

## CHAPTER 4: THE AFRICAN NILOTIC PEOPLES AS ETHNOGRAPHIC PARALLELS

### *FINDING THE RIGHT "FIT": AN APPROPRIATE ETHNOGRAPHIC PARALLEL*

#### **The Need to Look Outside Egypt**

The Egyptian culture is possibly the most conspicuously "idolatrous" of the ancient world. Images of deities and semi-divine rulers proliferate, carefully and skillfully painted and carved or fabricated from difficult and precious materials such as granite and gold. It seems logical to conclude that any prehistoric imagery from the same culture would qualify as images of deities or powerful rulers. It also seems logical that the precursors of such a visually artistic culture would embody its deities in physical form.

Archaeology demonstrates this tendency in the Upper Egyptian Predynastic cultures, and images suggesting Horus as falcon, Hathor as cow, Thoth as Baboon, Anubis as jackal, and Taweret as Hippopotamus appear either as small amulets found in graves or as images carved or painted on pots and palettes. Images of bulls, particularly on the Narmer Palette (Fig. 4.5), occur also, and can be linked to the bull cults of Apis, Mnevis, and Buchis, all earthly symbols, representations, or embodiments of the gods, Ptah, Ra, and Mont, respectively, with the king representing such a power on earth.

In an Egyptian context, the above list of deities and images seems incomplete, with its absence of anthropomorphism and symbols pointing to the prominent historic high and cosmogonic anthropomorphic deities, such as Osiris, Isis, Nephthys, Atum, Ptah (except the possible link with a bull), Nut, Geb, Shu, Tefnut, or Re (the Mnevis bull is rarely used). The 244 Predynastic figurines with a large degree of anthropomorphism, plus the early Dynastic ivory male and female figurines from Hierakonpolis, seem to present an anomaly in the interpretation of this Predynastic evidence, for

consistently the figurines are not understood to represent any of these deities. Since the Predynastic animal motifs fit the typical Egyptian iconography, it seems illogical to omit the figurines, for the main anthropomorphic deities are the ones missing from the Predynastic collection. Surely the Predynastic Egyptians had their high gods too. But before any conclusion can be reached on the possible divinity of the Predynastic figurines, it is necessary to delineate the differences between the religion practised by the Predynastic Egyptians and that of the extremely stratified, centralised, complex, hierarchical society of Dynastic Egypt. Fundamental differences between these two stages of a single culture may account for such omissions in the iconographic record. If a restricted use of iconography precludes the depiction of certain classes of deities in a small-scale, or non-state based culture, and favours the depiction of others, then more precise categories might be defined for the iconography that does exist, including the figurines.

As discussed in Chapter 3, Predynastic Egyptian society began as a number of small groups of semi-nomadic pastoralists and foragers, who gradually became increasingly dependent on agriculture and sedentary life. In their earliest stages, the Nile dwelling forerunners of the Predynastic villagers lived a peripatetic life, moving from dry to "wet" season camps according to the seasonal fluctuations of the inundation of the Nile. Being prehistoric or pre-literate, they did not leave textual evidence of their religious beliefs. Focusing on archaeology alone, we have access only to those artefacts that have survived, in this case around 6,000 years.

Nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples leave little trace (Finkelstein 1995), for they tend to rely on perishable materials such as animal bones, hides, wood, and grasses. They have few possessions, and those they have need to be small, transportable, durable, and lightweight. Hence the staple of archaeology, the potsherd, is often absent, due to the fragility and weight of pottery. Architectural remains are limited to perhaps a few stone foundations, crude hearths, and rough storage pits, and in those cultures which used stone tools, the remains of that industry. Such meagre remains provide information about diet and seasonal activity, but in the absence of shrines, religious architecture, and art, and, of course, inscriptions, little can be interpreted about the religion practised by these thrifty people.

The amount of information, therefore, is much more severely limited in these societies than in early historic, state-based societies. This vast difference between the remains of prehistoric small-scale cultures and historic ancient state-based cultures means that we must access different information in order to understand the religions of such different cultures. Archaeology alone, at least the conventional form of archaeology, which primarily concerns itself with preserved artefacts, cannot penetrate the religion of these smaller, less uniform, less settled groups. And yet to understand the origin of Egyptian religion and its earliest form, it is necessary to do so.

Predynastic Upper Egypt represents a transitional state from semi-nomadic Nile herding/horticultural society to a unified state with settlements comprising permanent religious and domestic structures. Lasting only about one thousand years, from the Badarian to Nagada III period (4000 - 3050 BCE), this phase of Egyptian civilisation represents the equivalent of the long, stable Neolithic/Chalcolithic phase of the rest of the Near East, which lasted from c10,000 BCE to c3,500 BCE, more than 6,000 years.

A plethora of pots and sherds has been retrieved from the settled phase of Predynastic Egypt. Initially, this cache formed the basis of the dating sequence developed by Sir Flinders Petrie and was used until recently as the only reliable method of dating sites and accompanying artefacts. However, the transition to permanent mud-brick structures, so common throughout the Near East, lagged behind, and most archaeological data comes from cemeteries rather than village remains.

Considering the well-documented contact of Upper Egypt with Palestine and Mesopotamia during the Predynastic (see, for example, H.S. Smith 1992), the conclusion cannot be avoided that this Near Eastern contact gave enormous impetus to this speedy transition. While cultures usually welcome technological innovation, new religious ideas are another matter, with cultures preferring to maintain their own beliefs and practices. In fact, it is insulting and illogical to suggest that a people would so easily abandon beliefs and practices that had served them well for perhaps millennia, in favour of foreign beliefs, deities, and rituals, unless they are coerced. I think the history of religions testifies to the perseverance and adaptation of indigenous beliefs in the face of massive introduced technological change, and I need not digress to prove it.

Thus, while Upper Egypt moved quickly from a prehistoric, small-scale culture, through a village-based Neolithic culture, towards a unified state-based culture, the religious beliefs and practices of the earliest stage probably provided a source of stability in a rapidly changing society. While it is unrealistic to suggest that no religious change at all took place, one would expect the people to maintain their beliefs in certain deities, spiritual entities, and traditions, while adapting rituals to new practices and institutions, such as the increasing importance of political leaders, greater reliance on agriculture, more permanent public and private buildings, greater wealth accumulation, a more stratified society, and the beginnings of a specialised work force.<sup>37</sup> For example, at Hierakonpolis the stone base of what may have been a protodynastic reed temple enclosed a mound of clean white sand (Hoffman 1979: 131), a clue perhaps to the persistence of the earlier reed style structure during a technological transformation to stone, as this structure was superseded by an Old Kingdom stone temple (ibid). Ivory figurines, as opposed to clay figurines, became more numerous and included a mounting base, unlike their earlier tapered counterparts found in graves (Ucko 1965: 220), indicating new uses for old icons.

In trying to understand Predynastic Egyptian religion, we must look both forward and backward in time: forward to Dynastic practice and backward to the beliefs of the prehistoric Nile dwellers who became the Predynastic and later Dynastic Egyptians, rather than to contemporaneous Near Eastern cultures with a different heritage. With the exception of the grave goods, the odd habitation site, and the implications of the Hierakonpolis structure, conventional archaeology provides little if any information on prehistoric Egyptian Nilotic religions. Unlike Australia and North America, Egypt does not have a surviving tribal culture to provide insights into the religion of the ancestors of modern Egyptians. Therefore, the methodology employed by Janet Spector (Chapter 1) needs to be stretched to accommodate this break in continuity. An ethnographic parallel must be sought elsewhere, but as nearby as possible.

An ethnographic parallel allows us to enter a prehistoric society by way of analogy. If similar patterns of artefact use can be established, then similar explanations can follow. While an immediate

twentieth century parallel is not available, a short distance to the north lives a number of Sudanese tribes whose lives and religions demonstrate a close affinity with early Egyptian culture, in many ways. An examination of these similarities allows us to examine the Predynastic figurines within a religious structure not completely clear from archaeological evidence, but supported by it. After a detailed discussion of the religion of these contemporary tribes, it will be possible to reconstruct hypothetically the life and religion of the Predynastic Egyptians – a view not attainable from artefact remains alone.

### **Contemporary African Religion of the Nile**

The Sudanese Nile region accommodates a number of tribal groups living a life-style comparable to the prehistoric Egyptians. The closest and most well-documented Nilotes of Sudan include the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1940, 1951, 1956) and the Dinka (Lienhardt 1961). To a lesser extent, the Shilluk (Evans-Pritchard 1948) and Atuot (Burton 1979, 1982a,b) also provide useful analogous material, as do some of the more distant tribal societies from Africa as a whole.

Caution must always rule in utilising such parallels. These twentieth century tribes and the prehistoric Egyptians are 6,000 years apart. Enormous change can occur over such a period. Also, the prehistoric Nile dwellers, as discussed in Chapter 3, lived in an environment dominated by the Nile inundation. The Sudanese Nuer and Dinka peoples live in a monsoonal environment. While the Nile provides a major source of food and water, the people depend on the monsoon to water their pastures and gardens. Like their earliest Egyptian counterparts, however, they are semi-nomadic, and the men annually take their herds of cattle to dry season pasture. As in so many small-scale cultures, the women look after the horticulture, while the men look after the herds. The Shilluk, in contrast, live a settled agricultural life, with the usual accompanying increase in social and political stratification, resembling the later phases of Predynastic culture.

The Nuer and Dinka tribes offer the best analogies to the prehistoric Egyptian Nilotes because of the semi-nomadic, small-scale structure common to their societies. (I leave the Shilluk out of the

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<sup>37</sup> see Chapter 1, Some Basic Premises #3-5

discussion for the moment, but will return to them later, for they are more useful to a discussion of the transition from small-scale to state-based structure.) The word "analogy" is crucial to remember. Despite the tempting similarities, no direct connection can be made between the Nuer/Dinka people and the prehistoric people in question. While they perhaps shared a common ancestor group or influences during prehistoric Egyptian times, we can never suppose this to be true. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Predynastic Egyptians had some contact with Sudanese peoples, but the persistence of a legacy to the present day cannot be claimed.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, the Nuer/Dinka provide an analogy only, to illuminate possible interpretations of the religious behaviour of the prehistoric Egyptians, rather than to "prove" that the prehistoric Egyptians shared the Nuer/Dinka world-view. I have chosen the Nuer as my principal ethnographic parallel, with the Dinka providing supplementary material, particularly those aspects of the Dinka religion which the Nuer do not share and which I think are analogously relevant.

These various Nilotic tribes have much in common. Their source of livelihood, social structure, religion, architecture, language, and material culture overlap to such an extent that intermarriage often takes place. But at the same time, significant differences separate them into individual cultures, existing side by side in mutually exclusive territories. As I explore, the Nuer and Dinka deities share such similar characteristics that we are tempted to conflate them. The ritual use of cattle displays few differences, but the priesthoods are unique to each culture. Their material cultures are indistinguishable and equally spartan, making it difficult to distinguish a Dinka village from a Nuer village, yet their customs and beliefs vary. These similarities and differences have significant consequences for archaeologists examining comparable settlements from prehistory, for the religious differences may not be reflected in the artefact assemblage. Material remains might suggest a unified, single culture, whereas in reality, a number of quite diverse cultures could have occupied the given area. This point is explored later with reference to the variety of figurines found from Predynastic Upper Egypt, which otherwise appears to be a single culture.

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<sup>38</sup> Early contact is suggested by the ritual deformation of ox horns in Dinka, Nuer, and Dynastic Egyptian cultures. Frankfort points out that the Dinka and Nuer deformations differ from each other, and both types are found in Old Kingdom tombs. Egyptian deformation ceased in the Middle Kingdom, before the conquest of Nubia, indicating that influence from or on the Sudanese people is Pre or Early Dynastic, rather than the result of Egyptian conquest (Frankfort 1948b: 165). If similarly deformed horns

One might ask why I have chosen the Nilotic peoples rather than any other similar society elsewhere in the world. The answer is that the prehistoric Egyptians were an African people, and it has been demonstrated (Mbiti 1969; Parrinder 1962) that contemporary African peoples share cross-cultural similarities in their religious life as well as social structure, despite the significant differences among them (Ranger & Kimambo 1972: 1-26). The religious lives of small-scale societies around the world diverge dramatically. The beliefs of, for example, the North American Natives, the Australian Aborigines, and the Pacific Islanders have little in common despite the similarities in their social and material cultures. Some broad generalisations about small-scale religion can be extracted from a comparison, but the myths, rituals, and practices remain unique and culturally specific. As Ucko emphasised (1962: 45), the "fit" between the prehistoric culture and the ethnographic comparison must be the closest possible. Although comparative material from other parts of the world is useful and interesting, any analogy could be misleading.

The differences that exist between contemporary Nilotes and Egyptian cultures at first seem so significant as to make any analogy impossible. For this discussion, the most significant are the poor artefact assembly of contemporary Nilotes and the absence of figurines. As discussed below, they also do not have a well-developed mortuary ritual and eschatology, or at least one they are willing to talk about. However, other elements of Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egyptian culture so closely resemble those of Sudanese tribal culture, that one can envision how iconography would function in contemporary Sudanese religions.

