

Unit 3

EARLY SOCIETIES IN SOUTH SUDAN

Introduction

In the 19th Century, Africa witnessed a lot of changes in her social, political and economic organisation. Before 19th Century, African societies evolved without any foreign influence. Most African societies later organised into small political units with no chiefs or kings.

In the early years of the 1st Century, there was the development of many states in the continent. States rose and conquered those which were weak. With a vast land to control, there was the need for a centralised form of governance.

Activity 1

Centralised and decentralised societies in South Sudan

South Sudan had various societies during the pre-colonial period. Some of the societies in South Sudan were centralised while others were decentralised.

Characteristics of centralised societies

Source 1



Pair work

The source above shows images of drawings and a building that date from times when there were centralised societies in what is now South Sudan. What do the images suggest about the characteristics of centralised societies?

- a) Centralised societies had one overall political leader who had a lot of power. The overall political leader was either a king or a queen or an emperor.
- b) Centralised societies had a standing army which defended the community during war.

Characteristics of decentralised societies

- a) In decentralised communities, political power was not in the hands of one person but in a group of people like the council of elders.
- b) Decentralised communities had warriors who defended the community.

There are many examples to give in South Sudan of centralised and decentralised communities. The Shilluk, Azande and Anyuak (Anywaa) were centralised communities while the Dinka and Nuer were decentralised societies.

Activity 2

The Shilluk Kingdom (1490-1865)

The Shilluk Kingdom is also known as the Chollo Kingdom. The Shilluk are part of the Luo Nilotes group. The Shilluk were a centralised community. They are also known as the Chollo. Their kingdom was situated on the banks of the White Nile. Its capital was at Fashoda. It was founded in mid-15th Century by a man known as Nyikang. He is said to have quarreled with some of his relatives and parted with them. He migrated to a different location with his followers who were then known as the Shilluk. He was regarded as a semi-god. The Shilluk kingdom was therefore a sacred monarchy.

Political organisation of the Shilluk

Source 2

The Shilluk king, or reth, was indeed said to embody a divine being—a god or at least a demi-god—in the person of Nyikang, the legendary founder of the Shilluk nation. Every king was Nyikang. The reth was not supposed to die a natural death. He might fall in battle with the nation's enemies. He might be killed in single combat after a rival prince demanded a duel, as they had a right to do, or be suffocated by his own wives or retainers if he was seen to be physically failing (a state which was indeed seen to lead to poor harvests or natural catastrophes). On his death, though, Seligman emphasised, Nyikang's spirit left him and entered a wooden effigy. Once a new reth was elected,

the candidate had to raise an army and fight a mock battle against the effigy's army in which he was first defeated and captured, then, having been possessed by the spirit of Nyikang, which passed from effigy back into his body, emerged victorious again.



Pair work

1. Discuss the sequence of events that are or might be involved in the transition from one King or Reth to his successor.
2. Present these events in form of a flow diagram.

The Shilluk Kingdom was a sacred monarchy ruled over by a king whose title was **Reth**. The Reth was a symbol of political unity. The kingdom was divided into two provinces; Gar (North) and Lak (South). The people lived in groups of villages known as **Podho**. There were fifteen **provinces** each under a Paramount Chief. The Chief was responsible to the Reth. Each village had its own military and a military leader. The position of the king was hereditary. The king appointed chiefs to help him rule the kingdom. Each king after Nyikango is believed to have possessed his spirit. The selection and installation of a Reth was an elaborate ceremony full of rituals.

Economic organisation

- a) The Shilluk had good land for planting crops. They therefore practised crop cultivation and kept few cattle. They planted millet, beans, maize, sesame, pumpkin and sorghum. Men and women took part in agriculture. They also produced gum.
- b) They were semi-nomadic cattle keepers as crop farming made them live a more sedentary life to take care of the crops. Men looked after livestock and milked cattle.
- c) They raided their neighbours for cattle too.
- d) They practised fishing in River Nile.
- e) They hunted animals and gathered wild leaves to supplement their meals. Men hunted while women and children gathered wild fruits and leaves.



