CHAPTER 2

Death, Memory and the Politics of Legitimation: Nuer Experiences of the Continuing Second Sudanese Civil War

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Much of what currently passes for 'governmental authority' (*buom kume*) in war-torn Nuer regions of south Sudan rests, sadly, on little more than the demonstrated power to kill with impunity. Or, more accurately, it is this lethal power combined with the power to declare such acts devoid of all social, moral, and spiritual consequences for their perpetrators around which contemporary assertions and counter-assertions of governmental 'legitimacy' revolve. Continuing military confrontations between the national government in Khartoum and the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and between the SPLA and its 1991 breakaway faction, the South Sudan Independence Movement/Army (SSIM/A), thus remain deeply rooted in a politics of memory – and especially of memories and identities lost.[1]

Indeed, beginning in the mid-1980s, leading Nuer members of what was then a still-united SPLA sought to persuade ordinary Nuer villagers as well as active Nuer recruits into a novel disregard for the memory of the dead. Dr Riek Machar, who at that time was reigning SPLA Zonal Commander of the Western Upper Nile, spearheaded this ideological campaign. Violent deaths generated by the ongoing second Sudanese civil war (1983 to the present),[2] he argued, were entirely devoid of the pollution risks associated with acts of intra-ethnic homicide due to local feuding and fighting. In essence, the Commander was advocating that the overarching political context of Sudan's present war – which he defined as a 'government war' (*koor kume*) – should take precedence over the personal identities and interrelations of the combatants in people's assessments of the social and spiritual ramifications of acts of inter-Nuer homicide.

What the Commander was seeking to secure with this revolutionary pronouncement was more than the unquestioning obedience of his troops to kill upon command. Certainly, he, like other southern military leaders,

was intent on undermining, if not destroying, any mediating structures standing between himself and the loyalty of his troops, including, when necessary, bonds of family, kin, and community. Yet, above and beyond any problems of troop discipline, Commander Machar's arguments were also implicitly bound up with evolving Nuer notions of what constitutes a 'legitimate' governmental authority.

Ever since British colonial forces of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium regime definitively conquered Nuer regions of the Upper Nile during the 1920s, 'the government' (*kume*, a word of Arabic derivation[3]) had claimed the right to impose capital punishment or otherwise eliminate individuals who seriously challenged its monopolistic claims on the legitimate use of force. And this 'right' was gradually accepted by Nuer men and women themselves. Consequently, as greater numbers of Nuer began to participate in 'the government' as court officials, chiefs, policemen, prison wardens, soldiers and the like, many of them were forced to confront the possibility – if not actuality – of killing fellow Nuer in 'the line of duty'. Higher-ranking Nuer government chiefs were among the first to face this moral dilemma. During the 1930s and 1940s, British administrative agents sometimes pressured 'Court Presidents' into imposing the death sentence on Nuer who had been convicted under the 'Sudan Penal Code' of 'culpable homicide amounting to murder' (Howell 1954: 66–7, 235–7). In such cases, the individual chiefs involved did not hold themselves personally accountable for such deaths: they were merely deferring to the will of the *kume* ('government') or the *Turuok* ('foreigners'). Consequently, the cultural logic of blood feuds and blood vengeance, they maintained, did not apply. Following Sudan's independence in 1956 and the subsequent spread of the first civil war (1955–72) to the Upper Nile Province during the early 1960s, these moral dilemmas were swiftly generalised to the Nuer population as a whole. Not surprisingly, both those Nuer who fought on the side of southern secessionist forces and those who allied themselves, directly or indirectly, with the central government in Khartoum also denied all personal accountability for acts of intra-ethnic homicides carried out under orders from their military superiors during that seventeen-year-long civil war. The efficacy of such denials ultimately depended, however, on whether or not the extended family of the slain accepted the southern military command structures and/or the national army as 'legitimate' governmental authorities. For without that implicit acceptance, any act of intra-ethnic homicide would provoke immediate calls for blood vengeance or bloodwealth compensation from the close kinsmen of the deceased.

Viewed in this light, more recent attempts by Commander Machar and other prominent southern military leaders to differentiate violent

deaths occurring in the context of a 'government war' (*koor kume*) from others due to local feuding and fighting must be understood as indirect assertions of political authority. In essence, the Commander was canvassing for public recognition that the military structures under his control constituted a 'legitimate' governmental authority.