The following discussion details these numerous similarities in order to demonstrate that today's Sudanese tribes, despite the differences, provide a suitable ethnographic parallel by which to assess the possible religious use of the Egyptian figurines and a religious framework within which to place them. Detailing the Sudanese religions also illuminates the possible roles of some of the other religious imagery of the Predynastic and Early Dynastic periods, and more securely establishes Predynastic culture as typically Nilotic, and these Nilotic cultures as the closest possible "fit" to Predynastic culture.

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were found in Predynastic material, a positive connection between the Predynastic Egyptians and the ancestors of today's Sudanese people could be maintained because of the non-archetypal, culturally-specific nature of the phenomenon.

The discussion of the kingship practices of the Shilluk and other African tribes helps to explain how a new ruling class appropriates and adapts pre-kingship iconography and beliefs. It is possible to see how popular pre-state beliefs and rituals can be modified to suit the preservation and legitimation of the superiority of one individual – the king. An examination of the Shilluk kingship and the Early Dynastic state-based iconography demonstrates how the religious and social structures of the more egalitarian Nuer and Dinka tribes contain the seeds, which under the right circumstances, might produce a society focused on divine kingship, commemorated by an elaborate mortuary ritual designed to preserve the spiritual life of the king and community. Reading back into Predynastic culture, its mortuary iconography takes its position in a small-scale society moving towards statehood. With regard to the figurines and the decline in their mortuary use, the separate realms of popular and official religious practice of these living religions illustrate how their use could have ceased while their meanings lived on in the new religion.

Some popular contemporary Western ideas confine hierarchy to complex state-based cultures, and the divisions between spirit and matter to a rationalist development in Western thought. Contrary to this notion, the Nuer, Dinka, and other African tribes envision their cosmology hierarchically and dualistically. The following discussion outlines this dualistic, hierarchical cosmological pattern as described by Evans-Pritchard (1956) and Lienhardt (1961). Of course, we can assign such categories to the mind of Evans-Pritchard as the product of Western dualistic hierarchical thought, but I must point out that Evans-Pritchard, only too aware of the need to address his own European cast, understood that:

Statements about a people's religious beliefs must always be treated with the greatest caution, for we are then dealing with what neither European nor native can directly observe, with conceptions, images, words, which require for understanding a thorough knowledge of a people's language and also an awareness of the entire system of ideas of which any particular belief is part, for it may be meaningless when divorced from the set of beliefs and practices to which it belongs. (Evans-Pritchard 1965: 7)

Today we call this approach, "phenomenological"; Evans-Pritchard's contemporaries called it "scientific", a methodology much challenged in today's intellectual climate. However, in so far as we can never be completely objective, we can be observant and attempt to enter into the world of the



people we seek to understand, despite an inevitable degree of selectivity and subjectivity in our questions and interpretations. We know that Evans-Pritchard possessed an acute awareness of the biases of his time created by "the great myth-makers Darwin, Marx-Engels, Freud, and Frazer" (Evans-Pritchard 1965: 1), and so at least he mercifully spares us the evolutionary, Darwinian scientific paradigm of the social sciences of his, and even our, time.<sup>39</sup>

Fortunately, thanks to Evans-Pritchard and Godfrey Lienhardt, we have sympathetic accounts of the Nuer and Dinka, undertaken with the intention to avoid ethnocentric and intellectual biases common at the time. Of course, such objectivity is never achieved in the absolute, but only in degrees, and the most recent valuable corrections to Evans-Pritchard's observations disclose the importance of women and their contributions, and, consequently, place pastoralism in the wider context of a more diversified economy than explored by Evans-Pritchard (Burton 1981, 1982a,b). Unfortunately, major disruptions caused by civil war and famines have dispersed these peoples (Burton 1994), and we have only the work of people such as Evans-Pritchard and Lienhardt to inform us. We must always keep in mind the intellectual climate of Evans-Pritchard's time and subsequent re-evaluations as social theory changes (Karp & Maynard 1983). But, I urge the reader also to keep in mind the *ideal* behind Evans-Pritchard's methodology, while at the same time to understand that the Nuer cosmology we may be dealing with has been filtered through a negotiation process involving the anthropologist, his milieu, and his subjects.<sup>40</sup>

### ***THE RELIGIONS OF THE NUER PEOPLE OF NILOTIC SUDAN WITH SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL FROM THE DINKA PEOPLE***

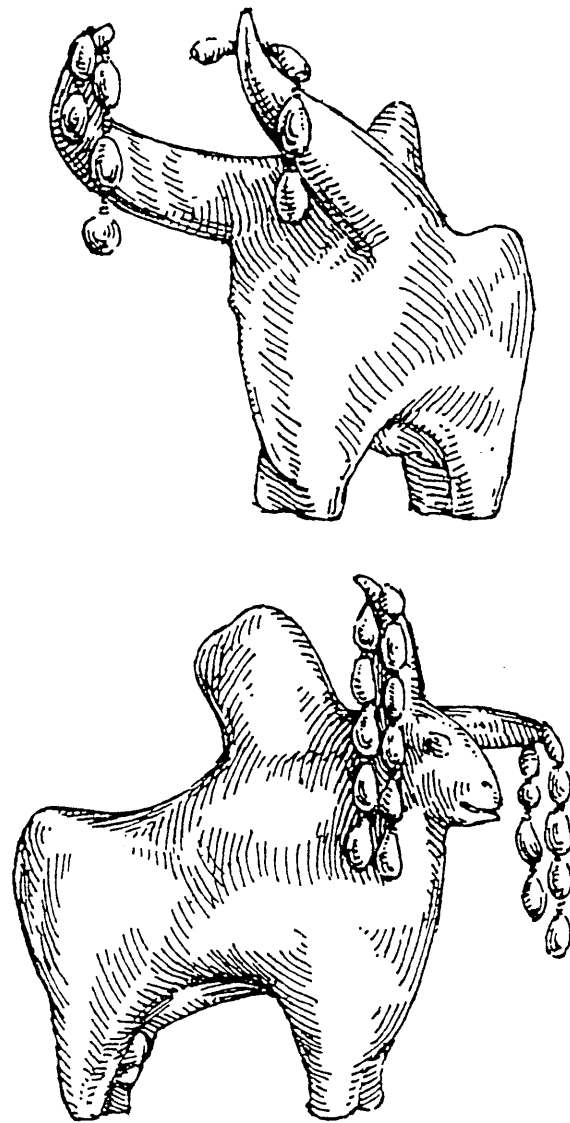
Unfortunately for this discussion, the Nuer do not make anthropomorphic figurines, unlike many other African peoples (Burland 1973: 197-251; Ucko 1962; 1968), although, both Nuer and Dinka girls and boys make small mud oxen (Fig. 4.1) (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 38; Lienhardt 1961: 40).<sup>41</sup> These

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<sup>39</sup> For an explication of Evans-Pritchard's methodological philosophy, see his essay "Religion" in (Evans-Pritchard et.al.1967)

<sup>40</sup> In the case of the Nuer, Dinka, and Atuot we are dealing with material gathered only by male anthropologists.

<sup>41</sup> These oxen bring to mind the few clay cows found in Predynastic graves. See Table 3.1.



**FIG. 4.1** Small mud oxen made by Nuer and Dinka children. Their horns are decorated with tassels in the way that the young men decorate their display oxen.

people lead very austere lives and leave behind few possessions. Typical of semi-nomadic and nomadic people, their artefacts are simple and few.

Expediency is, however, not the main reason for the lack of material imagery. The Nuer universe clearly separates the spiritual from the material:

It is true that for them there is no abstract duality of natural and supernatural, but there is such a duality between *kwoth*, Spirit, which is immaterial rather than supernatural, and *cak*, creation, the material world known to the senses. (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 124)

One of the main goals of Nuer religious ritual is to prevent the world of spirit intervening in the world of everyday events (ibid 197-199). The Nuer prefer divinity to keep to its "natural" place, the sky. The intervention of divinity, or spirit (*Kwoth*), usually takes the form of illness, death, misfortune, and most dramatically, lightning strikes. Therefore, for the Nuer to create images, at least to embody divinity, contradicts their basic philosophy. Unlike other similar African cultures (Ucko 1962: 45-8; 1968: 420-443; 1969a), they do not even use them for less elevated reasons, that is to represent fertility figurines, initiation figurines, soul repositories, or dolls, with the exception of the children's mud oxen.

How then, can the Nuer shed light on the possible uses of these figurines? The following provides an explanation through understanding the spiritual hierarchy of the Nuer and how such a hierarchy might be reflected in the artefact assembly of Predynastic Egypt.

The Nuer cosmology consists of three levels of Spirit: Supreme Divinity (*Kwoth Nhial*), the Spirits of the Air, and the Spirits of the Below. The Dinka conceive of a similar division: the main divinity *Nhialic aciek*; the "Free-divinities" of the sky; and the "Clan-divinities" of the earth (Lienhardt 1961: 28-146). This three-tiered hierarchy of spirit appears frequently in African ethnography (Ogot 1972: 122-135; Mainga 1972: 95; Schoffeleers 1972: 75-6) and seems to be a general characteristic of African religion as a whole (Mbiti 1969: 75-91; Parrinder 1962: 24-27; 37-38; Ray 1976: 50-52).

## **Kwoth Nhial, Nhialic aciek - The Supreme God**

*Kwoth Nhial*, to the Nuer, is the highest, absolute form of divinity, who is either a "Spirit of the sky or Spirit who is in the sky" (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 1), although the Nuer recognise him to be everywhere and not localised. While the Nuer characterise this god as male (ibid 7), he is at the same time invisible, "not figured in any material representations" (ibid 123), and ubiquitous, like the air (ibid 1). Like the sky, he is remote and inaccessible. He "is far removed from man in that man cannot ascend to him. [But] he is very near in that he can descend to man" (ibid 177).

God "descends" in sickness and death, and a great deal of ritual and sacrifice attempts to banish the danger of *Kwoth Nhial's* intervention (ibid 1956: 198) and to remove him from earth and return him to his remote and proper place, the sky. He "descends" most dramatically in a lightning strike, an affliction much feared among the Nuer. Lightning is a direct intervention of God in human affairs, and the resulting danger must be eliminated with ritual (ibid 55).

Despite their fear, the Nuer believe that anyone who is killed by lightning becomes a spirit and goes directly to God (ibid 57ff). They call these spirits *colwic* spirits. Having instantaneously gone to God, they become spirits of the above and enjoy the status and attention such spirits receive. Interestingly, the Dinka *colwic* is an evil bush spirit (ibid 60 n.1) and is associated with the malevolent deity, *Macardit* (Lienhardt 1961: 57,62,83). Still, the Dinka also consider lightning as a direct intervention of God, and those killed in this way are not mourned, for Divinity has "struck them on the head" (ibid 93). If a large tree is hit, the Dinka may turn it into a shrine, placing the horns of sacrificed animals in or below it (ibid).

### **Relationship to Cattle**

The closest *Kwoth Nhial* comes to earthly representation is in the majesty of the wide spreading horns of the ox (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 4) (Fig. 4.2). Note, *Kwoth Nhial* is neither the ox nor the horns, and is only suggested by the aesthetic grandeur expressed by the sweep of the horns. In his association with this aesthetic, *Kwoth Nhial* takes an ox-name of *tutgar*, incorporating the concepts of strength (*tut*) and greatness (*gar*), which also include the sense of omnipresence (ibid). Despite the ox

association, *Kwoth Nhial* is conceived anthropomorphically rather than theriomorphically and referred to as 'father' or 'grandfather'. He behaves in characteristically human ways as a creator and protector who "sees and hears all that happens and ... can be very angry and can love" (ibid 7).

The Dinka also hold that the supreme God is male and is called *nhialic aciek* and *nhialic wa*, "God the creator" and "God (my) father" respectively. Like the Nuer, the Dinka do not represent their God iconically, but establish their relationship with God through their cattle (Lienhardt 1961: 23). Lienhardt, however, did not indicate a connection between the spreading ox-horns and the majesty of Divinity, the supreme being. Rather, the cattle are gifts from Divinity; they ultimately belong to Divinity and thus connect the Dinka people to their god (ibid).

The ox is central to Nuer and Dinka religion and society. It is the preferred animal of sacrifice. While a goat or even a cucumber can substitute, the intention is the sacrifice of an ox. Although for the Nuer, a tenuous connection exists between the aesthetics of the ox horns and the supreme deity, no evidence exists that cattle are venerated in themselves or regarded as guardian spirits (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 249).

In these patriarchal societies, the care of oxen falls to the men, although the women bring the oxen into the family as bridewealth. Each boy receives an ox-name and his own bull at initiation, which is later castrated for ritual reasons. The young initiate devotes much time, attention, and emotional expression to his ox. He decorates the horns with tassels, as he did as a child with the clay figurines (Fig. 4.1), and performs dances, songs, and poems in praise of it. The dance often requires the youth to hold "up his arms in imitation of its horns" (Fig. 4.3) (ibid 250-251). Like the Nuer cattle, the Dinka cattle also stand in symbolic identification with people, the girls sharing the identification through the cows (ibid 16-17). Similar to the Nuer boys, the Dinka boys raise their arms in imitation of the spreading horns of the ox (Fig. 4.4) and perform the ox-dance, or *agar*, a simulation of the bulls running with the cows, which are represented by the village girls (ibid 16-18).

