

PERCY CORIAT ON THE NUER

Percy Coriat (1898-1960) spent nearly ten years, from 1922 to 1931, as an administrator among the Nuer, and, as the first British official who became fully conversant in Nuer,¹ he counts as the first administrator who could be considered an authority on them. It is unfortunate that he published only two pieces (*The Gaweir Nuers* [1923] and '*Gwek the Witch-Doctor and the Pyramid of Dengkur*' [1939]),² and only one of them (1939) has become generally known to those interested in the Nuer. He is better known through references about him in other persons' writings. He is mentioned in two administrative memoirs (C. Borradaile ('Ben Assher'), *A Nomad in the South Sudan*, London 1928, pp. 222-3; and V.H. Fergusson, *The Story of Fergie Bey*, London 1930, pp. 283-6), and he is the source of much information on the Gaawar in H.C. Jackson's early article on the Nuer ('The

¹C.H. Stigand, who was Inspector at Nasir in 1915-16 and Governor of Upper Nile Province in 1916-18, was one of the few early administrators who had any linguistic training in African languages. His *A Nuer-English Vocabulary* (Cambridge 1923) which was published posthumously, however, shows traces of having been put together with the aid of a Dinka interpreter. V.H. Fergusson worked exclusively through Dinka and Atuot interpreters. John Lee, Assistant District Commissioner at Nasir in 1921-29, also became fluent in Nuer at the same time Coriat did, but unfortunately he committed less to paper than almost any other administrator among the Nuer.

²A selected annotated bibliography of the writings of Percy Coriat is provided below, at the end of this article.

Nuer of Upper Nile Province', *Sudan Notes and Records* [hereafter *SNR*], VI:2 [1923], p. 162). He is also referred to occasionally by E.E. Evans-Pritchard (cf. 'The Nuer: Tribe and Clan', *SNR*, XVI: 1, XVII: 1, XVIII: 1 [1933-5]; *The Nuer*, Oxford 1940; *Nuer Religion*, Oxford 1956, *passim*), by B.A. Lewis ('Nuer Spokesmen. A Note on the Institution of the *Rulo*', *SNR*, XXXII: 1 [1951], p. 83) and P.P. Howell (*A Manual of Nuer Law*, London 1954, *passim*). None of these references gives a coherent picture of his work or his knowledge of the Nuer.

As yet no single library or archive has a comprehensive collection of his writings. This would be a difficult collection to compile, for most of what he wrote is found in government correspondence and brief reports. Some of his papers can be found in the Central Records Office, Khartoum (CRO) and in Rhodes House, Oxford. The majority of his most important reports are still to be found in Upper Nile Province where he served, and these are scheduled to be transferred to the Southern Regional Records Office (SRRO) in Juba in 1982. Some of his correspondence referring to the districts in present-day Jonglei Province have already been transferred to Juba. The collection of the SRRO will inevitably be incomplete, because of the attrition government documents have suffered in the district headquarters of the Southern Region. None of Coriat's papers on the Lou were found in Akobo, to which they were transferred in 1935, and none on the Gaawar and Zaraf Nuer were found in New Fangak when both these headquarters were visited this year. Some copies of his reports have, surprisingly, been found in Nasir, where he never served, and correspondence has also been found in Bor, a district with which he had numerous dealings. Most of his existing reports have been found in Malakal, and more may yet be found in Bentiu.

This article is a brief survey of the most important of Coriat's papers which have so far come to light. It will also give a summary of his career among the Nuer, and an assessment of the value of Coriat's papers for any study of the Nuer. In the near future some of his government reports may become more accessible to researchers, and some such assessment must be made if his work is to take its proper place in Nuer ethnography.