These complex and controversial issues cut straight to the core of contemporary Nuer notions of community, ethnicity, and polity. Beyond that, they raised deeper questions about the nature of homicide, the meaning of death and the role of Divinity (*kuoth nhial*) in maintaining human morality. Subtle tensions in people's images of themselves as 'Nuer' (*nɛi ti naadh/Nuar*) and as members of a broader community of 'black people' (*nɛi ti caar*) or 'Southerners' (*jinubni*) were also thoroughly implicated. So, too, were the divinely sanctioned obligations of relatives to ensure the 'procreative immortality' of kinsmen who die heirless on the battlefield, through the posthumous provision of 'ghost-wives'.

Much soul-searching and debate among contemporary Nuer men and women stems from this perhaps unavoidable clash between the mandatory 'forgetting' of civil war victims advocated by the southern military elite and the social and emotional sediments each such death leaves in the hearts and lives of surviving kin. This chapter explores this rapidly evolving sphere of debate from the perspectives of both the perpetrators of 'government'-sponsored violence and the immediate families of the victims. One of the more general aims is to compare and contrast the dominant motives, meanings, and structures of 'memory' supporting ties of family and kinship with those underlying contemporary assertions of political legitimacy on the part of rebel military leaders. More generally, the chapter shows how the fluctuating strength of politico-military power networks in this region has varied directly in relation to ordinary people's willingness to accept, however reluctantly, that some slain relatives will be consigned to a kind of social and spiritual 'oblivion'.

Chains of Memory Binding Nuer Families: Achieving Procreative Immortality

There is one form of memory that contemporary Nuer men and women continue to value above all others – that is, the memory of one's name on the lips of one's children. Procreation remains the paramount goal of life for every Nuer. Everyone fears 'the true death', 'the complete death' – that is to say, a death without children to extend one's line and to revitalise one's influence in the world. This universally shared life-goal is nevertheless experienced somewhat differently by men and by women. For a woman, her first childbirth marks the threshold to adulthood, personal security, and future independence in her husband's or lover's home. The comprehensive term for 'woman/wife' in the Nuer language – *ciek* (pl. *man*) – is conferred only on those women who, whether married or not, have experienced childbirth. A woman's experiences of both full femininity and adulthood are thus inseparable from her experience of procreation itself. Each new child she bears stands as living symbol of this inner state of self-realisation. The procreative immortality sought by men, in contrast, is motivated in part by strong collective interests. Without formal heirs, a man acquires no permanent position in the patrilineal chain of descendants from which he emerged. From the perspective of Nuer men, 'marriage is really a matter of names' – that is, a matter of keeping alive through progeny the names of all males born into a particular family. Whether or not any cluster of patrilineal kinsmen fully realises, this cultural ideal will depend in large part on the cattle resources available to it. Ideally, close patrilineal kinsmen draw in turn on their commonly-held herd in order to marry, bear sons, and thereby extend their patriline. A man's procreative potential is thus fused with that of his close patrilineal relatives through the 'ancestral herd'. Male corporate solidarity and continuity are, indeed, founded on this principle of 'communal fertility' through shared cattle rights.

The enduring centrality of this procreative life-goal is readily apparent in the many unique and imaginative ways Nuer men and women have developed and maintained over the generations for transcending individual problems of infertility and/or premature death. By creatively manipulating their bridewealth system, Nuer families can potentially assist infertile and/or deceased relatives to achieve 'procreative immortality' through the acquisition of legal heirs. Because the social paternity of a child is determined solely on the basis of cattle transfers, it is possible for Nuer families that have been heavily ravaged by illness or warfare to 'regenerate' themselves both by arranging 'ghost-marriages' and by perpetuating 'leviratic unions' (see Evans-Pritchard 1951: 109–17). In the former case, a pro-husband marries a woman in the name of a deceased kinsman (or, less commonly, a deceased kinswoman) in order to bear that person posthumous heirs. In the latter, a widow continues to bear children in the name of her deceased husband with the support of a designated pro-husband, who is usually a younger brother of the deceased. By giving strategic priority to the unfulfilled procreative ambitions of deceased elders before marrying for themselves, surviving family members can 'repair' debilitating holes in their kinship networks. The younger generation's willingness to defer to their genealogical seniors in this way stems in part from their sense of indebtedness for having received cattle through them, and in part from their faith in their own juniors' willingness to perform

the same procreative service for them should it become necessary. Infertile women can also perform these 'regenerative' services by contracting woman-to-woman marriages (Evans-Pritchard 1951: 108 ff.). An infertile and unmarried Nuer woman is 'free' to become a social man, to gather cattle, and to marry a wife to bear patrilineal heirs for her. Similarly, it is not uncommon for a father without living sons to substitute the reproductive potential of a fertile unmarried daughter in order to acquire direct patrilineal heirs. This he does by allowing his daughter to bear children with one or more lovers 'in the bush' while simultaneously making it very clear to them that no bridewealth cattle will be accepted for her. Although they are far less common than ghost-marriage and the levirate, these two female-centred modes of extending patrilineal connections can also cement cracks in people's kinship structures.