Through his initiation ox, the youth enters "into a new kind of relationship with God, the guardian spirits of his family and lineage, and the ghosts of his ancestors" (ibid 251). The relationship with his



**FIG. 4.2** Ox with spreading horns, suggestive of the nature of the Nuer *Kwoth Nhial*



**FIG. 4.3** A Nuer youth raising his arms in praise of his ox. The raised arms are meant to imitate the spreading horns.

initiation ox is so close that, as a boy matures, his identity becomes tied up with this ox and the ox comes to stand as a symbol for the self, even after it has died or been sacrificed (*ibid* 253). The Dinka men directly identify themselves with their cattle, as do the Atuot men (Burton 1982a: 269). To attract girls, the Dinka boys decorate their cattle rather than themselves and they name themselves after the colours and markings of their cattle. Warriors attribute to themselves the characteristics of bulls, and the Dinka basic social group for men is the cattle-camp (Lienhardt 1961: 10-27).

At this point, I cannot help but draw attention to the similarity in gesture between the young Nuer initiate in the photo and the male figurines of Predynastic Egypt in which the arms are held at right angles above the head. The similarity between the Dinka boys' posture and the female figurines with raised arms (Fig. 2.4) also cannot go unnoticed. These comparisons are tempting, but raise problems in the context of grave figurines. This issue will be explored later (Chapter 6).

Elise Baumgartel, in discussing the female figures with raised arms on the decorated ware (Fig. 2.7), mentioned that contemporary Sudanese women perform a "cow dance" (Baumgartel 1970b: 493). She concluded that these figures on the vases, and by implication, the figurines with raised arms, are "dancing as part of a ritual belonging to the cow goddess" (*ibid*), presumably a proto-Hathor, the fertility goddess, the most popular of all deities, whom Baumgartel saw represented on the vases (*ibid*).

Neither Lienhardt nor Evans-Pritchard mentioned whether the girls also raise their arms in imitation of cattle horns, but John Burton (1982a: 267-8) described the Atuot ox and cow dances in greater detail, in which adult and juveniles of both sexes participate. Like the Dinka boys in the photo, the Atuot "men leap high into the air with their arms outstretched, imitating the girth and pattern of the horns of their personality oxen" (*ibid* 268). Women join the dance in partnership with the men. No mention is made of their arm position, but Burton described six or eight younger women whose movements imitate the slow gallop of the cows: "A girdle of colored beads reaching well above their heads sways back and forth, suggesting the manner in which the hump of a cow shifts back and forth when running" (*ibid*). I cannot imagine any other way a "girdle of colored beads" could be supported above





**FIG. 4.4** Dinka boys dancing the ox-dance. Arms are raised to imitate the horns.

the head unless the arms were raised, but, for the girls, this gesture imitates the hump rather than horns.

More detailed information and photographs on the role of women in the ox and cow dances would be usefully analogous with the many Predynastic Egyptian female figurines with gracefully raised arms, comparable to those in the photo of the Dinka boys. Both Lienhardt and Baumgartel brought to their discussions the interests of their own sex, for Baumgartel did not mention the ox-dance of the boys. I can only point out that the arm gestures of the Nuer, Dinka, and Atuot possibly express male rather than female divinity, although it is always possible that the girls and women of these tribes also have their "cow dances" in honour of a female divinity not accessible to male anthropologists.<sup>42</sup>

Nuer women do have "cow names", and young girls take "ox-names", but Evans-Pritchard gave them little significance, claiming the girls and women are merely copying the males, and their practice signifies little (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 250). Since the females are responsible for milking the cows and making cheese, and the Atuot and Dinka girls (and perhaps the Nuer females) take part in the "cow dance", a good case can be made for reading between Evans-Pritchard's lines and postulating that the women, too, have their own rituals and beliefs focusing on cattle. In support of this assumption, Elise Baumgartel mentioned a personal communication from Anthony Arkell on a Sudanese women's cow-dance in which the women raise their arms (Baumgartel 1955: 81).

Comparisons with the attention paid to a variety of bull cults in Ancient Egypt can be made. The Apis, Mnevis, and Buchis bulls represent Ptah, Re, and Mont respectively. The bulls are not divine in themselves, but "fulfilled the function of making a deity tangible on earth, heralds that could be nourished and served in an indirect service of the principal deity" (Quirke 1992: 16). Also the similarity between some of these Predynastic figurines and the Nuer and Dinka imitations of cows, bulls, and oxen reaches deeper into Dynastic Egypt, where the king ran as a bull amongst the sacred bulls at Memphis in order to effect a normal inundation of the Nile after an abnormally low one (Baines 1995: 130). The special markings of Dynastic sacred bulls, such as the Apis bull of Memphis, reflect a common African phenomenon shared by the Nuer and Dinka, as emphasised by Evans-

Pritchard and Lienhardt throughout their studies. Occasional accounts for other African peoples also identify certain colours or markings of cattle as meaningful or special. Atuot ox-songs refer to cattle colours (Burton 1982a: 271-2). The Lozi of Zambia, in an attempt to alleviate drought, sacrifice black cattle, the colour of which signifies dark rain clouds (Mainga 1972: 96-99). Similarly, the Dinka, who, unlike the Nuer, sacrifice in order to bring rain, choose an ox whose black and white markings signify thundery skies (Lienhardt 1961: 93). To the contemporary Nilotes, other African peoples, and the Egyptians, cattle hold special spiritual significance far beyond their practical functions, linking the people to their divinities and providing a conduit for divine powers.<sup>43</sup>

### **The Nature of the African Supreme Being**

*Kwoth nhial* is a sky spirit, and as Evans-Pritchard pointed out, can be understood in the way we understand God (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 28). Implied in his statement is the qualification that *Kwoth nhial* is not God as the Christian world understands it; hence he backed away from the temptation to approve of Nuer religion in Christian terms – an attitude common in Missionary days and still prevalent in today's world striving for a theory of religious pluralism to accommodate an increasingly global culture. Lienhardt makes the same comment with regard to the Dinka. While *nhialic*, Divinity, can be compared to the Muslim and Christian concept of god, the term also covers a number of disparate conceptions (Lienhardt 1961: 56). Therefore, in the spirit of Evans-Pritchard, I present the Nuer and Dinka concepts of Divinity, not as the equivalents of an invisible prehistoric Egyptian deity, but as analogies which might help us imagine Predynastic, non-represented high deities, who do not find concrete expression until the advent of writing and institutionalised religion.

The non-represented supreme deity is not just a Nilotic conception; it is a pan-African one. Geoffrey Parrinder (1962), in his general discussion of African Traditional Religion made the point:

... all Africans believe that there are other spiritual forces than those associated with 'idols'. The great Creator has very few temples or images, but is almost everywhere believed in. Many other gods and ancestors are prayed to without any material representation of them being used. (Parrinder 1962: 16)

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<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of gender bias in anthropology, see Leacock (1978).

<sup>43</sup> For a short discussion of some of the links between Egyptian and Sudanese cattle cults, see Frankfort 1948b: 162-168).

He added later, "It is exceedingly rare to find any attempt at portraying the Supreme Being" (ibid 89). This observation is supported by other historians such as John Mbiti, who said, "... no idols have been reported in African traditional societies – as far as sources available to me are concerned" (Mbiti 1969: 71), and:

Often he is considered to be so remote that men  
do not pray to him regularly. (ibid 24)

James O'Connell commented on the apparent contradiction between a supreme being who is creator, all-knowing, and all-powerful and at the same time, so remote that he receives no direct worship, has no shrines, and no priests (O'Connell 1962: 67). Commenting on the West African concept of deity, he termed this phenomenon the "deus otiosus", a withdrawn high god (ibid). Other scholars of comparative religion, such as Mircea Eliade and Raffaile Pettazzoni, have tried to explain this phenomenon in various theoretical ways, acknowledging the tendency of societies to conceive of their high god in this way (ibid 67-68).

It is tempting to interpret this "universal" acceptance of a single, remote supreme being as an innovation introduced by Christian and Muslim missionaries. But repeatedly, ethnographers stress that the "invisible" African god is pre-Christian and pre-Muslim. Bethwell Ogot introduced the Padhola of Eastern Uganda as monotheists who have been monotheistic for at least the last 500 years. The monotheisms of Christianity and Islam represent "neither a revival, nor an innovation, but an attempted merger of the differently derived concepts of God" (Ogot 1972: 122). Geoffrey Parrinder carefully commented that the Yoruba notion of a supreme god does not derive from Muslim or Christian influence: these "new religions adopt and enrich the name of God, but do not introduce it as something new" (Parrinder 1962: 34). Evans-Pritchard also emphasised that the Nuer find no contradiction in their belief in *Kwoth Nhial* and the gods of Christianity and Islam; rather they recognise that foreign peoples do not have a different god from their own, but merely different names and rituals for the same god (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 49). The Christian and Muslim influence on the Nuer, he said, has been negligible (ibid 48).

The concept of the invisible god is followed up in greater detail in Chapter 5 in the discussion of Osiris as a possible Predynastic "invisible" god. At this point, the African tendency not to represent their high gods, at least in their small-scale cultures, challenges any notion that the Predynastic figurines represent a supreme being.

The following discussion of some religious institutions of African state-based cultures indicates the emergence of a different attitude towards representation and the appearance of a new iconography as the state takes form. The differences between African small-scale and state-based religions hint at the kind of religious changes which might have occurred in Egypt during the appropriation and adaptation of certain Predynastic beliefs by the rising ruling class, and how Predynastic beliefs might be reflected in Dynastic material.

### **Divine Kingship and the Supreme God**

African peoples with centrally controlled, state-organised societies often develop the concept of divine kingship as the society moves towards statehood (Ray 1976: 120). Most African groups fall within this category, unlike the Nuer and Dinka, who have been classified as "stateless" peoples, and not the norm for Africa (Parrinder 1972: 71). Care must be taken in equating these various "cults of kingship" with each other or claiming a common source, for even where similarities exist, differences in systems of state produce individual "cults" (Ranger & Kimambo 1972: 4).

Although each kingship cult is unique, it shares with other similar cults "the notion of the spiritual power of the dead kings, to whom sacrifices were made at the cult centres" (ibid 5). In many of them, the living king is considered to be the High God himself, rather than a deified ancestor (ibid), suggesting that "the great royal cults emerged as the result of the imposition of control by kings over pre-existing High God" or popular cult centres (ibid 6), rather than the deification of an individual powerful king.

Such pre-monarchical cult centres, for example those found in southern Tanzania, are associated with particular clans, whose agricultural life, like the Predynastic Egyptians, characterises the cults' beliefs and practices (ibid 6-7). The "take-over" of such cults by royalty is often accompanied by the

development of a "royal theology" (ibid 7). Another possibility is the development of a new royal cult (ibid) focusing on an ancestral king, as in the Lozi monarchy (Mainga 1972: 95-108).

The Shilluk institution of divine kingship (Evans-Pritchard 1948) has elements of both systems but adheres mostly to the former, that of a "take over" of the existing cult. While the king is divine, he also descends from a divine royal ancestor, who represents the High God on earth. The Shilluk believe their kings to be descended from *Nyikang*, their original leader, who brought them to their homeland and vanquished the original inhabitants. Each successive king has the spirit of *Nyikang* in him, which passes from king to king, father to son (ibid 9). *Nyikang* is immortal and immanent in the king and is worshipped at shrines all over Shillukland. The dead king receives worship at his tomb shrines, and the shrines of the living king are indistinguishable from these and receive the same ritual attention (ibid 17-18). *Nyikang* as king is "the medium between man and God" (ibid 18-19), and thus appropriates the pre-existing High God.

Much attention has been paid to the "murder" of the Shilluk king, and myth dictates that unless the king remains in good health, the country will not prosper. Therefore, if the king weakens, the Shilluk maintain that he must be ritually murdered and a successor chosen from among the king's sons (ibid 20-25). Little, apparently, is made of mortuary ritual, but the cult of the dead king continues at the tomb locations established in the natal region of each dead king (ibid 22).

*Nyikang* is not god, but has a special relationship to him through possession (Evans-Pritchard 1948: 27). He is represented in effigy form, which is paraded through Shillukland during the investiture proceedings of a new king (ibid 26). This image consolidates worship on a central image, which supports a centralised and unified culture focused on kingship. Through *Nyikang*, the Shilluk worship their God, who appears to remain invisible and otherwise inaccessible.

Such an image has little place in Nuer and Dinka societies, based on kinship and clan structures rather than centralised authority. A more useful comparison can be made with Dynastic Egypt's cult of divine kingship, accompanied by suitable iconography, mortuary rituals, and architecture. By definition, images of centralised secular or spiritual unity are anachronistic in a society with no

dynastic ruler to govern it, but would become increasingly useful as a disparate cluster of cultures moved towards unification. The Nuer and Dinka systems could typify those which precede the development of a divine kingship, in their case, with the spiritual power of the bull coming to symbolise the essence of divine leadership invested in the king, as it did in Egypt during the development from Predynastic to Dynastic.

The Shilluk parallel with Egypt does not extend deeply into the afterlife, although the establishment of a mortuary cult for the king in each culture follows his death. A closer parallel can be taken from the divine kingship of the Lozi people of Zambia. The Lozi place their high god, *Nyambe*, at the top of the typical three-stage hierarchy, understanding him to be the "Creator and Origin of all things" (Mainga 1972: 95). The sun is his symbol, and he is worshipped at family shrines on the eastern outskirts of the village (ibid 96). Although the Lozi king is not a direct divine representative on earth, he derives his divine ancestry from the daughter of *Nyambe* through the paternal lineage. The Lozi king becomes more powerful after death, and a village develops around his grave to protect it and provide the rituals necessary to maintain the dead king and receive his beneficial intercession. As in Egypt, the Lozi cult of royal graves developed as the state developed (Mainga 1972: 100).