Fig. 3.1 Shilluk king

- f) They were also traders. They carried out small scale trade with Arabs and neighbouring communities.
- g) The Shilluk were also craftsmen. They made jewellery, spears and daggers.

Social organisation

The family (gol) or Kalo was the smallest social unit. The father was the head of the family.

The society was divided into social classes. The first social class was the Royal house (Kwa Reth). Reth means King so these were the descendants of Nyikang. It was from this social class that a king was chosen. After the Kwa Reth were the ororo. They were the commoners. These were former members of the royal family who were disinherited of their royalty. Next were the Chollo who were descendants of non Shilluk people who settled in Shilluk territory.

The last class was the Bang Reth. This was a class owned by the king. They included his royal wives and widows of dead kings. Others in this group were descendants of slaves captured in raids.

The Shilluk were polygamous. Bride price was normally in form of livestock. Marriage to a relative was prohibited. Divorce was rare but if it happened, the bride price had to be returned.

Boys were initiated into adulthood through a dance ceremony. After initiation, the boy was allowed to have his own sorghum field and marry. The Reth interceded for the whole community.

Decline of the Shilluk Kingdom

Attacks from the Ottoman Empire and colonisation of Sudan by the British led to the decline of the kingdom.

Today, the Shilluk still have their King but he is not an independent political leader. He operates under the South Sudan constitution.



Class work

1. Research on the Shilluk community using a range of sources including, someone from the community if possible.
2. Find out as much as you can about the community including how elections for a new Reth took place.

Activity 3

The Azande Kingdom

The Azande are a Bantu community. The Azande means the people who possess much land. The Azande people are found in present day Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan and in the Central Africa Republic. The Azande Kingdom was created through military conquests and was ruled by two different dynasties; the Banda dynasty and the Vungara dynasty. In South Sudan, they live in the Central and Western equatorial states of Yei, Maridi, Yambio and Tambura or Tumbura. The word Azande means people who possess much land. They were fierce warriors who were able to acquire a lot of land through conquests.

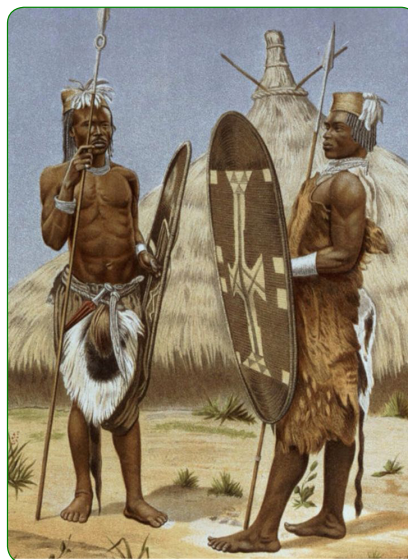


Fig. 3.2 Azande warriors

Political organisation

They were ruled by Kings. The kingdom was made up of many tribal kingdoms ruled by the Vungara dynasty. After a King's death, the sons would fight for the seat. The losing sons would move and establish kingdoms in neighbouring areas. This made the Azande Kingdom spread far and wide especially Eastwards and Northwards.

Each kingdom was divided into provinces.

The king appointed chiefs to help him rule.

The kingdom had a strong army which was feared by many.

Economic organisation

1. In the Azande Kingdom, roles were gender based. The Zande were iron workers. They made iron knives, bows, arrows and swords.
3. They were also mixed farmers. They kept animals like cattle and grew crops like millet and sorghum. They practised shifting cultivation.
4. They hunted animals to supplement their meal.
5. They traded with their neighbours.
6. They made pots and baskets to store food and water.
7. They made baskets from barks and palm leaves.

Social organisation

They lived in villages made up of related clans. Their houses were made of mud. It is the men who built huts.

They believed in a supreme god called **Mboli** to whom they prayed and offered sacrifice.