The strategic possibility of marrying a 'ghost-wife' in the name of a deceased relative is considered a divinely sanctioned, moral imperative only in the situations where a fully initiated man dies heirless – or, *ad forte*, a man dies in the act of defending homestead and herd. Any unreasonable delay on the part of surviving kinsmen to fulfil this obligation would provoke the justified wrath of the deceased's ghost. Backed by the moral indignation of God or Divinity (*kuoth nhial*), this anger commonly manifests itself through instances of sudden illness, death, infertility, and/or other grave misfortunes visited upon the immediate families of neglectful kin. Indeed, the principal rationale behind offers of bloodwealth cattle is to 'cool' the hearts of the dead man's family by providing them with the wherewithal to marry a 'ghost-wife' in the deceased's name.

Bearing the divine origins of this key kinship obligation in mind, we can begin to appreciate the magnitude of social and spiritual changes advocated, implicitly and explicitly, by the Commander's controversial assertions about the inherent 'finality' and 'individuality' of violent deaths generated by a 'government war'. For contemporary Nuer men and women to accept this idea would necessitate a temporary – if not permanent – suspension of one of the strongest moral obligations binding communities of kin. Furthermore, people would have to come to terms with the frightening thought that they, too, might be abandoned someday by their relatives to 'the complete death'. While I am certain that it would take considerably more than a 'government order' to persuade contemporary Nuer men and women that they could ignore a divinely sanctioned moral obligation with impunity under any circumstances, the strong secularising thrust of the Commander's arguments was fully consonant with Nuer experiences of more than half a century of political assertions and counter-assertions of 'legitimacy' on the part of successive governmental regimes.

Disengaging God from Death: The Pollution of Homicide

Prior to the definitive conquest of Nuer communities by British colonial forces during the 1920s, there was no such thing as a morally or socially neutral act of inter-Nuer homicide. *Te kaamdiɛn ke coaa* ('A bone exists between them') was the principal Nuer metaphor for relationships of permanent hostility forged through homicide. The buried bones of the slain – which remain firm and whole beneath the earth long after all remnants of flesh have disappeared – were thought to create a social rift so deep, so strong, that the possibilities of commensality, sexuality, and intermarriage between the extended families concerned were prohibited 'forever'. Active states of inter-Nuer community warfare and feuding could often be tempered by transfers of bloodwealth cattle and by the completion of special sacrifices of purification and atonement. Nevertheless, relationships of 'the bone', like those of agnation, endured for as long as they were remembered.

At that time, people conceptualised relationships of the bone 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. Were the slayer to eat or drink anything before having this embittered blood removed through a small incision (*bier*) made on the upper arm by an 'earth priest' (*kuaar muon*, also known in the literature as a 'leopard-skin chief'), he was sure to die of a highly dangerous and contagious form of pollution known as *nueer* (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 293 ff.).

While completing this purificatory rite of *bier* enabled the killer to eat and drink safely once again, it did not remove all risk of *nueer*. For were the slayer or any of his relatives ever to eat, drink, or make love with a relative of the slain, the penalty was death by *nueer* for both of them. This lethal state of pollution could also be triggered by a 'neutral' person belonging to neither party to the blood feud eating or drinking in the homes of both. All persons within the extended communities concerned were thus forced to ally themselves with one feuding party or the other – if only in matters of food and drink. This lethal danger could be ended only after the payment of bloodwealth cattle compensation and after the performance of a complex series of cattle sacrifices orchestrated by an 'earth priest' (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 293 ff.; Howell 1954: 44–8; Hutchinson 1996: 122 ff.). Fear of *nueer* was thus a primary force motivating reconciliation or migration prior to the coming of 'the government'.