Of the two models identified here – the appropriation of the pre-monarchical high god and the establishment of the ancestral king – the Egyptian cult of the dead king would conform best to the first: identification with the High God. On the throne, the king is the son of a god, and yet this son is a god himself, Horus. The king is Horus on the Throne, and as Re-Harakty, represents the High God Re. After death he becomes an Osiris, a god who rules the underworld. Having incorporated the High God Re and the agricultural god Osiris (see Chapter 5), the royal Egyptian cult appears to have absorbed or taken over earlier cults focusing on these gods. From the African examples, we can see that the Egyptian focus on the relationship of the dead king and the living king with Re, Horus, and Osiris is at home among the African tribal religions of centralised state systems.

This brief look at the African models of divine kingship demonstrates how a new ruling class can utilise the religions of the semi-autonomous small-scale village communities in order to consolidate the loyalty of these communities and create one centralised religion focused on a single ruler.

Understanding how a high god can be brought to serve new centralised interests provides a framework in which to examine how the various anthropomorphic, but essentially invisible, high gods of Dynastic Egypt could have emerged from a Predynastic past devoid of iconography attributable to any of these deities. In the case of Egypt, a number of high gods seems to have been appropriated: the solar god, in this case Re of Iunu/On (Greek Heliopolis); three creator gods – Atum, also a sun-god from Iunu and associated with Re, Amun of Thebes, and later Ptah of Memphis; and the god of the underworld, Osiris, centred at Abydos from the early Dynastic period. The kings and priests of Nekhen (Hierakonpolis) brought some of these various high gods into an association with their ruling god, Horus the falcon god. Over time, the official priesthoods synthesised the various myths and legends accompanying these gods into a unified belief system which served the interests of the ruling class and focused the allegiance of the wider community of both Upper and Lower Egypt.

Included in this appropriation and synthesis of pre-monarchical beliefs were the mortuary cults practised by the Predynastic Egyptians. During life, under the divine patronage of the highest god, Re, Atum, Amon, or Ptah, the king shared identity with the ruling god Horus; in death, he took the form of Osiris, the god of the underworld. Chapter 5 presents evidence for the probability of the existence of Predynastic mortuary beliefs centred on Osiris, and establishes the ground for the participation of at least some of the figurines in Predynastic beliefs and practices which became incorporated into the Dynastic mortuary cult of the divine king. First, however, the continuation of the detailed discussion of the spiritual hierarchy of the Nuer and Dinka spirit worlds will help to position these figurines appropriately within a plausible Predynastic spiritual dimension, for the African analogies demonstrate their unlikely role as supreme deities, even of the underworld.

### **Spirits of the Above**

The next cosmological level in the Nuer hierarchy is the air - below the sky but above the earth. The Nuer call the spirits which inhabit this region *kuth nhial* (spirits of the above). They subdivide into *kuth dwanga* (spirits of the air or breezes) and *colwic* (spirits nearest to God). The Dinka counterparts are the Free-divinities, *Deng*, *Garang*, *Abuk*, and *Macardit*.



### Nuer Kuth dwanga and the Dinka Free-Divinities

Like the supreme god, the *kuth dwanga*, spirits of the air, have no earthly representation. Some find their expressions in natural phenomena associated with the "above" such as thunder, rain and wind, while others find associations with illness, war, and numerous other phenomena (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 28-33). The Nuer maintain that these spirits are *Kwoth nhial* but *Kwoth nhial* is not them. Evans-Pritchard understood this distinction as a "refraction", in the way that light refracts into colours, but colours are not light. *Kwoth nhial* is approachable through these "refractions", and sacrifices are dedicated to various lesser deities rather than directly to *Kwoth nhial* (ibid 51).

*Buk*, a female deity, occupies a unique position in the Nuer pantheon of Spirits of the Air. Unlike the other air spirits, she is conceived theriomorphically as a pied crow (ibid 46). As a bird, she is an air spirit, but she is also a spirit of rivers, and thus can also be categorised as a Spirit of the Below (ibid 32). Like other Spirits of the Below (discussed later), she finds expression in material form.

Lienhardt called the comparable divinities in Dinka religion (*Deng*, *Garang*, *Macardit*, and *Abuk*) "Free-divinities", because all Dinka clans share them, unlike the Clan-divinities, which by definition are clan-specific. Free-divinities and some of the Nuer air spirits are thought to possess people and directly affect their lives (ibid 39ff). These deities receive the most ritual attention. Because of their power and ability to affect human lives, cattle are dedicated to them and sacrificed during times of spiritual need (ibid 33-48).

Of the Dinka Free-divinities, *Deng* is the most powerful (Lienhardt 1961: 76), for he is associated with the most vital and dynamic forces - rain, thunder, and lightning (ibid 91). *Garang*, son of *Deng*, is a sky-god often associated with the sun (ibid 84-89). *Abuk*, mother of *Deng* and the equivalent of the Nuer *Buk*, the archetypal woman and mother, presides over the occupations of women. Unlike *Buk*, she is not immanent in the crow, but to some Dinka people, she is immanent in a small grey water snake (ibid 90), and thus, like *Buk*, is a river or water deity.

*Abuk, Deng, and Garang* form a Dinka triad which is very similar to the numerous triads of Egyptian religion.<sup>44</sup> However, the archetypal nature of the family unit prevents any speculation that could link the two religions through this symbolism.

Through the sky deities from the Above, the Nilotic peoples come closest to contacting their supreme divinities. The female divinities in particular, *Abuk* and *Buk*, are the highest manifestation of divinity accessible to earth-bound humanity, and unlike all other deities discussed so far, they are believed to manifest in earthly form: the pied crow and the water snake. These female divinities seem to straddle the invisible spiritual world and the earthly realm, for both are spirits of the above, and at the same time, the spirits of the life-giving water of the river. That one should be conceived as a bird becomes increasingly important as this exploration of Nuer and Dinka religious systems progresses in its analogy of the religious context of the Predynastic mortuary figurines. But, before a discussion of the figurines, the following brief explication of the *colwic* and *Kwoth cuekni* spirits of the above begins to open up the Nuer and Dinka approach to the afterlife, the relationship of special "souls" to their supreme gods, and the possibility of similar Predynastic beliefs as precursors to the institutionalisation of divinity inherent in the king.

### **Colwic Spirits**

The *colwics* are Spirits of the Above and are the most unusual of Nuer deities, for they are created through the death of a human being by lightning strike. The spirit of the victim immediately becomes pure spirit and merges with *Kwoth nhial*. God has chosen this person and, through direct intervention, has taken the *yiegh*, or what we might term the "life" or "rational soul" (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 144,155). The Dinka share this attitude to a limited extent, but do not make a divinity out of the dead person, even though Divinity has "struck them on the head" (Lienhardt 1961: 93).

For the Nuer, more concrete concepts of "soul" and personal spirit have developed around the *colwic* spirits than are applied to the average Nuer individual. These concepts will be explored later in the discussion on eschatology and mortuary rituals.

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<sup>44</sup> See Griffiths (1996) on triads in the Predynastic.

### **Kwoth cuekni - the spirit of twins and the spiritual importance of birds**

The world of Nuer Spirits of the Above includes the phenomenon of twins, *Kwoth cuekni*. Twins have a special place in Nuer culture, as they often do in African culture generally, although frequently ominous (Parrinder 1962: 93). To the Nuer, they are spirit (*Kwoth*). They believe that twins are birds (*dif*), and as birds, they fly in the sky and hence are near to God and special to God (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 80). Also, rather than two, they are one person and have a single personality, despite the recognition that, in a physical, practical sense, they are two separate individuals and are treated socially as such (ibid 128). It is the *tie*, or soul, of a twin, which is a bird (ibid 132).

In marriage and death, the Nuer treat twins differently from other individuals. In particular, no mortuary ceremonies are held for them, for they cannot be separated, even in death, nor, as a person of the sky when alive, do they attend mortuary ceremonies for others. Despite the taboo against their participating in mortuary ceremonies, their association with birds is especially connected to death (ibid 129), and their graves stand out from the rest. In death, their spirits go up into the air (ibid 130), like the *colwic* spirits. Also, like the still-living Dinka spear masters (see ahead), the body of the Nuer twin is treated specially and laid on a platform in the grave, unlike the body of an ordinary person (ibid 130).

This discussion of twins as birds might seem a little out-of-place in an analysis of Predynastic Egyptian mortuary beliefs, but the connection between a soul and a bird is similar to the Egyptian *b3* (*ba*), that aspect of the human soul to take the form of a human-headed bird. This connection augments the many small and large correspondences that can be found between these two Nilotic religions, even through they are separated by several thousand years. For both the Nuer and Egyptians, birds suggest spiritual connotations, which manifest as those deities connecting the invisible, spiritual, immortal realm of the sky with the visible, mortal, human realm of the earth.

For the Nuer these spiritual birds are the souls of twins and the combination sky and earth goddess, *Buk*, who takes the form of a pied crow. For the Egyptians, the human-headed bird soul (*b3*), the falcon god (Horus), and the kite goddesses (Isis and Nephthys) mediate between humanity and the celestial realm.

The *b3*, as a bird, is freed at death from the body during the day and allowed to "go forth" from the tomb. But its earthly nature forces it to return by night to the tomb for sustenance. It transgresses the free world of the spirit and the dependent world of the body.

Horus as the celestial falcon god represents the absolute authority and power of the sun god Re on the throne as he rules the temporal world. At the same time Horus manifests in earthy form as the king, bestowing on him a semi-divine status. Horus, as a bird deity, mediates between the supreme god, Re, and humanity, and brings the power and order of the sun into the lives of ordinary Egyptians through the centralised political and social structures.

Isis and Nephthys are also birds. As daughters of the earth (Geb), and the sky (Nut), they belong to both earth and sky. Encompassing these two realms, they mediate between the funeral on earth and the celestial afterlife as they mourn and protect the dead king on his way to his immortal home in the night sky. Besides the mortuary connection, other nuances of the Nuer twins haunt the Egyptian sisters, Isis and Nephthys. For although the mythology identifies them merely as sisters, only their crowns separate their otherwise identical iconography. While their female form characterises all Egyptian female deities, the mirrored poses of Isis and Nephthys as they guard Osiris' body suggest a more deeply shared identity, like that of the *Kwoth cuekni*. In light of the numerous correspondences already apparent between the Predynastic and Sudanese Nilotes, the bird deities and spirits seem to intimate a common ancestry or influence, which gradually diverged over the centuries, leaving only faint traces of a distant relationship.

In both the Nuer and Egyptian beliefs, only very special souls are birds or "go to god". In Dinka belief, all *yeighs* "go to god", but their emphasis on the special need to ritualise only the death of their spiritual leader (see ahead), compares with the Egyptian emphasis on the mortuary rituals and structures for the king. In the earliest records of Egyptian eschatology, only the king's soul is immortal and is singled out from all others for special treatment and preservation. We do not, however, know how the ordinary people conceived of the afterlife. Certainly their graves, complete with grave goods, suggest some belief in an afterlife, but the ritual focus on the immortality of the

king's soul in the forms of a *b3* and *k3*, especially the former, characterises Egyptian eschatology as African, with the emphasis of the spiritual importance of birds and the immortality of the leader.

### The Spirits of the Below

The Spirits of the Below, the *kuth piny* (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 63-105) of the Nuer and the Clan-divinities of the Dinka, raise some of the most challenging points for understanding Predynastic Egyptian religion.

#### Buk and Abuk - Spirits of Above and Below

A particularly important Nuer spirit already mentioned, *Buk*, can be considered both as a *kuth nhial* or a *kuth piny*. Her Dinka counterpart, *Abuk*, is a female Free-divinity. As a bird, Buk is associated with the above and therefore, like all birds, a symbol of "Spirit and loved by God" (ibid 80). As a spirit of the below, she is associated with rivers and streams (ibid 31). Unfortunately, Evans-Pritchard does not develop the "theology" surrounding the Nuer *Buk*, but he did indicate that she is associated with a similar Dinka deity, *Abuk*. Fortunately Lienhardt provided more in depth information on *Abuk*, the Dinka mother of *Deng*, one of their primary spirits of the above.