Percy Coriat served in the Middle East during World War One, and in 1921 he went to the Sudan employed by the Sudan Cotton, Fuel and Industrial Development Company. The company soon went bankrupt, leaving Coriat stranded at a station in Lake No on the White Nile. He was recruited into the Sudan Political Service by the Governor of Upper Nile Province, K.C.P. Struvé, in 1922 and was immediately sent as an Assistant District Commissioner to the small outpost of Ayod among the Bar Gaawar. Here he took the unprecedented, and never repeated, step of staying in his district during the rainy season. It was during the rains of 1922, cut off from all other British government officials, that he learned to speak Nuer and established many ties of personal friendship with the Gaawar, including the prophet Dual Diu. In 1923 the Lou Nuer were included in his district, and in 1924 his headquarters were transferred from Ayod (which was considered too isolated) to Abwong on the Sobat river. Abwong had the advantage

of direct and year-round contact with Malakal, but as an administrative centre for the Nuer it had certain disadvantages, the first being that it was situated in Ngok Dinka country, and the second that it was rather distant from the Gaawar and even some Lou. Between 1924 and 1926 all of the Gaawar and Zaraf Nuer were transferred from Coriat's jurisdiction to that of the administrative centre of Fangak on the Bahr al-Zaraf.

Coriat served as Political Officer on the patrol sent to the Gaawar in 1928 following the outbreak of hostilities with the Lou. He also served in the campaigns against the Lou throughout 1928-9. From 1929 to 1931 he served as District Commissioner for the Western Nuer. By the end of his career among the Nuer Coriat had administered all but the Eastern Jikany, and he personally provided a good deal of coherence and continuity to Nuer administration throughout the province in this formative period. Three of the most important administrators among the Nuer in the 1930s - Wedderburn-Maxwell and Captains Alban and Romilly - benefited directly from his experience and advice.

In 1932 Coriat left Upper Nile Province and served in other parts of the Southern Sudan until transferred to Kordofan in 1935. He served in the Sudan Defence Force from 1941 to 1945 and ended the war in Libya in command of a Nuba battalion. From 1946 to 1953 he was part of the administration of Tripolitania, and in 1954-5 he was commander-in-chief of the Muscat & Oman Field Force. He died in 1960.

Coriat is remembered among the Gaawar and Lou as a harsh man who 'tamed' the Nuer, and a number of stories are still told about his summary justice and his role in the pacification campaigns. His horse made an almost equally strong impression on the Nuer, and Coriat on his horse riding down the Nuer is a picture still frequently recalled. It is even said that his eye was poked out by the branch of a thorn tree when he was chasing fugitives through a forest during the Nuer Settlement, though in fact he lost his eye in battle during World War One. For all his remembered harshness he is also remembered with admiration and affection by many older persons who knew him. The fact that he was capable of strong personal friendships with individual Nuer is a point told in his favour. His friendship with Dual Diu is well known, and to a certain extent the war between the Gaawar and the government is attributed, unfairly, to a falling out between the two men. It is clear from a number of his letters that Coriat regarded Dual as a friend throughout the hostilities and had some reservations about government actions against him.

Of all the Nuer Coriat knew the Gaawar best, and his experiences there coloured his view of other Nuer. This is particularly evident in his assessment of the nineteenth century. During the 1860s and 1870s the Gaawar had been the target of intensive slave-raiding. This created a number of deep divisions in Gaawar society as some sections allied with the slavers against others. Coriat's description of the impact of the slavers on Gaawar society (*The Gaweir Nuers* [1923], p. 3) was gathered from persons who had lived through the events of the nineteenth