Widespread fear of this pollution form also supported a definite code of fighting ethics at that time. This code precluded recourse to spears in

[redacted]utes [redacted]g clo[redacted]nsme[redacted]l neig[redacted]rs a[redacted] as t[redacted]ics s[redacted] as the killing or capturing of women and children, the raiding of stock and the burning of homes in confrontations between Nuer communities. Shared respect for these ethical limits was thus a fundamental aspect of Nuer concepts of ethnicity, kinship and community.

Following the consolidation of British colonial rule over the Upper Nile during the 1920s, the divinely backed responsibilities of scattered Nuer families of 'earth priests' for purifying confessed slayers and for negotiating transfers of bloodwealth cattle between feuding parties were gradually transformed and absorbed by a newly created, secular, administrative hierarchy of 'government chiefs'. These developments were accompanied by a process of ritual 'streamlining', in which numerous elements of the complex series of sacrificial rites formerly required for the permanent resolution of blood feuds were ignored or eliminated by the colonial administration (Hutchinson 1996: 130–33). The sole 'functions' of the indigenous priesthood that were consciously preserved by the colonial administration were the blood-letting rite of *bier*, performed on the slayer, and the sacrifice of 'the cow of the gallbladder' (*yang ketha*), performed in conjunction with the transfer of bloodwealth cattle to the victim's family. Both of these rites were directed towards eliminating the dangers of *nueer* associated with substantive contacts between parties separated by a 'bone'.

Despite other minor and not-so-minor modifications to the ritual mechanisms Nuer had developed for containing the dangers of *nueer* (for details, see Hutchinson 1996: 122–33), widespread faith in this pollution complex remained a prominent element shaping local patterns of intra-ethnic violence through the outbreak of the second Sudanese civil war in 1983.

Moreover, Nuer images of 'the bone' proved eminently capable of encompassing broader fields of violent opposition between northern and southern Sudanese. During the 1980s and 1990s, I often heard rural Nuer men and women refer to the legacy of violent hostility created by decades of civil warfare as 'our bone with the Arabs'. Indeed, Nuer experiences of more peaceful relationships rooted in shared kinship, ethnic, regional and national 'identities' have been increasingly overshadowed in recent decades by their ever-intensifying, collective memory of this 'bone'.

Regional Variations in People's Experience of Gun Warfare: The Western Nuer

Widespread respect for the dangers of *nueer* was especially apparent in Nuer communities located west of the White Nile during the brief period of peace (1972–83) that separated the end of the first Sudanese civil war [redacted] the beginning of the second. Many Western Nuer communities had been mercifully spared the full brunt of the first civil war (1955–72), owing to an era of unusually high flooding (1961–72) which made the infiltration of southern secessionist forces into that area difficult. Unlike their more geographically exposed and militarily engaged cousins located east of the White Nile, Western Nuer villagers acquired very few guns during the course of that war. Consequently, they were far more vulnerable than their better-armed Eastern comrades to the predatory violence of government guns at the start of Sudan's present war in 1983.

During the early 1980s, government-sponsored Baggara Arab militias began raiding deep into Western Nuer territories, burning villages, stealing grain, capturing thousands of cattle, and carrying off hundreds of women and children in the process. Armed with little more than locally crafted spears, many Western Nuer communities experienced a sudden and unprecedented rise in the number of men lost to enemy bullets. In their efforts to cope with the sheer magnitude of these human losses, Western Nuer men and women began to memorialise these bullet victims in novel ways. Basically, Western Nuer villagers began to attribute deaths caused by bullets – as distinct from those caused by spears – to the direct intervention of that all-powerful and overarching 'Divinity of the Sky' (*kuoth nhial*). What is more, this uniquely direct spiritual linkage could be actively developed by surviving kinsmen through appropriate prayers and sacrifices into a protective spirit (known as *col wic*) and, thereafter, be effectively called upon in times of danger. In this way, Western Nuer villagers began to identify bullet victims with lightning victims in that both forms of death were thought to create a potentially powerful guardian spirit known as *col wic*. Properly honoured with periodic sacrifices and a small shrine, the spirit of a *col wic* could be turned into a protective force of goodness. Although other deaths caused by drowning and fires, as well as those that occurred deep within the bush without apparent cause, could also be assimilated into this category of spirit, the paradigmatic case was that of lightning victims. Significantly, the Nuer word for gun (*mac*) also means 'fire' – this being a shortened version of a linguistic distinction drawn between a *mut tang* ('spear with a wooden shaft') and a *mut mac* ('spear of fire') in earlier decades. And much like lightning, the 'fire' of a gun is always accompanied by a thunderous roar.