Like *Buk*, *Abuk* is associated with streams and rivers. Unlike the other air or sky spirits, both take on a living form, become immanent in the world and involved in daily human activities, specifically those of women. Like the Nuer women, the Dinka women's main tasks are horticultural. The Dinka women (and perhaps the Nuer by implication) appeal to *Abuk* for plentiful harvests (ibid 90). Despite Lienhardt's recognition of *Abuk* as "the archetypal woman and mother, [who] presides over the occupations of women" (Lienhardt 1961: 89), he still claimed that she is of minor importance compared to the others. These days, of course, we ask "of minor importance to whom?", since at least 50% of the Dinka population must find *Abuk* of extreme importance.<sup>45</sup>

The combination of snake, grain, and water as symbols of female bounty occur repeatedly in world mythologies. In agricultural, as opposed to pastoral, forager, or horticultural societies, these symbols

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<sup>45</sup> For a reassessment of the importance of women in Nilotic tribal culture see (Burton 1979; 1982).

find widespread iconographic expression, often in association with small female figurines. Prehistoric Mesopotamia is a particularly good example. The Southern 'Ubaid female figurines have eyes in the shape of date-pits (Maisels 1990: 313) (dates were a vital staple of life to these people), and the children of those nursing figurines are in the form of snakes.<sup>46</sup> The eyes of some of the Neolithic Palestinian clay figurines are shaped like kernels of wheat (Bar-Yosef 1991: 37). Shelley Smith (1984) in her study of the gender implications in Predynastic Egyptian artefacts observed that markings on the female figurines link women with water, bread (ibid 114), grain, and plants (ibid 107).

For the Dinka, *Abuk* is not only a deity of harvest and plenty, but the mother of their main "Free-divinities" or spirits of the above, *Garang* and *Deng*. In some myths she is mother of one and spouse of the other (Lienhardt 1961: 88-89, 103, 160-1), displaying the ambiguity of many primordial deities and the non-dogmatic nature of Dinka cosmology (ibid 91). The three Free-divinities, *Deng*, *Abuk*, and *Garang*, form a kind of a trinity which combines the elements of rain, vegetation, and sun, respectively (ibid 161), and constitutes an original family: father, mother, and son, respectively.

Although both Dinka and Nuer cultures are patrilineal and appear to favour male authority, these people revere the fact that women bring life into Dinka and Nuer lineages. In both groups, women more than men are deeply involved with the archetypal female, *Buk* and *Abuk*, as mother of the gods, protectress of women, and a deity associated with women's activities: the harvest, bringing new life, and collecting the elementary symbol of life for both pastoral and agricultural productivity - water. Although Lienhardt assigned little importance to this female divinity (Lienhardt 1961: 89), and Evans-Pritchard scarcely acknowledged her general and wide-spread importance in the few mentions he gave her (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 31-33; 81; 125-7; 212; 45-6; 212), both writers, however, did acknowledge that she provides protection and is the source of life.

On the infrequent occasion when *Buk* is the focus of sacrifice, she receives the blood in the sacrifice of cows (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 46). The importance of cows is reflected in the Nuer word for cattle, *Yang*, which means "cow" (ibid 203). The other deities, including the highest, receive only the blood

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<sup>46</sup> I have applied the methodology employed in this thesis to the prehistoric figurines of Mesopotamia in my B.A. Honours thesis (Relke 1996).

of oxen or bulls. These male animals nevertheless stand in for *Yang*. In turn, the *yang(s)* represent human beings in the sacrifice. Lienhardt also pointed out that the Dinka sacrifice cows only to avert great calamities (Lienhardt 1961: 297), and the Nuer sacrifice fertile cows only at mortuary rituals for senior members (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 202). Thus cows, rather than oxen or bulls, are the most precious of sacrificial beasts.

It is perfectly reasonable to conclude that cows, therefore, have a hidden sacredness, not obvious in the preoccupation with oxen and bulls. In practical terms, cows create more cattle and are thus too important to sacrifice, except metaphorically. Rather, oxen, which cannot reproduce, are set aside in place of cows as sacrificial beasts, and bulls, which are fertile, are sacrificed very rarely (*ibid* 202). But as symbols of the archetypal mother, cows may have a spiritual value apart from their practical value, as do the oxen whose sacrifice unites the community with divinity, aside from the practical provision of food.

The value of cows may not be hidden to the Nuer and Dinka, but rather to the male anthropologist, not privy to the rituals and beliefs of the women, whether he consulted them or not. Predynastic cow images thought to be Hathor come to mind. The difference is that for the Nuer and Dinka, the cows are most important to women and the oxen to men, whereas Hathor had a universal appeal. The principal female divinity becomes universally important to the Dinka and Nuer only in the rare sacrifices mentioned above, and such a sacrifice is discussed ahead in relation to Egyptian practice.

Through the contemporary Sudanese mortuary and mediating roles of birds, the immanent and accessible nature of female deities, and the elevation of the cow and its relationship to the female divinity *Buk*, the combined female, bird, and cow symbolism of the Ma'ameriah and Khizam figurines begins to develop meaning in the comparable society of the Predynastic Egyptians.

Moving further down the Nilotic cosmic hierarchy, additional explication of Predynastic imagery, often associated with female figures on painted D-ware and present on the earliest Dynastic artefacts, can be obtained through a discussion of the more earth-bound spirits attached to specific Sudanese Nilotic clans. The following discussion of clan imagery strengthens the ethnographic parallel further,

and by implication, reinforces the analogy between the two religious systems of contemporary Nilotes and Predynastic Egyptians, reinforcing the place of the figurines within a Nilotic system.

### **Totemic spirits and Clan-divinities**

While spirit, *Kwoth*, is all one to the Nuer, they differentiate between great and little spirits. The great spirits are the *kuth nhial*, spirits of the above, while the little spirits are the *kuth piny*, spirits of the below. These lesser spirits, while still "refractions" of the great spirit, are "conceived of as immanent in creatures and things on earth" (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 63), and unlike the other spirits, with the exception of *Buk* and *Abuk* to a certain extent, find earthly expression and specification. They manifest in the totemic spirits, which can denote living animals, plant species, or inanimate objects (ibid 64).

While the Spirits of the Above and Free-divinities can possess individuals, they are thought of as separate from these individuals and to have their own identity. On the other hand, the totems and Clan-divinities cannot be dissociated from their earthly appearances, "for it is only by reference to them that they are known at all" (ibid). This relationship between the totem and creature or object is spiritual, rather than material, as in the relationship between twins and birds. For example, the lion is not a totem, but the spirit of lion (as a species, not an individual) is one totem to which the Nuer direct sacrifices and petitions.

Lienhardt (1961: 104-146) called these similar powers in the Dinka system, Clan-divinities, as they are specific to individual Dinka clans, unlike the more universal "Free-divinities". In both Dinka and Nuer societies, these totems or Clan-divinities take the usual forms of totems found in small-scale societies – animals, plants, and objects. We usually associate totems with animals and birds, but for the Dinka and Nuer, domestic utensils, burnt grass, flesh in general, and even smallpox can become totems.<sup>47</sup> As in similar small-scale societies, the totem is respected and protected by its clan, and is both feared and propitiated. Lienhardt (1961: 110) demonstrated the nature of Clan-divinities and totems through the recounting of a conversation with a Dinka member:

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<sup>47</sup> For a list of Nuer totems, see Evans-Pritchard (1956: 63-105). For a list of Dinka totems, see (Lienhardt 1961: 110).



When I asked what I myself should invoke as my clan-divinity, it was half-jokingly suggested that I should invoke Typewriter, Paper, and Lorry, for were these not the things which always helped my people and which were passed on to Europeans by their ancestors?

The Nuer and Dinka find self-identification and a self-referential emblem in their totem or Clan-divinity, a spiritual power which protects and helps them if given proper attention and respect through sacrifice and a special regard for the individual species or objects which symbolise them. For the Nuer, totems originate in extraordinary experiences which they interpret as divine interventions through certain creatures, plants, or objects (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 94).

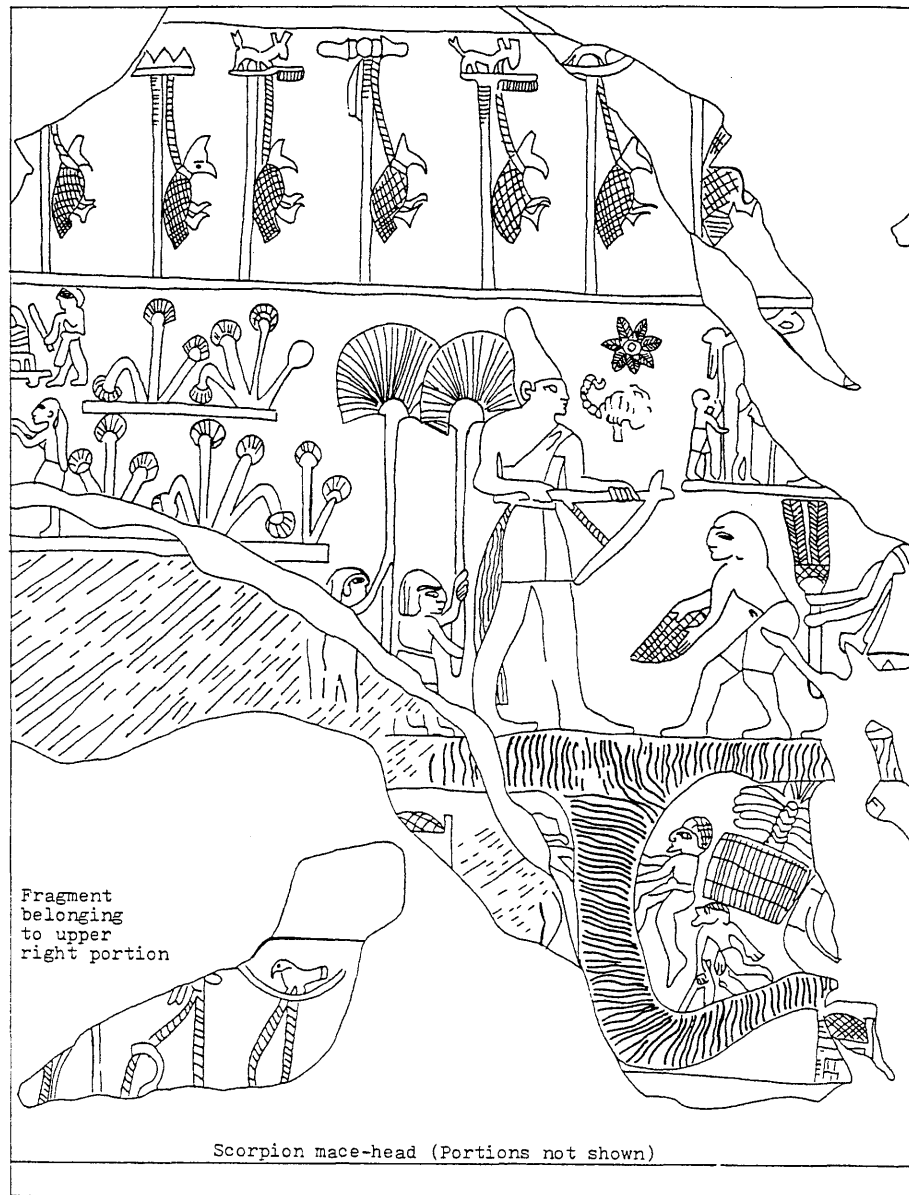
As with emblematic/totemic species of other cultures, most take the form of living creatures, such as lions, crocodiles, lizards, snakes, trees, birds, fish, plants. If the culture is prone to making artefacts, their emblems appear on ritual and clan objects, as in the case of the Predynastic Egyptians. Images of falcons, jackals, baboons, cows' heads and horns, bulls, scorpions, birds, and lions appear on Predynastic and early Dynastic artefacts. The Narmer palette (Fig. 4.5) is famous for its falcon, bull, and cows' heads. The "Scorpion" macehead is named for the association of the king with the scorpion imaged close to him (Fig. 4.6). The "cities" palette (Baines 1995: 112-3) (Fig. 4.7) depicts a lion, scorpion, and three falcons. The missing emblems may include the bull, catfish, vulture, cobra, and elephant (ibid 112).

Standards topped by what appear to be cattle horns, some in conjunction with a bird (falcon?), appear on late Predynastic decorated ware (Fig. 2.7), and standards carrying images of falcons and a jackal appear on the Narmer palette. The falcon became the dominant emblem, signifying the Horus name of the king written within the serekh (Fig. 4.8). The Horus falcon symbolised the ruler of a united Egypt and later merged with the sun god, Re, to form Re-Harakty.