The society was divided into two. The **Avungara** who were related to their great leader Gbudwe and his two sons Yambio and Tambura. The second group was the **Amborrou** whose cradle land was the valleys of River Mbomu. Then there were the commoners who were not Zande but were captured in wars of conquest and assimilated. The commoners were also called Auro.

They had a strong belief in witchcraft. They believe that witchcraft was an inherited substance located in the belly of a person. Many wore charms to protect them from bad spirits. Chiefs used witchcraft on persons who had committed crime especially big crimes like adultery and murder. The witchcraft was able to determine who had committed a crime. Thieves were punished by having their ears cut.

Source 3

Azande Witchcraft

- (1937) *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* by Evans-Pritchard.
 - This publication put the Azande (southern Sudan and northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo) on the map. Anthropology-wise and made Evans-Pritchard famous.
- Witchcraft or **mangu** exists within the body of an individual. Passed down from parent to child of the same sex (father → son, mother → daughter).
- Important to the Azande is whether or not a person is consciously (or unconsciously) directing their **mangu** to harm someone else.
 - Witches are never strangers or those in a superior social position.
 - If someone is sick, various oracles are consulted. If the oracles point to witchcraft as the source of the sickness, authorities confront the accused witch.
 - In order to reverse the harmful affects of his/her **mangu** the individual will perform a ritual that involves taking water into his/her mouth and then spitting it out, therefore cooling the **mangu**.
 - **Mangu** is blamed when an unexpected calamity occurs. The afflicted person must be the object of a witch's hatred/jealousy/etc. in some way.





Pair work

1. The source summarises some of the Azande beliefs about witchcraft as explained by the anthropologist, Evans-Pritchard, in 1937. What are their central beliefs about witches? What do they believe can happen as a result of Mangu?
2. Do you believe in witchcraft? Do your people practise witchcraft? Discuss with your friend how they carry out the practise.

The Zande were polygamous. Bride price was in form of iron spears. Men who could not afford the bride price could at times arrange to marry each other's sisters so they had no spears to pay. Kings at times gave spears to the court pages to enable them marry.

The Zande circumcised their boys.

They also performed dances especially at night during full moon.



Work to do

1. Draw a table like the one below in your notebooks. Write down the social, political and economic similarities between the Shilluk and the Azande. An example has been given.

	Political similarities	Social similarities	Economic similarities
1.	They were both headed by a king.	Marriages were polygamous in both communities.	They all participated in trade.

Activity 4

The Anyuak (Anywaa) Kingdom

The Anywaa people called themselves Anywaa (singular) Anywaae (plural). Others, particularly their neighbours simply know them as Anyuak. The Anywaa land originally was the stretch of territory extending along the Sobat River with its tributaries of Baro, Alworo, Gilo (draining western Ethiopia) and Akobo, Oboth, Agwei-Pibor. The Anyuak are part of the Luo Nilotes group. They were centralised community. The Anyuak kingdom headquarters is in Otalo in Adongo clan.



Fig. 3.3 His Majesty King Adongo Agada, the 23rd King of the Anyuak Kingdom

Socio-Political Organisation of the Anyuak

Source 4

The kingdom of Anyuak was originally divided into two large clans: *Tung Goc* and *Tung nyo-Odolla*, which were perpetually feuding and competing for dominance. The Anyuak settled in big villages along the Akobo, Baro, Alworo, Oboth, Agwei and Dikony (Pibor) Rivers. Each Anyuak village has a King (Nyiya), chief (kwaro) and Kway-Luak (sub chief) in control of the social and administrative matters of the village. The Anyuak society is communal. It is obligatory to share resources and assist one another in times of famine and diseases. The Anyuak are strongly religious and have strong beliefs in

spirits. The Anyuak king (Nyiya) does not die but returns to the river. When the King discovers that he can no longer hold on, he secretly whisper to his trustees his successor (usually son, brother or a cousin). When the king has already returned to the river, the new king is placed on Ocwok (royal throne and bead).