What merits special emphasis here, however, is that most contemporary Nuer consider the moral obligations of kinsmen to ensure one another's procreative immortality to be especially strong with respect to *col wic* spirits. Every *col wic* expects to be married to a 'ghost-wife' by surviving kinsmen, and that this obligation will take precedence over all other marriages. Failure to fulfil this divinely sanctioned obligation invites the

justified wrath of the spirit concerned. When properly respected and ritually honoured, however, *col wic* spirits were believed to be capable of protecting their supplicants from many life-threatening situations – including, many contemporary Western Nuer remarked, those involving bullets.

By 1986 or so, SPLA forces under the command of Riek Machar had succeeded in curtailing government-sponsored militia raids on Western Nuer regions south of the Bahr-al-Ghazal river. And it was shortly thereafter that Commander Machar became aware that local Nuer villagers were categorising bullet victims as *col wic* and, consequently, as persons for whom the marriage of a 'ghost-wife' was deemed essential. Fearing that this conceptual equation would cheapen the concept of *col wic* – which, he argued, was supposed to be an extremely rare phenomenon – the Commander immediately embarked on an ideological campaign to rupture this spiritual equation between bullet and lightning victims. The victims of government guns, he argued, should not be equated with *col wic* spirits but, rather, dissociated entirely from the social and spiritual consequences of homicides generated by local forms of inter-Nuer community fighting and feuding. The blood-letting rite of *bier*, he maintained, was likewise unnecessary in the context of a 'government war' (*koor kume*). The dangers of *nueer* simply did not exist in such cases.

This revolutionary redefinition of the meaning of violent deaths implied a weakening and distancing of the overarching role of Divinity as the ultimate guardian of human morality as well as of the ethical obligations of kinsmen to ensure the procreative immortality of relatives who die heirless. Whereas the Commander himself appeared convinced during a 1990 interview that his ideas were gaining widespread acceptance among Western Nuer, a 1996 field trip to that region revealed that these issues were still matters of tremendous debate and uncertainty among local citizens. For though unprecedented levels of poverty and mortality had forced many people to adopt more individually oriented strategies for daily survival by that time, many Western Nuer men and women I met during that research trip continued to voice profound concerns about the troubled ghosts and unfulfilled procreative aspirations of murdered family members. Moreover, many of these people continued to hope that these deaths would be appropriately 'memorialised' at some as yet unknown future time 'when the world becomes good again'. Other people were beginning to wonder whether or not what began as an 'emergency suspension' of the procreative obligations binding close kin would eventually prove permanent in the context of a seemingly endless state of civil war.

Regional Variations in People's Experience of Gun Warfare: The Eastern Nuer

Whereas the Western Nuer reacted to their first full-scale exposure to a 'government war' by reaffirming the mutual procreative obligations binding communities of kin through the elaboration of a symbolic analogy between bullet victims and lightning victims, the first response of the Eastern Nuer to both 'the government' and 'guns' was quite the opposite. Focusing more on the troubled consciences of the perpetrators of homicidal violence rather than on the emotions of surviving kin, many Eastern Nuer began to test the limits of divine tolerance in matters of intra-ethnic homicide during the course of the first civil war. Resorting to an informal yet highly pragmatic process of indirect 'experimentation', local community members began to observe known and/or suspected intra-ethnic killers in order to see whether or not they became ill after failing both to confess their deeds and to perform appropriate purificatory rites with the aid of an 'earth priest'. The result was that many Eastern Nuer began to suspect that the dangers of *nueer* were not equally grave in all cases of inter-Nuer homicide. Perhaps the 'blood curse' of the slain operated only in situations where assailant and victim were related or previously known to one another. Other people began to wonder whether the dangers of *nueer* varied with the type of weapon used in the killing. Whereas the power of a spear, many Eastern Nuer reasoned, issues directly from the bones and sinews of the person who hurls it, that of a gun is eerily internal to it: 'all a person does is aim it'. Whereas everyone appeared to agree during the 1980s and 1990s that to kill someone with a spear was to accept full responsibility for that death, many Easterners maintained that matters were much less clear in the case of inter-Nuer gun slayings. Not only were 'bullets' (*dei mac*, literally, 'a gun's calves') more prone to unintentional release, but once they had been fired, their trajectories – and hence their fatal consequences – were often impossible to trace accurately. Often fighters were uncertain as to whether or not they had slain someone.