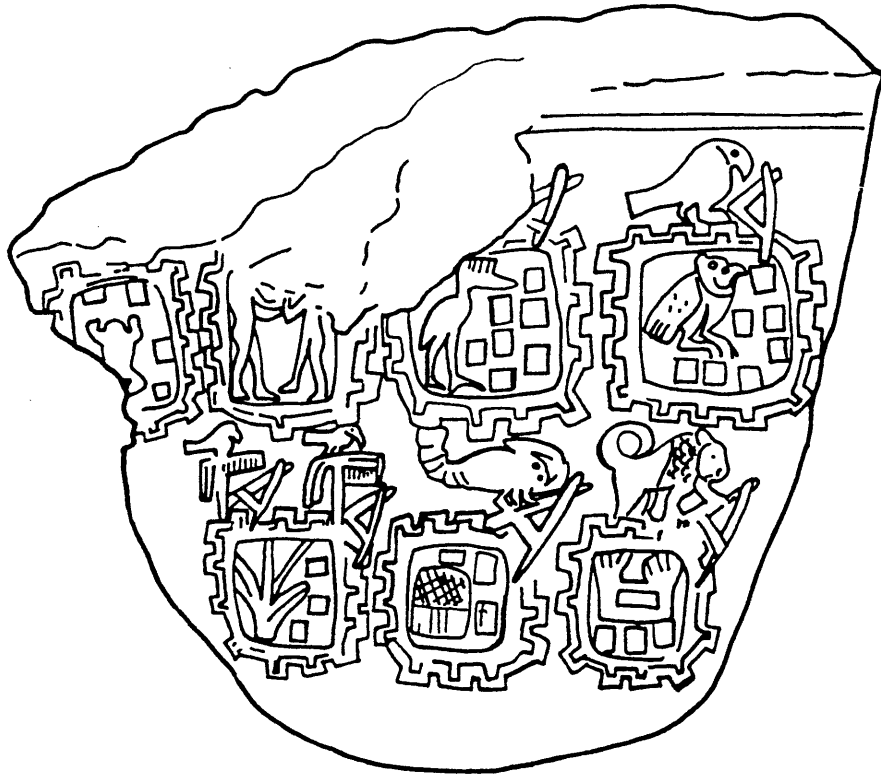
Other, less identifiable emblems appear on late Predynastic and early Dynastic imagery. Following two falcon standards and a jackal standard on the Narmer palette is something resembling a stomach with oesophagus attached. The same standard also appears on the Narmer macehead (Fig. 4.9). Baines (1995: 120) described it as a "cushion-like object" belonging to the king. On the Narmer



FIG. 4.5  
Narmer Palette



**FIG. 4.6** Scorpion macehead



**FIG. 4.7** Cities palette

palette and macehead, an equally ambiguous form appears on the jackal standards. Standards on the "Scorpion" macehead include other objects which may be inanimate or symbolic.<sup>48</sup> Already mentioned, some of the Nuer and Dinka totems and Clan-divinities are equally strange, and include such things as flesh in general (for the Spear-master clans), winnowing trays, head rings, comets, rope, and even diseases.

While these standards probably became royal emblems, as Baines claimed (1995: 120-1), they possibly originally signified the various clans first unified under one ruler – Narmer or Scorpion. The ruler on the Narmer palette is accompanied by not only his "sandal bearer" but by a Leopard-skin priest (Baines 1995: 120,132). These four standards and *sem* priest, wearing the leopard skin, became emblematic of the *sed* festival in general (ibid 120). Egypt celebrated its unification repeatedly at the beginning of each reign (ibid 146), and thus these four standards could have come to represent unification from Narmer's time onward.

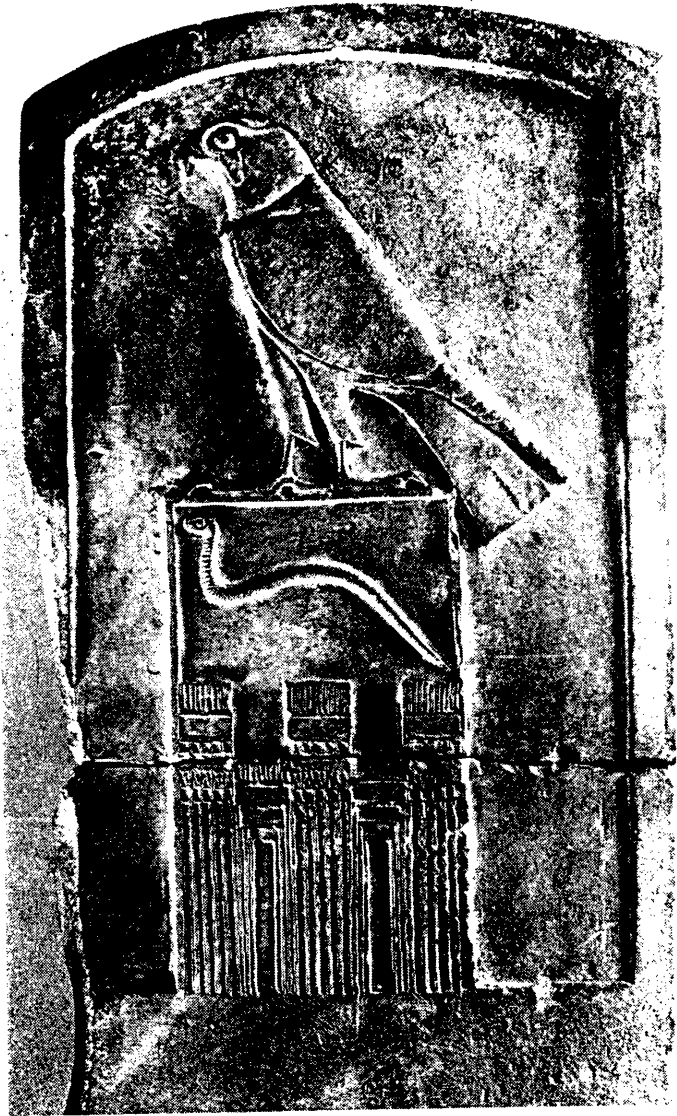
Throughout the Dynastic period, Horus dominated as the symbol of rulership of a united Egypt, and many of the other emblematic animals developed into some of the well-recognised theriomorphic and therianthropic deities of Dynastic Egypt: Anubis, Khenthamenthis, Wepwawet, Hathor, Seth, Thoth, and Selket, with the bull iconography continuing to signify the combination of royal and divine power through the bulls of Apis, Mnevis, and Buchis.

Baumgartel (1960: 148) made the important observation that among the early representations of deities there is no sign of Re. Later, of course, Re was indicated hieroglyphically by a simple circle with a dot in the centre, a kind of cosmic eye. Baines made a similar observation that "no god is shown in a non-animal form" (Baines 1995: 114). He reasoned that either some categories of deity could not be represented, or that representations have been lost (ibid 114-5). Although he favoured the latter explanation, judging from the discussion thus far, the former is probably the more accurate.

Understanding the reluctance of African cultures to represent their high deities in iconic form makes the absence of Re, as a supreme celestial authority, predictable. Neither are the other cosmogonic

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<sup>48</sup> For a discussion of some of these more symbolic standards, see (Baumgartel 1960: 142-153).



**FIG. 4.8** Horus as falcon as part of a serekh

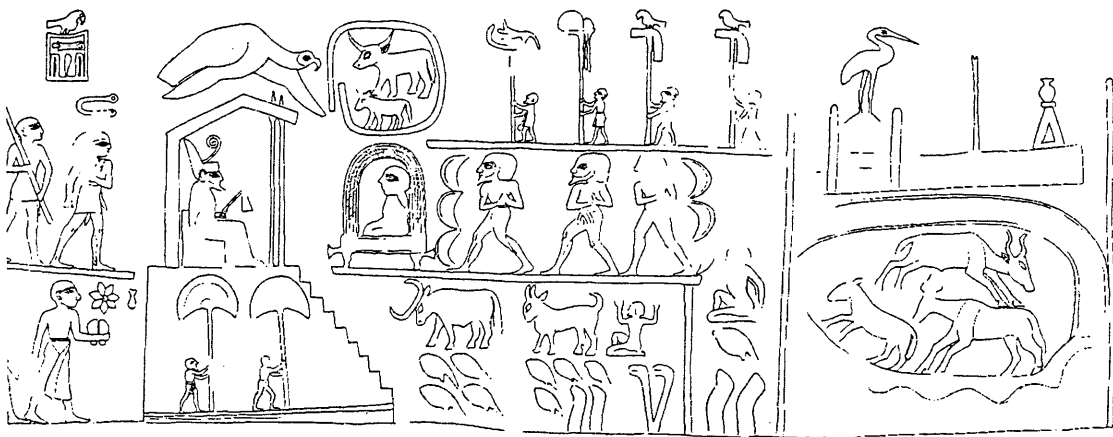


FIG. 4.9 Narmer Macehead

deities of the sky and air, such as Nut, Shu, and Tefnut, indicated on Predynastic artefacts. Geb, although god of the earth, also functions as a higher, cosmogonic deity, and hence is also not found. Isis, Nephthys, and Osiris are not represented either, at least, as far as scholarship has determined to date.

None of the deities identified on Predynastic artefacts is a supreme deity or cosmogonic deity responsible for the functioning and creation of the cosmos. The deities represented are those which interact with human beings; those which represent groups of people - clans or nomes; and those which take their symbolic forms from the natural world in the form of living creatures and earthly objects, in the same way that the Nuer and Dinka totems and Clan-divinities take their forms. With regard to the figurines, we could be looking at symbolic representations of lower or intermediate deities or spirits that link the immediate world of the Predynastic peoples to the spiritual world. Contact with the spirit world is typically made through ritual and sacrifice, and the following explication of Nuer and Dinka ritual brings even closer together the religions of contemporary Nilotic tribes and the Predynastic Egyptians, and places a female deity at the centre of an important Egyptian sacrifice.

## Religious Symbols and Ritual

### The Shrine and Nuer and Dinka Spirits

A simple shrine seems to be the only religious structure of the Nuer and Dinka peoples. The Nuer place their *riek* shrines at various locations for various sacrifices and associate them with *Kwoth nhial*, spirits, and ghosts (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 162, 206). The shrine's basic construction consists of a mound of earth, a forked stick mounted on top (Fig. 4.10), and at least one permanent tethering peg for securing the sacrificial animal. The community shrine can be positioned in the courtyard, in the kraal, or beside the central hearth in the cattle byre (ibid 206). The home shrine for domestic ceremonies is erected in front of the family dwelling (ibid) and is often simply the forked stick alone, serving as an "altar of God within the home, God of the hearth" (ibid 114).



The Dinka *yik* shrine is often also merely a forked stick secured in the ground, but the shrines of their religious specialists, the spear-masters, include a number of smooth, small, dome-shaped mounds (Lienhardt 1961: 261-265) positioned near their dwellings, signifying the ancestor(s) of the inhabitants (ibid 262). The warrior clans of the Dinka erect mud domes to their ancestors, at which offerings are made to the dead. Mounds also provide access to "the above", where divinity abides: "The way in which terrestrial being may approach Divinity is by going high, by levitation, or sometimes by building a mound or 'pyramid'" (ibid 32). These mounds sometimes resemble bulls, have horns attached to them, and contain earth from a dead warrior's grave (ibid 263). Sometimes small mud bulls comprise part of the funerary ritual objects.<sup>49</sup> At these shrines, which vary from one part of Dinkaland to another, "the dead are in some sense still living presences, accepting offerings there made to them" (ibid 264).

A notable expression of the Nilotic ritual mound is the "pyramid" of Ngundeng, also called Dengkur, begun by the Nuer prophet Ngundeng and completed by his son, Gwek (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 305-6) (Fig. 4.11). It stands 50-60 feet high, with a diameter of about 100 feet. According to Evans-Pritchard, the mound was built in honour of *Deng*, a spirit of the above (ibid 306). Decorated with elephant tusks on the mound and base, it became a cult site, taking sacrifices of specifically marked black and white oxen to *Bungdit*, the mother of *Deng*, whom we know from Dinka mythology as the goddess *Abuk*.

A number of other "pyramid" structures dot the Dinka landscape, built in honour of powerful prophets, and thought to serve as their tombs in which they were buried alive (Howell 1948). The association of a pyramidal mortuary mountain connecting earth to the sky god, and the inclusion of specially marked cattle with a spiritual significance are reminders of the Egyptian royal mortuary cult, worship of the sun god, Re, and the cattle cults which included the specially marked bulls, symbol of the high god. But despite the obvious similarity to the Egyptian pyramids, Howell rejects a connection, favouring an indigenous origin, reflecting the shape of the cattle byre and the veneration and spiritual significance

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<sup>49</sup> While this use of mud cattle could be linked to the concept of the highest divinity, the use of mud oxen as "dolls" challenges assumptions about discrete categories of spiritual and secular artefacts. Considering the Nuer Dinka examples, figurines in other small-scale societies which are used as dolls may also have divine associations, whether animal or human.



**FIG. 4.10** Nuer Riek shrine

of cattle (ibid 53). Whether the connection is historical or coincidental, it is still yet another example that strengthens the analogy between the Predynastic Egyptians and the contemporary Nilotes.

Of course, to a future archaeologist, only the large and small earth mounds have a chance to be uncovered, with the occasional inclusion of bulls' horns and perhaps the odd mud bull figurine. The association with graves would not be apparent without the corpse or other indicators in the construction. Bulls' horns and mounds feature in prehistoric and Predynastic Egyptian remains: the mound of stones and the mound of sand at Hierakonpolis (Hoffman 1979: 127,131); the early-historic bulls' heads and horns at Saqqara; the bulls' horns found above Nubian Paleolithic graves (ibid 91); and the ben-ben stone of the historic Egyptians, which developed into the largest mound of all, the pyramid.

The Egyptian pyramid, as the representation of the primeval mound at the beginning of creation, found its prototype in the first mounds left after the receding of the Nile (Spencer 1982: 150-51). In the combination of mound and stake, we therefore can find an analogy with the world axis, connecting heaven and earth, often represented by a pyramid, ziggurat, mountain, pagoda, stupa, tree, or pillar in various world mythologies. This central point at which the material and spiritual worlds connect becomes in all religions the focus of ritual and often sacrifice, opening humanity during a sacred time in a sacred space to the often dangerous spiritual power behind or inherent in the universe.

