudan is a blend of high and low-tech. There is no electricity, no water or telephones, but anyone who is anyone has a satphone and they use them constantly. You might think in the middle of the bush in Sudan you would at last be free of the curse of mobile phones. But no, now it is the Thuraya bleeping at you. Even though these cost a great deal to use, church leaders, military commanders with no more than grass hut can all afford the latest models. A standard visit when you arrive is a courtesy call to the 'commander', all of whom are from central casting. Worn fatigues, dangling cigarette, grizzled beard, grubby plastic table, mirror sunglasses, sprawled entourage and satphone lying carelessly on the table. You tell them the truth and they tell you a pack of lies and both sides leaved satisfied.

Minutes after our plane touched down in Ayod, in the Nuer heartland, another plane arrived. Decorated with sharks' teeth and swirling paintwork it seemed like a visitor from another war, perhaps Laos in the 1970s. Nothing was said, and soldiers came out of the bush to unload ammunition cases, then it swung around and disappeared. There was supposed to be a peace conference between the Lou Nuer (armed) and the Gawaar (disarmed) but the SPLA had clearly had enough of the disruption and having trained soldiers to hand had decided to go and duff up the Lou without telling the NGOs. The village was then invaded by soldiers and we were suddenly in the middle of an offensive. We left.

Travel is by plane; once the rains come, the plains become an impassable waste of mud. The planes are flown from Kenya by the usual world-wide camaraderie of pilots, landing on delicate airstrips hastily cleared of cows. The pilots are monosyllabic except to one another and usually have sunglasses, beards and spotless white shorts. These planes are expensive but the money seems to flow. More recently, the Russians have brought in aging big-bellied cargo planes with minimal fittings and these act like buses. People crowd in with all their household paraphernalia and are disgorged at another cluster of mud huts elsewhere in the savannah.

The landscape is distinctly bleak. Sudan may be famous for its wildlife, but it was not in evidence. Only, rather ominously, birds of prey, eagles, kites, buzzards, sitting on dry trees in a speculative way. This land is all flooded every year; and when the floods fall, the snails that cling to the reeds are caught. So the land is covered with dry white snail-shells, like the traces of a biblical cataclysm. The grasses and trees seem rather extreme even by African standards, each one with massive spines or burrs to snag you if you venture off the road. There is another disincentive to do that, which is that the Sudanese government mined many areas and then destroyed the records of the mines, so although they are now mostly mapped, there is always the chance…

The war isn't over; on every street corner, you see people with Uzis et al. A popular t-shirt here, as elsewhere in Africa, shows Los Angeles rappers posing with guns. These are just theatre, intended to sell CDs to the under-17s, but ironically, here they are worn by people for whom gun culture is all too real. If you go into a village, you are usually sitting with several people casually fingering the safety-catch of their guns. If you travel along a road, people say encouraging things like 'they don't attack on this road very

often'. It reminded me of swimming with sharks; people often mutter 'they don't usually attack inside the reef', but when a three-metre bull shark drifts speculatively by just beneath you it suddenly feels important to be sure. Raymond Chandler once wrote; 'when in doubt as to what happens next, have a guy come through a door with a gun'. Southern Sudan feels like that.

Nuba

I was first seduced into a fascination with the Nuba mountains by the photographs of that old Nazi, Leni Riefenstahl. Her photographs of beautiful oiled people seemed to represent the right sort of challenge to the dreary uniformity of Sudanese Islamic culture. My second attraction was more abstract, the presence of Kordofanian languages, an island of West African languages isolated in the middle of Sudan. What were they doing there? I went to Khartoum in 2004 to try and find out more and came back horrified. In between the phonemes, everyone I talked to told of burnt-out villages and massacres. The Khartoum communities seemed to be hanging on to their culture by a thread as their children became gradually Arabised. So a chance to go into the mountains themselves seemed worth the taking.

I was fearfully expecting things to be much worse than they were; to see traces of burnt-out houses everywhere. But in the south of the hills, which was SPLA territory, things were not so bad and many villages survived, although the populations scattered in militia raids. And people recover quickly; the scenes were astonishingly like the old, rosy-glow photographs. Clusters of round houses with dry-stoned walls, newly thatched and cattle, pigs and dogs snuffling around. Enormous chunky baobabs, spreading shade over the village centres and old men under trees. But this is an illusion, many of these villages were deserted until last year and even now, new bunches of returnees arrive with every truck. One of the ironies is that the Un grossly underestimated the desire of the Nuba to return home. They apparently considered that once they had become accustomed to the amenities of city life, they would not want to return to rural villages without water, health and light. But of course this is a very American view, it was to ignore the fact that the Nuba in Khartoum were at the very bottom of the social pyramid, neither proper southerners, nor Muslims, they lived despised by everyone.

Nuba are astonishingly different from their southern neighbours. Small farmers growing sorghum in inaccessible fastnesses in the mountains, they had developed a very distinctive culture and cut off from their environment they seemed to be withering on the vine. The Nuba tend to believe in the rule of law and the virtues of peace, unlike the Nuer, for whom the war, dare I say, was great entertainment, cattle-raiding pursued with superior means. The first all-Nuba post-war conference resolutions go on at length about the importance of culture and even include a resolution about improved musical instruments. You cannot imagine the Dinka et al. worrying about this because in so many ways, war has re-affirmed their culture.