century and follows very closely the account given by the Bar Gaawar today.³ Coriat assumed that other parts of Nuerland suffered the same sort of devastation and attributed the dispersal of Lou clans and lineages to the breakdown of social order that followed Arab raids ('Notes on a paper on Nuer read by Mr. O. [sic] Evans-Pritchard at a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, September 1931'; also 'Gwek the Witch-Doctor', p. 225). This was clearly not the case as the Lou suffered very little from slave-raids in the nineteenth century. The impact of the slavers on the Nuer was a point on which he and Evans-Pritchard disagreed (Coriat 'Notes' [1931], Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, p. 133). It is clear from Evans-Pritchard's more detailed descriptions of segmentary fission and the dispersal of kin that the 'social disorganization' that Coriat attributed to the slavers was really the product of Nuer expansion when kin groups lost their territorial cohesion. In assigning the cause to the effect, Coriat underestimated the impact of the slavers on Western Nuer society because it showed fewer signs of 'disorganization' ('Report on Eastern District (Nuers) Bahr el Ghazal Province' [1931]). In fact the Western Nuer had been exposed to slave-raiding far longer than any other Nuer region, but they had expanded less and had not experienced the same sort of mixing that Evans-Pritchard described for the Nuer of the east.

Most of the other aspects of Gaawar life and history that Coriat recorded (*The Gaweir Nuers* [1923]; 'Settlement of Ol Dinka-Gaweir Boundary Dispute' [1926]; 'Transfer of Barr Gaweir to Zeraf Valley District' [1926]) can be corroborated by modern Gaawar testimony. Because of the brevity of his 1923 pamphlet some of what Coriat has written could be misleading to a casual reader. It is only as one becomes more familiar with the Gaawar that the importance of some of his more cryptic passages becomes apparent. His writing on the Gaawar refers mostly to the Bar rather than the Radh. He gives a different list of age-sets for the Gaawar than Howell does, for example, but Coriat's is a list for the Bar of the Duk ridge, while Howell's is a list for the Radh Gaawar and the Lak and Thiang inhabitants of the Zeraf island (Coriat, *The Gaweir Nuers* [1923], p. 22; P.P. Howell, 'The Age-Set System and the Institution of "Nak" among the Nuer', *SNR*, XXIX: 2 [1948], p. 179).

Coriat's descriptions of the Lou ('General Report S8 (Lau Nuer) Patrol' [1928], 'Nuer Settlement - Guncol Area Report'

³Some of Coriat's information on Gaawar history may have been derived from K.C.P. Struvé, who as Inspector in Upper Nile Province before World War One published a fair amount on the nineteenth century in the Sudan Intelligence Reports and the Governor-General's annual reports on the Sudan. It should be noted here that Coriat was consistently inaccurate in his dates for events in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

[1929], 'Gwek the Witch-Doctor' [1939]) are more at variance with modern Nuer testimony than his material on the Gaawar. This seems to be a result of the fact that while stationed at Abwong Coriat did not have the same access to as wide a range of sources among the Lou as he had for the Gaawar at Ayod. His accounts of Ngundeng and Guek seem drawn mostly from sources antagonistic to the two prophets, and he did rely a great deal on three of their personal enemies: Guet Thic, Lam Tutthiang, and Lam's son Mayan, a government interpreter at Abwong (all three are mentioned in 'Southern (Abwong) District (Handing over Notes)' [1929]).

On the subject of religion Coriat is again at variance with Evans-Pritchard on some major points. He shared with other administrators a prejudice against 'witchdoctors' of all sorts and was not particularly careful in distinguishing between diviners, magicians, priests and prophets (*The Gaweir Nuers* [1923], pp. 19-20, 22-3; 'Notes' [1931]). On two points, however, he seems to have been better informed than Evans-Pritchard. The first was his observation that priests, too, were inspired by a *kuoth* (*ibid.*). This is *kuoth rieng* (Divinity of the Flesh), though he does not name it as such. Evans-Pritchard rather underestimated the importance of this *kuoth* in his analysis of the priests, preferring to call it 'priestly virtue' (*Nuer Religion*, pp. 109-10, 299), thus presenting the priest as more removed from Divinity than he actually is. The second point was the political or secular influence of the Lou prophet Ngundeng. Coriat was quite correct in attributing extensive secular influence to Ngundeng ('Notes' [1931]), a point that Evans-Pritchard consistently denied (*SNR* [1935], p. 56; *The Nuer*, p. 188).