### **The Sacrifice at the Centre of the Universe**

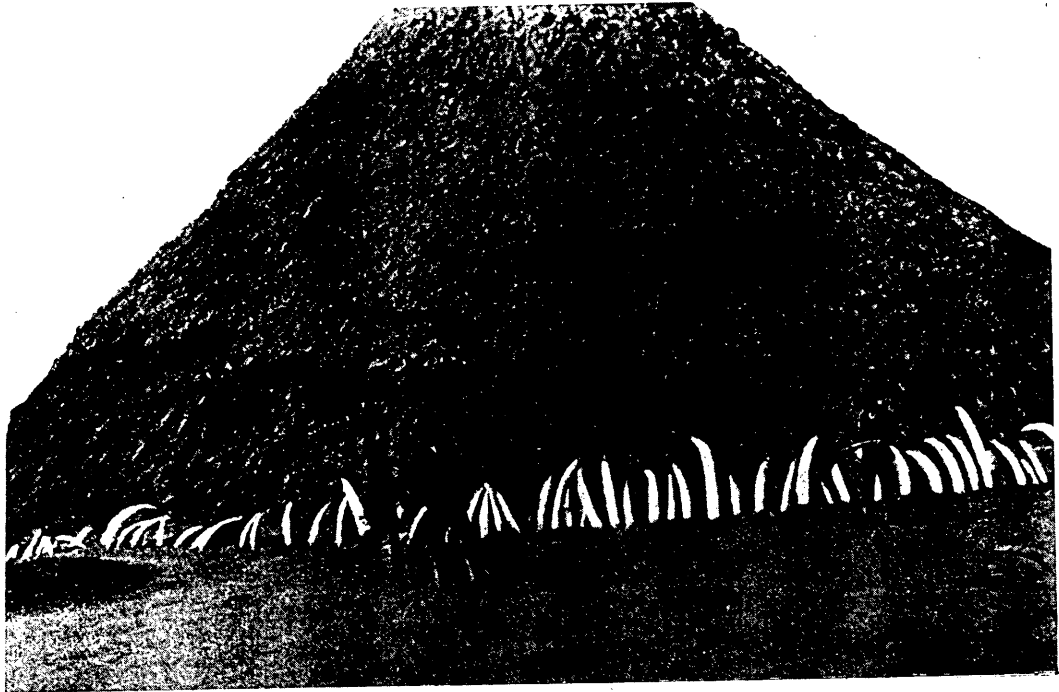
The close identification of the Nuer with their cattle, discussed in the section on the Supreme God, brings an added dimension of meaning to the many ox sacrifices forming the central religious ritual:

In sacrifice, then, some part of a man dies with the victim [the ox]. It can be regarded both as an absolution and a rebirth; and also as a self-immolation ... I would say that it is a substitution [for the man]." (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 281-2)

In substituting the person for the idea of the divine as expressed by the ox, the Nuer and Dinka individual is, in a sense, finding identity in divinity. For the entire community participating in the sacrifice, a kind of unity with divinity is achieved: "those attending the ceremony are most palpably members of a single undifferentiated body, looking towards a single common end" (Lienhardt 1961:



*a.* Ngundeng's pyramid (Lou)



*b.* Ngundeng's pyramid (Lou)

**FIG. 4.11** Pyramid of Nuer prophet Ngundeng

233), and "the whole victim corresponds to the unitary solidarity of human beings in their common relationship to the divine" (ibid 234). While on the practical level the beast is subsequently divided up and all present receive a meal, the spiritual value of sacrifice cannot be underestimated.

The ritual sacrifice of cattle presents the central feature of the rituals of many African pastoral cultures. Already mentioned, besides the Nuer and Dinka, are the Lozi, and numerous mentions of sacrifice throughout the literature indicate that cattle are the most valued animal. For example, the "ritual of the state bull" of the Bwambo of Tanzania unites disparate groups of the same territory and ends in a sacrifice at the central shrine from which all participants obtain a share of the meat as a symbol of unity (in the one bull) (Kimambo & Omari 1972: 118-9). In societies where humans were once the most valued sacrifice, now cattle take their place (Parrinder 1962: 63). For the LoDagga, only the sacrifice of the Bull of Childbearing can pacify an ancestor angry over the shortfall in the payment of bridewealth cattle (Ray 1976: 148).

Both Evans-Pritchard (1956: 197-285) and Lienhardt (1961: 10-27, 220-251, and extensively throughout) provided detailed descriptions and analyses of the cattle "cults" of the Nuer and Dinka. The two practices are very similar and so I will describe the main details as though they were one practice.

Sacrifices are performed at times of crisis and transition – birth, initiation, marriage, death, illness, troublesome ghosts, special expeditions, preventing blood-feuds (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 197) – and for the Dinka, all these and drought (Lienhardt 1961: 85, 101, 280). The victim to be sacrificed is set apart from the rest of the herd. It is first consecrated to "god", usually by having ashes rubbed on its back (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 261). Even though the animal may be dedicated to a "lesser" divinity, it is always indirectly sacrificed to the supreme spirit to whom it ultimately belongs. In the case of illness, understood to be the result of sin, the illness is transferred to the animal and the evil drains into the earth with the blood. For both the Nuer and the Dinka, the victim takes the place of a human being. In sacrifice, they sacrifice themselves to Spirit. Since cattle are their most precious possessions, these people also sacrifice what is most dear.

A shrine, as described above, is part of the sacrificial environment. In some cases, only a peg forms the shrine (Lienhardt 1961: 259). The elements of mound, forked branch, and peg testify to the material simplicity and economy of these semi-nomadic peoples. Yet, this elementary shrine locates the focus of Nuer and Dinka religious ritual. At this shrine, communal and family sacrifices re-establish the natural order between divinity and humanity. Sins of all kinds are expiated: homicide, incest, fraud, theft.

For the Nuer, senior male members conduct family sacrifices, and specially appointed representatives of the group conduct collective sacrifices (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 199). Individuals participate by pouring milk libations from consecrated gourds onto the tethering peg (Lienhardt 1961: 137, 276).

The Nuer Leopard-Skin Priests (Fig. 4.12), the most startling reminder of Egyptian practice (Fig. 4.15b), generally confine their sacrificial activities to the resolution of homicide and incest cases (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 298). Dinka sacrifices are performed by members of their special spear masters clans. In most cases, the animal is speared at the climax of the ritual, although sometimes it is suffocated or beaten to death.

The spear in both Nuer and Dinka sacrifice plays a prominent role, and in the officiant's hand it becomes an expressive tool of communication. Each Nuer man carries his spear constantly and "it is an extension and external symbol of the right hand, which stands for the strength, vitality, and virtue of the person" (ibid 233). Since women do not carry spears, only men can sacrifice (ibid 236). The spear symbolism for the Dinka is even more elaborate and "sacred", as it features in their central myth of *Aiwel Longar*, the first master of the fishing-spear (Lienhardt 1961: 171-218). Their sacred spears are often long metal points, up to 4 feet, embedded in short shafts, and are ceremonial rather than practical (ibid 252). It seems possible that the Predynastic Egyptians also practised sacrifices using ritual spears. Elise Baumgartel (1960: 32) mentioned the discovery of long stone blades found in Nagada 1 graves. Up to 41 cm. long, 4-5 cm. wide, and less than .6 cm. thick, they must have had ceremonial value only as these fragile stone blades are too long and thin to withstand any practical service.



**FIG. 4.12** Nuer Leopard-Skin Priest

After the sacrifice, the beast is cut and distributed according to status and kinship. "God takes the *yiegh*, the life. Man takes the *ring*, the flesh" (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 213), and the evil "goes into the earth with the blood of the cow" (ibid 220).<sup>50</sup> Evans-Pritchard did not detail the distribution of the various parts of the animal, but Lienhardt provided a diagram of the typical beast, indicating the distribution of the butchered animal (Fig. 4.13). For our purposes in a discussion of the African nature of Egyptian religion, two parts are significant: the forelegs and the hind legs, particularly the forelegs.

The right foreleg of the Dinka sacrificed ox or bull goes to the men of the sacrificer's lineage, whereas the left goes to the "girls" (I presume he means, "women"). The most significant part, the right hind leg, goes to the sacrificer's maternal kin (Lienhardt 1961: 24). The maternal kin are important because through the women, wealth and life come into the lineage (ibid 9; 127-9), despite the patrilineal nature of Dinka society.

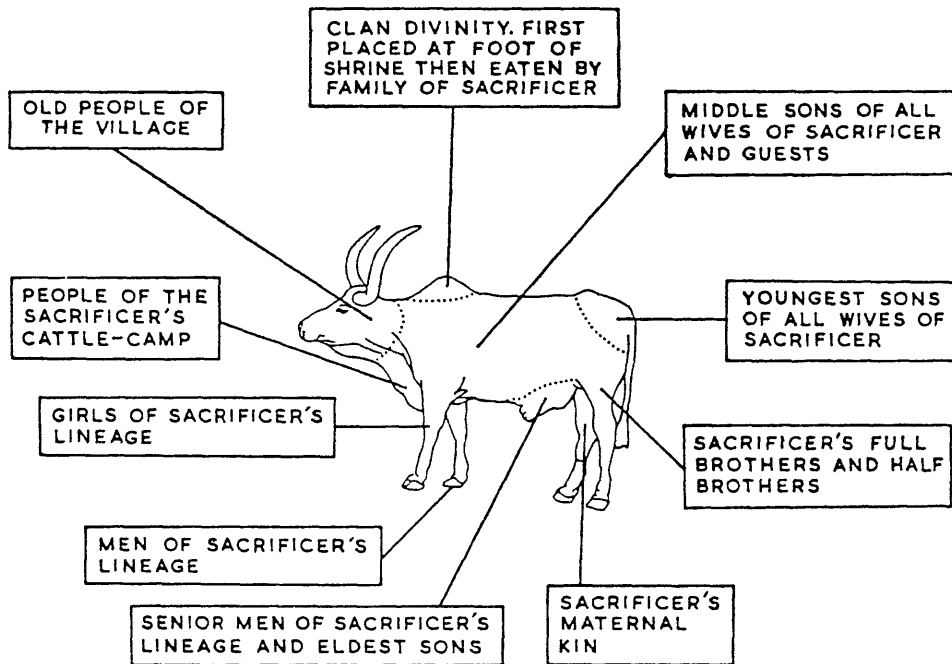
Elements of such basic simplicity, as expressed by the *reik* and *yik* shrines, appear in Dynastic Egyptian religious architecture, from the earliest mounds, such as the stone and sand mounds at Hierakonpolis, through to the early Dynastic step pyramids, the stone pyramids, and the obelisks capped by the pyramidal ben-ben stone. But even more specific evidence testifies that the earliest Egyptian religious ritual may have been very much like that of the Nuer and Dinka. I refer specifically to the illustrations of the region of the Imperishable Stars on the tombs and coffins of dead kings and nobles. This iconographic evidence cannot be traced back further than the c1450 BCE tomb of Senmut (Fig. 4.14), but references to the elements of the action depicted in these illustrations are found in the *Pyramid Texts* with references to "The Mooring Post" (*Pyr.* 794, 863, 2014, 2232) and "The Foreleg" (*Pyr.* 12, 79).

In the *Pyramid Texts*, the foreleg is an important mortuary offering to the deceased king and Osiris, and depictions of it on mortuary iconography persist throughout the Dynastic period (Figs. 4.15a,b). The foreleg was thought to contain the sustenance needed by the *k3* in the afterlife, and presentation

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<sup>50</sup> Although a male animal is sacrificed - usually an ox and in some special cases, a bull - the animal is called, by the Nuer, a cow (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 203).





**FIG. 4.13** Diagram of the distribution of the sacrificial beast

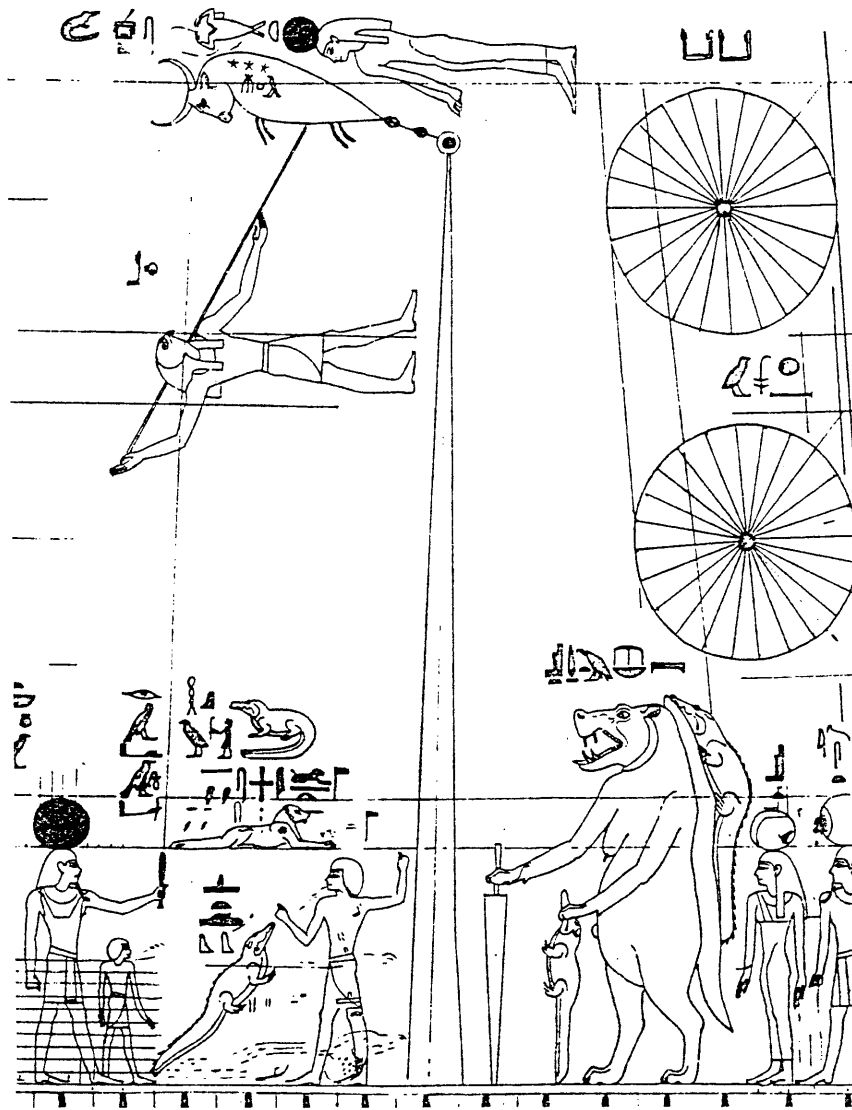
of the foreleg at the Opening of the Mouth ceremony transferred the vitality of the bull (also called *k3*) to the deceased (Gordon 1996: 34).