Pair work

1. Analyse how social and administrative matters are controlled in the Anyuak villages.
Present your work to the class.

The Anyuak kingdom used to be a federation of villages. The village is the largest political and economic unit in the Anyuak community. A village community is generally associated with lineage of some clans. Each village is headed by an independent king or chief. The villages headed by kings (Niyiae) were constantly feuding among themselves for the control of Ocwok (the royal throne and bead). This state of insecurity prompted the British colonial administration to make Nyiya Agada Akway Cham king of kings ostensibly after the Ethiopian feudal system (Emperor Haile Sellasie was king of kings) rendering the Ocwok to permanently remain in his possession. All other kings come to his court to be put on Ocwok or enthroned.

Economic Organisation

1. Lying in the plains below the Ethiopian highlands, Anywaa land has the characteristics of marsh land, rich savannah forest and grassland with annual rainfall of about 800mm. This has tremendous influence on the economy and lifestyle of Anywaa people.
2. They are predominantly subsistence agriculturalists growing sorghum, maize, sesame, beans, pumpkin, and tobacco. They raise cattle, goats and fowl, which are used for trade and sacrifices to the spirits. The cattle raiding practice of their neighbors, has discouraged them from keeping large herds of cattle.

3. Anywaa-land has a huge potential in wildlife especially large game such as elephants, giraffes, buffaloes, etc. The annual migration of the white ear cobs pass through Anywaa-land, which become a yearly source of proteins but has a huge potential for tourist attraction. There is also a potential for exploiting the shea nuts, acacia Senegalese (gum Arabia) and lalob which are abound in the forest.
4. The practice fishing in the following Rivers: Akobo, Baro, Gilo, Alworo, Oboth, Agwei, and Dikony (Pibor).
5. They practice blacksmith to make, fishing spear, hunting spear (fighting spear), knives, cultivating tools and dancing tools (gaari).
6. The Anywaa youth extract gold nuggets and dust from the streams that drain the western Ethiopian highlands near Dima and Maji. The gold extracted is used for trade with Ethiopian highlanders or exchanged for dimuy-beads as well as settling marriages.

Social Organisation

1. The Anyuak are strongly religious and have strong beliefs in spirits. They belief that when one dies his or her spirit comes back. One could communicate with the departed through a medium. Anyuak attach importance to *Acieni* (curse) or *gieth* (blessing). The two create order in Anyuak society. For instance, before a person dies, he confides their will to somebody, who declares himself as the trustee of the will once the death is announced.
2. Marriage is expected of every adolescent. He pays bride price in demuy, cattle and sometimes money. The tradition of money started with the Ethiopian Anyuak and has now become common due to the scarcity of the demuy.
3. Marriage to blood relatives is highly discouraged such that the social stigma can force one to find ease by going to live in a far off place.
4. They are polygamous. The Anyuak participate in the marriage of more than one wife. This is see as a mode of continuing the community.

5. The Anyuak have typical naming system. The first born is called Omot (boy) or Amot (girl), the second born is called Ojulo (boy) or Ajulo (girl) the third born is called Obang (boy) or Abang (girl). The twin Opiew (boy) and Apiew, Ochan (girl). A child born after twins is called Okello (boy) or Akello (girl). A child whose father dies before he or she was born is called Agawa (both boys and girls). Ochalla (boy) or Achalla (girl) is a child born for a dead brother.
6. The Anyuak literature is orally expressed in form of poems, songs, folktales, riddles, and stories. These are passed down from one generation to another.
7. The main music instruments included used by the Anyuak include; thom (guitar), bul (drum), tung (horn), odola (small drum).



Fig. 3.4 King (Nyiya), Adongo Agada Akway performing royal dancing (Agwaga) after enthronement, May 2001. He is the 23rd king of the Anyuak kingdom. In May 2003, a peace agreement between the Anyuak and the Murle was sealed in Otalo under the auspice of Nyiya Adongo Agada Akway

Activity 5

The Nuer

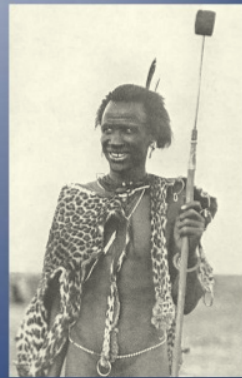
They live in the upper Nile valley. They are Nilotes. The Nuer people were a decentralised society. They are believed to be related to the Dinka by blood. Some people claim that in the past the descendants of the Nuer and Dinka were children of the same father.