In their efforts to cope with the sheer devastation experienced during the height of the first civil war (1963–72), the Eastern Jikany Nuer eventually developed new (gun-specific) purification rites, used first to supplement and later to replace the blood-letting rite of *bier*. This new purificatory rite became known as *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 – and that is all. From a historical perspective, it is perhaps not surprising that a rite that could be performed by anyone, anywhere, at any time, without disclosing the identity of the slayer, would have been

'dis[redacted]red' [redacted] th[redacted]ght [redacted] firs[redacted] wa[redacted] and [redacted] after avidly adopted throughout the east. As one contemporary Eastern Jikany man explained: 'No one stood up during the war and said "I killed someone" – death was everywhere!'

All this is to say that even without the increasingly heavy hand of southern military leaders, many Nuer fighters – especially Easterners – had already latched on to the mysterious inner force and ambiguous impact of guns in an effort to shed any residual feelings of personal accountability for their participation in a 'government war'. From the perspective of the perpetrators of violence, acts of homicide were supposed to be not only 'memoryless' and 'impersonal' but also completely devoid of all pollution risks when assailant and victim were previously unknown to each other.

Some of these developments derived from the materiality of guns themselves. The former sense of security gained from residing in a community with a large number of spear-bearing men was lost in a world dominated by semi-automatic rifles. The former centrality of human blood flows in triggering off states of *nueer* was gradually marginalised by the sheer 'fire' force of guns. Both the elaborate analogy drawn between bullet victims and lightning victims in the west and the emerging importance of 'the water of the cartridge shell' in the east entailed a major shift away from metaphors of blood towards those of temperature in people's attempts to comprehend the mysterious inner force and ambiguous impact of guns. In both cases, people's experience of increased vulnerability with respect to gun warfare was symbolically transformed into assertions of greater individual control over the social and spiritual consequences of homicide. What was originally experienced as a sudden, devastating loss of a loved one was symbolically transformed in the west into a spiritual force of protection which, when properly memorialised and honoured, could potentially protect surviving kin from further acts of gun-related violence as well as from other life-threatening situations. In contrast, the Eastern Nuer focused more on the emotional dis-ease generated by acts of intra-ethnic homicide in the context of a 'government war' from the killer's perspective. By secretly sipping a few drops of water from an empty cartridge shell, individual Eastern Nuer killers gained the ritually supported 'right', so to speak, to shed feelings of personal accountability for their murderous acts while simultaneously burying them from the public eye. The fact that the Western Nuer were, in general, far less experienced with 'government' warfare and with guns than were their well-armed Eastern cousins at the start of Sudan's current war may account in large part for the radically different perspectives these two groups adopted with respect to 'the problems of violence' and 'the politics [redacted] of [redacted] of memory'. Whereas many war-ravaged families in the west sought to memorialise gunshot victims by making them permanent additions to their personal, spiritual pantheons, Easterners, it would seem, were far more concerned about gaining ritualised permission to forget – or, at least, publicly suppress – the memory of their own homicidal acts.

Nevertheless, the fact that these developments occurred at a time when local cattle resources were falling and war-related mortality rates were rising meant that people's abilities to ensure the procreative immortality of murdered relatives were being severely strained. Recent attempts by the southern military leadership to dissociate the social and spiritual ramifications of homicides due to local feuding and fighting from the alleged 'finality' and 'individuality' of deaths generated by a 'government war' have continued to reinforce this trend towards a weakening of the procreative obligations binding communities of kinsmen. Consequently, the deep sense of personal security individual kinsmen derived from the former strength of these mutual procreative commitments has been dying in the context of the present civil war. At the same time, the gradual lifting of former restrictions on the types of weapons and violent tactics which could be used against neighbours and kin has culminated in levels of inter-community violence previously unknown in this region. It is as though Sudan's unresolved war had released the full violent thrust of a longstanding warrior ethos, without the moral qualms and ritual strictures that formerly held it in check. Cultivating and achieving this release, however, has by no means guaranteed the success of southern military leaders in directing and controlling its violent force – a fact that is amply apparent in the dramatic rise in both intra- and inter-ethnic homicide rates experienced throughout this region following the tragic 1991 split in the SPLA leadership. All major battle lines have become questioned and blurred.