The Coriat Papers at Rhodes House, Oxford

There are only four reports of any particular ethnographic interest on the Nuer in the Rhodes House collection, and the rest of the papers contain fragmental autobiographical notes, some papers covering his service elsewhere in the Sudan,⁴ and letters to his wife during most of his career in the Sudan Political Service, the Sudan Defence Force and the Muscat and Oman Field Force (see *Mss. Afr. s. 1684*). There are forty-nine letters (a total of three hundred and thirty pages) from the years 1924-31 in Upper Nile Province. Much in the letters is of

⁴Of some ethnographic interest are his comments on the Tuleshi, which are found in his letters from Kordofan and his report on the removal of the Tuleshi from their hill villages in 1945. There are also photographs of the Tuleshi and Mrs. Coriat's own comments on the Tuleshi operations. Additional notes on Kordofan by Edward Aglen (a copy of which has been deposited in the library of the Institute of Social Anthropology, Oxford) are also found in the Coriat papers in Rhodes House.

a personal nature, but a good deal describes his administrative work and the personalities involved in the administration of the Nuer and Upper Nile Province. The most valuable from the point of view of information on the Nuer are the letters from 1925 to 1928, particularly those covering the campaigns against the Lou and Gaawar. There are no letters from the year 1929, when his wife was with him in the Sudan. The letters of 1930-1 are less descriptive than the earlier ones but are filled with more specific references to persons and places among the Western Nuer that Mrs. Coriat knew from her own experience while with her husband. Evans-Pritchard is mentioned only twice: once in 1930 after his first field trip among the Nuer when he complained that the Nuer were 'harder to know than ever', and once in 1931 when his second field trip ended in illness. 'He looked fairly rotten', Coriat reported, 'but one couldn't expect anything else with the awful food and servants he puts up with when he is living with the Nuer.' Other administrators associated with the Nuer he mentions are: the Governors Struvé, Willis ('Chunky') and Pawson, and the District Commissioners Fergusson, Lee, Pletts, Wyld ('Tiger'), Romilly ('Dub'), Alban ('Obang'), and Masterman ('Pink Eye'),

Coriat's own papers on the Nuer are supplemented in the Rhodes House collection by papers written by others. There are a number of Nuer Settlement reports, also found in the Civil Secretary and Upper Nile Province sections of the Central Records Office in Khartoum. Three by Willis (dated 26.11.28, 11.1.29 and 20.6.29) give summaries (frequently inaccurate) of the Gaawar rebellion, the final suppression of the Lou and plans for the future. There are in addition three reports by veterinary and agricultural experts surveying the economic potential of the Lou, Gaawar and Thiang.

By far the most interesting of the additional papers are the draft memoirs of Mrs. K. Coriat (Mss. Afr. S. 1684 [11]). These were composed with the aid of her husband's letters but also fill in the gaps not covered by them. They do not provide the same sort of ethnographic or historical detail, but they give a vivid account of her life with her husband among the Western Nuer in 1930-1, including two descriptions of the execution of one of Fergusson's murderers. They also show rather more insight into the personalities of other administrators than do Coriat's own letters.

The full range of the Coriat papers available both in Britain and the Sudan provide a dimension often overlooked by anthropologists in their reappraisals of Evans-Pritchard's ethnography. Administrative observations on the Nuer are dispersed in many different reports and letters, and it is therefore more difficult to make a comprehensive assessment of their value. Administrators like Coriat often had more limited or specific interests in the Nuer than Evans-Pritchard and frequently did not address themselves to topics that interest anthropologists, but they did spend longer among the Nuer, had a more comfortable (if less profound) understanding of the language, and more personal dealings with individual Nuer than either Evans-Pritchard

or most of the missionary ethnographers had. They are, therefore, a source of information that must not be overlooked.