Source 4

The Nuer and the Dinka

The Nuer feel closer to the Dinka than to other groups of strangers. They fought together in the SPLA and often speak of each other as cousins. At the same time, the Nuer show greater hostility toward the Dinka than toward other strangers.

"The nearer people are to the Nuer in mode of livelihood, language, and customs, the more intimately the Nuer regard them, the more easily they enter into relations of hostility with them and the more easily they fuse with them...Nuer make war against a people who have a culture like their own" — Evans-Pritchard.



Pair work

Study the source above and answer the following questions.

1. What apparent contradiction does the source suggest about the attitudes of the Nuer towards other tribes?
2. Do you think the anthropologist would come to the same conclusion today? Give reasons for your answer.

Political Organisation

- (a) The largest political organ was the tribe. The tribes were subdivided by lineage.
- (b) Tribes made up a clan. Clans lived together in villages under a headman.
- (c) They were led by religious leaders who were like chiefs.
- (d) When several clans faced danger they could come and stay together to form a strong defence then separate after the threat was over.

- (e) Disputes in the society were solved by the religious chiefs who were known as **kwar**.

Economic organisation

1. They were nomadic pastoralists. Cattle were their dearest possessions. A family's prestige was equivalent to the number of cattle they owned. Families lived around communal cattle camps. They preferred being named after their cattle. They dedicated their cattle to spirits.
2. They raided cattle from their neighbours especially the Dinka. To them raiding the Dinka was normal and a duty. Every Nuer tribe raided the Dinka.
3. Women performed rituals to bless men before raids and safe return.
4. They fished in the Nile River.
5. They cultivated millet and maize.
6. The Nuer were traders. They traded with the Dinka, Anyuak and the Shilluk who were their neighbours.

Social organisation

1. They believed in a supreme god called Kwoth. They offered sacrifices to him. They believed that God visited men through natural things like rain or thunder, the moon or the sun. They believed the rainbow is the necklace of God.
2. They had religious leaders like diviners and healers.
3. They believed in spirits.
The spirits of the air were the most powerful.
4. Facial markings were done to initiate one into adulthood. The cuttings are known as **Gaar**. The patterns differed according to the tribe one belonged to. In some it involved six cuts across the forehead.
5. They built circular houses with mud walls.
6. They had many ceremonial rituals.
7. Their marriages took place in stages. A marriage was not complete until a woman bore at least two children. Then it was fully complete after she bore the third child.

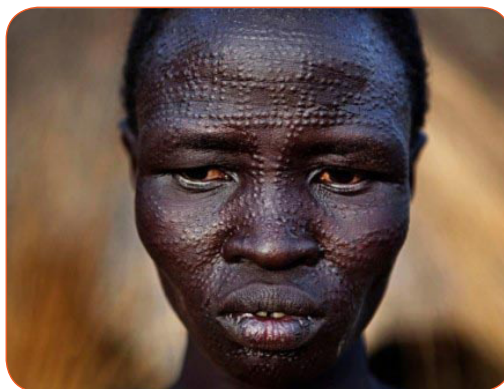


Fig. 3.5 Nuer woman

8. Their marriages were polygamous. They were also exogamous. A man could not marry a woman of the same clan as his. They also had 'ghost' marriages.
9. Barren women were allowed to "take a wife" of their own. The children born from such a marriage were hers though they had been fathered by men.
10. They practised circumcision of their males though not all the time. They used to circumcise at times as a ritual to cleanse someone who has committed incest.
11. Members of a clan shared a totem.



Class work

Hold a class discussion with your teacher on marriage in the Nuer community.