In many ways, the entire fitful history of Nuer accommodation and resistance to the extension of 'government powers' into local forms of authority, co-operation and coercion has been rooted in this subtle politics of memory and loss. For as we have seen, the ebb and flow of governmental authority in this region has varied directly with ordinary people's willingness to accept, however reluctantly, that some slain relatives will be consigned to a kind of social and spiritual 'oblivion'. Perhaps government structures everywhere are likewise dependent on the enforced 'forgetting' of the violence that inevitably upholds them. Yet, be that as it may, these memory issues most certainly lie at the militarised heart of 'state-making' and 'state-breaking' processes in the contemporary southern Sudan. Moreover, this battle continues to be waged not only in the sphere of public debate but in the troubled hearts of all those Nuer who have killed, or

lost loved ones. Strong degrees of moral uncertainty – if not profound anxiety – remain in the mind of nearly everyone. Indeed, I suspect that even Commander Machar himself may wonder at times whether or not some personal tragedy carries with it a moral message from Divinity or God. The sudden, accidental loss of a loved one – even when it occurs far from the battlefield – may well provoke in him as well as in others thoughts about the possible involvement of the disapproving eye of God, the restless and avenging spirits of the dead, or simply the collective ill-will of envious enemies.

Notes

1. This chapter draws on more than two years of field and archival research carried out between 1980 and 1996. Initial funding for this research was provided by the Social Science Research Council (1980–83). Follow-up field trips to Sudan were supported by the Yale Center for International and Area Studies (1990), the National Endowment for the Humanities (1992) and the Graduate School of the University of Wisconsin-Madison (1996). I am deeply indebted to all of these institutions for their tremendous generosity. I also wish to thank Richard Werbner for the lively intellectual creativity and profound patience he demonstrated in pulling together this timely volume.

2. Sudan has been at war with itself since independence, with only a brief decade of relative calm separating the ending of the first civil war (1955–72) and the beginning of the second (1983–present). Sudan's unending strife is usually explained as a clash between a majority population in the north, identifying itself as 'Arab' and 'Muslim', and a long-suffering minority population in the south, identifying itself as 'black' and 'African' and, increasingly, 'Christian'. Although both northern and southern Sudan contain numerous ethnic and linguistic groups that crosscut these regional identifications, the fact remains that ever since Sudan declared independence from Britain and Egypt in 1956, 'southerners' as a group have been marginalised by a national state government dominated by 'Arab' and 'Muslim' interests. In recent decades, these tensions have been fuelled by intensifying regional, national and international competition for control over the vast, untapped mineral and water resources of the south. These resources include some 970 million barrels of proven oil reserves located in, primarily, Nuer regions of the Western Upper Nile Province.

3. Unfortunately, I am unable to spell Nuer terms used in this publication context with full accuracy, owing to the fact that I must limit myself to the letters of the English alphabet. More accurate Nuer spellings can be found in Hutchinson (1996).

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CHAPTER 3

Smoke from the Barrel of a Gun: Postwars of the Dead, Memory and Reinscription in Zimbabwe

Richard Werbner

The Postcolonial Shift from the Modern Memorials of the Nation-State

The biopolitics of remembered identity in the nation-state have never been the same since the First World War. With that watershed in modern warfare, marked by conscription and mass death in the trenches, came new, modern ways of memorialising the common soldier. The change was – at least for the Great Powers – a radical shift in the command by the state over the identities of the war dead. The state reached well beyond its old limits; it encompassed painstakingly, as never before, the individuality of the fallen common soldier. The state no longer tolerated that unsacralised oblivion for the dead which left common soldiers anonymous, missing without trace, and, worse still, beyond the pale of the commemorated nation. Instead, their names, their dates of birth and death, their bodies and last resting places, all became the object of elaborate state remembrance, equally for all, on an unprecedented scale. This standardised practice, so distinctively the modern democracy of death, appeared most strikingly in the making for the first time of mass military cemeteries with row after row of uniform graves on standardised plots for individuals. Earlier wars had left the dead scattered and haphazardly named, often in common graves.

The historian Thomas W. Laqueur, who finds a precise date for the change, in January 1915, remarks: 'a new era of remembrance began: the era of the common soldier's name or its self-conscious and sacralized oblivion' (1994: 152). Note the paradoxical linkage: it is an era of both the *common soldier's name* and its *oblivion*. For the sake of preserving and remembering the names of individual common soldiers, 'both during the war and after, the state poured enormous human, financial, administrative,