Selected Annotated Bibliography of Percy Coriat

- 1923 a 'Barr of Southern Gaweir--Précis of Note by Coriat 19.1.1923 '(CRO Dakhliá I 112/13/87). Brief note on Bar Gaawar political divisions.
- b *The Gaweir Nuers*, 10.7.23, 23pp. (a copy can be found in the library of the Institute of Social Anthropology, Oxford). Published as a supplement to Jackson's *SNR* article when it was issued as a pamphlet. Contains the same information found in 1923a as well as notes on Gaawar history, customary law, economy, religion, and relations with the Dinka and other Nuer.
- 1926 a 'Settlement of Ol Dinka-Gaweir Boundary Dispute' (UNP 66.B.11).* Report of boundary settlement in December 1925, giving a summary of the previous thirty years of Gaawar-Dinka relations.
- b 'Transfer of Barr Gaweir to Zeraf Valley District' (UNP 66.B.10).* Gives much the same information found in 1923a and 1926a, considerably updated and expanded.
- 1928 'General Report. S8 (Lau Nuer) Patrol', 20.3.28 (CRO Civsec 5/2/11). Summary of events leading up to the 1928 campaign against Guek Ngundeng. It disagrees significantly with some of his statements in his 1939 article on Guek.
- 1929 a 'Southern (Abwong) District (Handing Over Notes)', 6.5.29 (Rhodes House). The only known copy of his handing-over notes on the Lou to his successor, Capt. Alban. Gives suggestions for administration following the Nuer Settlement, discussions of specific aspects of office routine and district administration. Brief biographical notes on forty Nuer and forty-three Dinka leaders. One appendix on Lou Nuer political prisoners, but the appendix on division of road work is missing.
- b 'Nuer Settlement--Guncol Area Report', 24.5.29 (CRO Civsec 1/3/8; Rhodes House). Final report on the death of Guek and Nuer Settlement operations, with final returns of prisoners, casualties and cattle captured from the Gun Lou.
- 1931 a 'Western Nuer District (Handing Over Notes)', 1.2.1931 (CRO Civsec 57/2/8; Durham 212/14/9). List of political divisions of Western Nuer tribes, including population

estimates and descriptions of prominent leaders.

- b 'Administration-Western Nuer', 5.2.31 (Rhodes House). Brief summary of previous administration of Western Nuer, mainly outlining difficulties that have arisen, seeking clarification of future policy from the Governor of Upper Nile Province.
 - c 'Notes on a paper on Nuer read by Mr. D. [*sic*] Evans-Pritchard at a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. September 1931' (CRO Dakhliia I 112/12/87; END 66.A.1+). Detailed critique of Evans-Pritchard's first presentation of his Nuer material; a number of his comments were cited by Evans-Pritchard in his revision of the paper which was published in *SNR* 1933-5.
 - d 'Report on Eastern District (Nuers) Bahr el Ghazal Province' and 'History and General Tribal Organisation' (END 66.A.1+). Summary of Nuer and Atuot origin myths, nineteenth-century history and progress of Anglo-Egyptian administration. Some of the same information is found in 1931a.
- 1939 'Gwek the Witch-Doctor and the Pyramid of Dengkur', *SNR*, Vol. XXII:2, pp.221-237 (ms. in Rhodes House). Full-length account of the prophets Ngundeng and Guek, written apparently from memory with perhaps only 1929b as a reference. It disagrees in many important aspects with some of his own reports (1928 especially).
- n.d. 'Easy but Uncertain' (Rhodes House; *Karama*, forthcoming). The only complete article surviving among the various drafts of his autobiographical material, it describes an incident during his rainy season tour in Ayod in 1922 and gives a vivid sketch of Nyang Macar, one of his earliest Gaawar friends.
- * Schedules for transfer from the Province archives, Malakal to the Southern Regional Records Office, Juba, in 1982.
- † Scheduled for transfer from the Nasir District archives to the Southern Regional Records Office, Juba, in 1982.

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