- (a) Ghost marriages and how they worked.
- (b) Marriages involving barren women.
- (c) Polygamous and exogamous marriages.

Activity 6

The Dinka

They are the largest ethnic group in South Sudan. They also call themselves the **Jieng**. They are River Lake Nilotes. They are among the tallest people in the world.

Political organisation

They were a decentralised community organised in clans. They had leaders from ruling families who ruled over the people. These leaders were ritual chiefs who were believed to have healing powers. They were known as **Beny Bith** or masters of fishing.

Men who had undergone scarification became known as **Parapuol** and formed the warriors of the community.

Economic organisation

1. The Dinka men made carved fishing hooks and spears.
2. Dinka women weaved baskets and sleeping mats from papyrus.
3. They made pots and leather belts from animal skin.
4. They were pastoralists. They kept large herds of cattle.
5. They were also traders. They traded with the Nuer in cattle, grain and ivory.



Fig. 3.6 Dinka cows



Fig. 3.7 Dinka cattle luak

Social organisation

Young men were inducted into adulthood through markings on their forehead. This is called **scarification** or **tattooing**. This was done from the ages of 10 to 16. Those who screamed or blinked during scarification were considered weak.

After their scarification they named themselves after the colours of their cattle.

They held traditional dances for various occasions like marriage.

They practised wrestling which was a very popular sport.

Polygamy was practised especially among the rich.

Women were valued very much as sources of wealth through bride price.

They built round mud huts.

They mostly walked naked especially the men. Women dressed skimpily in small goat skin skirts.

The Western Dinka practised circumcision while many Eastern Dinka did not.



Fig. 3.8 Dinka girl

Source 5

a)

THE DINKA AND NUER TRIBE



Dinka tribe markings ^



Nuer tribe markings ^

b)

You are a Dinka, I am a Nuer, Kiir is the President, Dr. Riek is opposition Leader. You are poor; I am poor (by their standards). Both of them are wealthy and call one another brother and every time they meet, they hug. I and you have one thing in common, poverty.

The fact that you come from the President's home base does not make you any better than me.

Neither does the fact that I come from Opposition Leader's Region make me worth than you. We both have to struggle to survive. The day we will start thinking beyond our tribes, we shall make this country a better place and a place where there is no room for "tribalism". It starts with you and me my dear brothers and sisters of the soil. It's time for you and me to start hugging. Let's embrace the peace! It's time for peace to prevail. Do not wait for Leaders, it start with us. One South Sudan and One Nation!"

~Peter Pal Dekur

DDM



Pair work

1. Discuss the similarities of Dinka people and Nuer people from the two sources above.
2. What is the common message of the two authors from the sources above?



Work to do

1. Draw a table like the one below in your notebooks. Write the social, political and economic similarities between the decentralised societies we have discussed.

	Political similarities	Social similarities	Economic similarities
1.			
2.			
3.			

2. Draw another table and in it, write the difference in social, political and economic organisation of the decentralised and centralised societies we have discussed.

NEW WORDS

Early societies:	These are societies that existed before modern time period dating below 18 th Century.
Centralised societies:	These are societies with a single rule with all the powers.
Decentralised societies:	Societies whose power is shared among groups of people for example, council of elders.
Kingdom:	A country, territory or state ruled by king or queen.
Polygamous:	A type of marriage which allows man to marry more than one wife.
Exogamous:	Marrying outside one's tribe or clan.
Diviners:	Specialists who confer or provoke spirits. Have special powers.
Nomadic:	Movement of domestic animals from one place to another in search of pasture.
Pastoralists:	People who keep animals as their only economic activity.
Rituals:	Cultural occasions with different significant meaning.

End of Unit Exercise

1. It is believed that there were many factors that led to the formation of centralised and decentralised societies. Discuss them with your friend.
2. Why did many Kingdoms collapse in what is now South Sudan in the mid 19th Century?
3. Describe the political organisation of the Nuer in the pre-colonial period.
4. Describe common social practices in the communities we have studied.
5. How was sacrifice done among the Dinka?