Figure 4.14 is an illustration from the ceiling of the Tomb of Senmut, Dynasty 18, 1473 BCE. Depicted is the region of "The Imperishable Stars", often referred to in the *Pyramid Texts* as the destination of the soul of the deceased king (*Pyr.* 139, 141, 374, 380). This region is the northern sky, which today revolves around the pole star, Polaris, but at the beginning of the Predynastic, c4000 BCE, revolved around an empty centre.

The most noticeable constellation to revolve around the empty centre at that time was Ursa Major, or the Big Dipper, as we see it. To the Ancient Egyptians, and probably the Predynastic Egyptians, the shape of this constellation suggested the leg of a sacrificed bull. It is the "Foreleg" of the *Pyramid Texts*. In some illustrations, an abstracted bull represents it, as in Senmut's tomb. In others, a full bull is indicated, and in some a hind leg, although Neugebauer and Parker state that, in the leg form, "it is always a bull's foreleg" (Neugebauer & Parker 1969: 183). The most frequent depiction is the abstracted bull, as far as the remaining evidence indicates (Neugebauer & Parker 1969: Book of Plates), to which Neugebauer and Parker referred as "a bull-headed leg" (*ibid* 188). The frequency of this version may result from the better preserved monuments of the New Kingdom, where it reappears after the Middle Kingdom preference for the foreleg (*ibid* 183).

Some Dynastic texts refer to the Foreleg as the foreleg of Seth, entrusted to Isis to hold (*ibid* 190-191). In the myths of the contention between Horus and Seth, Horus cuts off Seth's foreleg after Seth, in the form of a bull, tramples Osiris to death. Horus hurls the leg into the sky where it becomes a constellation, leaving it with Taweret, who prevents it from doing further harm (Baines & Pinch 1993: 42, 51). In another form of the myth, however, Seth is a red dog, whose foreleg gets thrown into the sky (Neugebauer & Parker 1969: 190-1). To confuse matters even more, one text identifies the foreleg as that of Osiris, bull of the sky (*ibid* 191).

The inscriptions on the monuments name the foreleg *Meskhethiu* or *Mes* for short (*ibid* 189), and tomb and coffin iconography specify a bull's leg, whether fore or hind. A rather graphic depiction of the

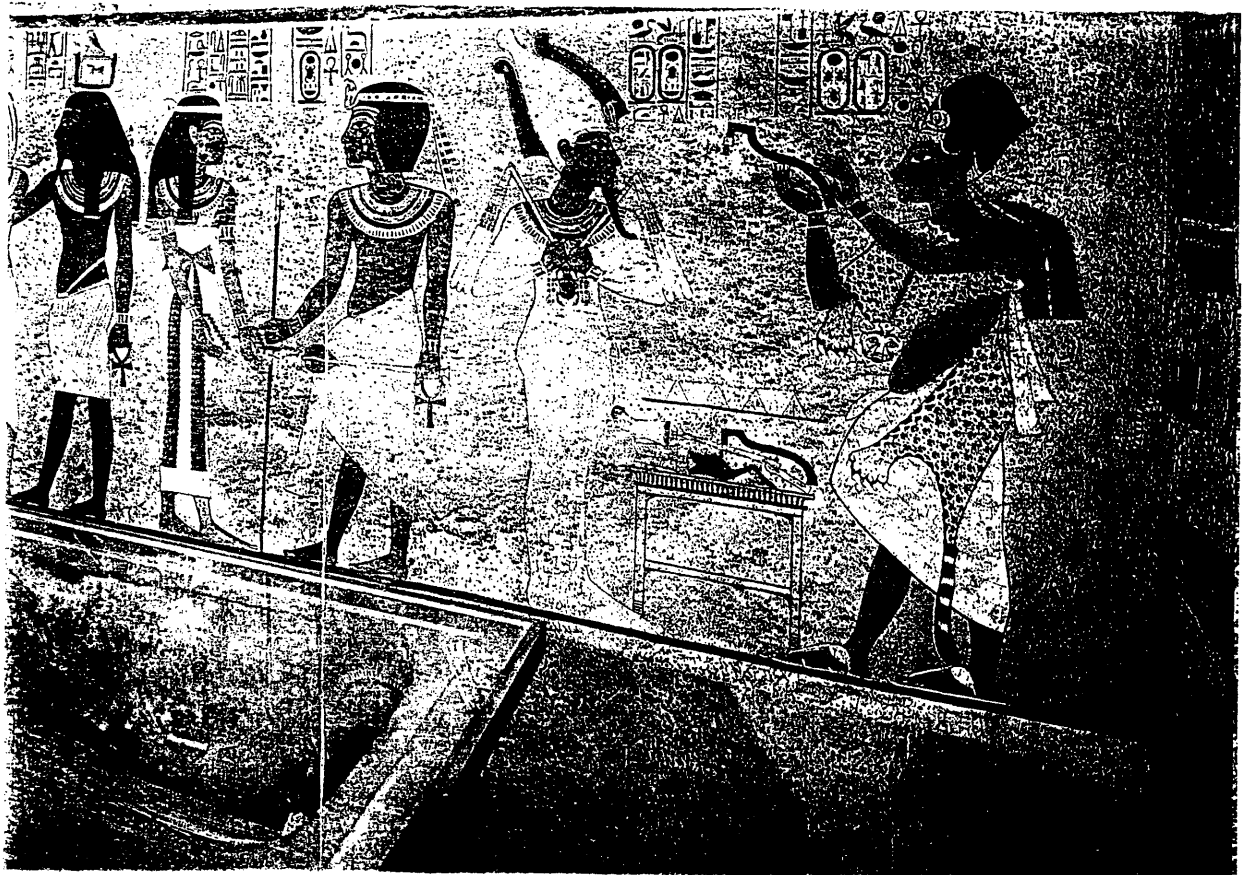


**FIG. 4.14** Detail from The Northern Sky, region of the Imperishable Stars  
Tomb of Senumt, 1473 BCE



**FIG. 4.15a**

Mortuary offering of a single foreleg to Osiris. From the *Book of the Dead of Naun* c1000 BCE.



**FIG. 4.15b** The foreleg offering during the ritual of the Opening of the Mouth in the painted burial chamber of Tutankhamen's tomb

cutting of the foreleg appears in a relief from Princess Idut's tomb at Saqqara, c 2410 BCE (Fig. 4.15c). Iconographic evidence indicates that the forelegs of living calves were severed, much to the distress of their mothers, as expressed in the illustrations (Weigall 1915). In a scene from the Opening of the Mouth ceremony of Hunefer, a distraught cow follows her calf, whose fresh stump from a severed foreleg drips blood onto the floor. Meanwhile, attendants rush the severed leg to the ceremony.<sup>51</sup>

Tethered to the Mooring Post, the bull's leg indicates that the Mooring Post is at the centre of the region of the Imperishable Stars, like a sacrificial tethering peg, and that the "Foreleg", or *Mes*, revolves around it, as Ursa Major did at that time. In the case of Senmut's tomb illustration, the Foreleg is on the left along with the "sacrificer", a falcon headed deity. Neugebauer and Parker referred to the falcon-headed figure performing the sacrifice as a deity named *An* or *Anu* (Neugebauer & Parker 1969: 191-2), not to be confused with the Sumerian high god, Anu. Considering the Horus and Seth myth, possibly this falcon-headed god could be Horus, but no hieroglyphic inscription on the monuments suggests this.

The Foreleg is variously tethered either to a long mooring post, as in the Senmut version, or to a shorter post/peg held by a large hippopotamus deity, whose name varies from monument to monument, leading Neugebauer and Parker to refer to her simply as *Hippo*. In some cases she is called "Isis" (Neugebauer & Parker 1969: 189, 190-1), in others, *Ipet* and *Ipy* (ibid 190-1). She is nearly indistinguishable from *Taweret*, the Hippopotamus goddess who protects during childbirth, and is called in one instance, *Wrt*, probably a simplification of *Taweret* (ibid 84). Like *Taweret*, *Hippo* is a composite theriomorphic deity comprising mainly a female hippopotamus with a pendulous breast, lion feet, crocodile teeth, and often with a crocodile on her back. The only difference is that *Taweret* holds her hieroglyphic symbol of protection (Fig. 4.17), whereas *Hippo* holds a peg or post to which the Foreleg is often tethered.

In most examples, *An* appears to be spearing the beast, as in Senmut's tomb, but in others, *An* appears to be holding a rope (Fig. 4.16). The spear represents more accurately the activity meant by

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<sup>51</sup> British Museum papyri 9901/5, from the cover of Faulkner (1985).



**FIG. 4.15c** Cutting the foreleg off a sacrificial bull.  
From the tomb of Princess Idut at Saqqara c 2410 BCE

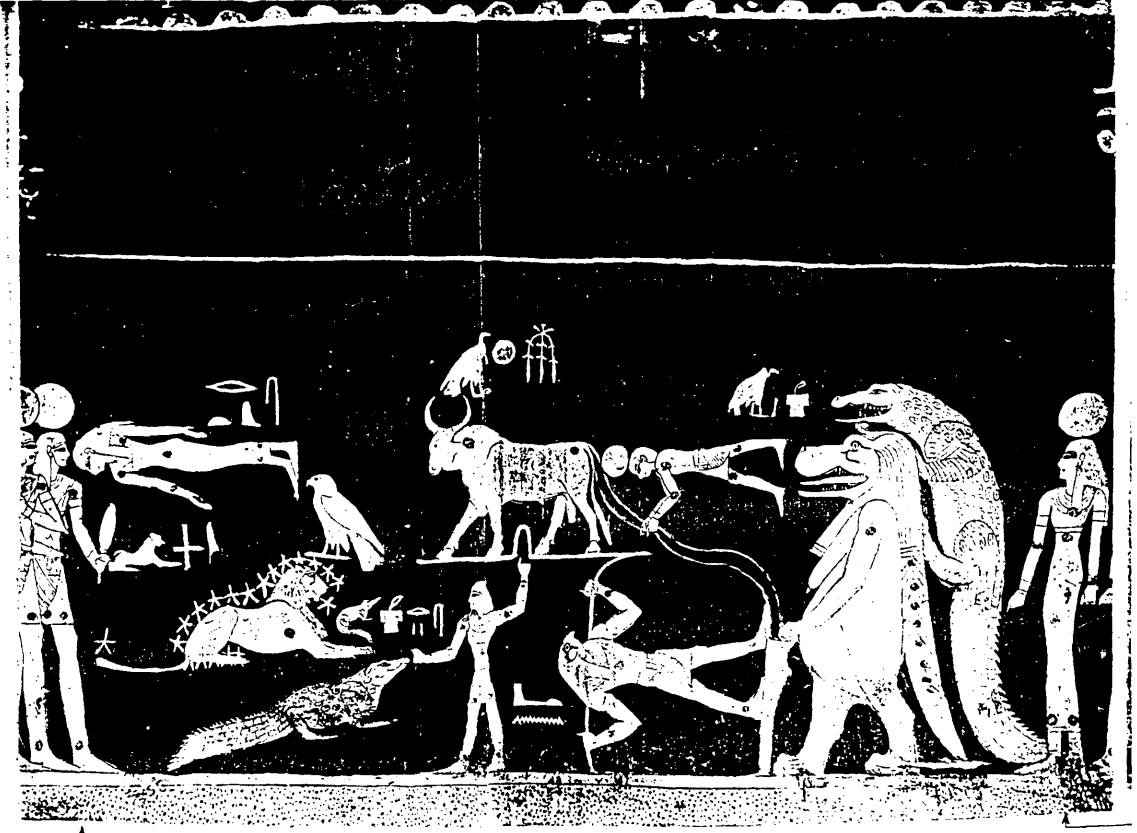
the scene, for Neugebauer and Parker refer to this deity as "the spearing god" (ibid 192). Egyptian scribes and artists notoriously made mistakes when copying standardised iconography and texts. I think in this case, the reason could be that, by 1450 BCE, the original sacrifice represented by the illustration was no longer a central part of Egyptian official religion and so the loss of meaning led to errors in reproducing the imagery.

The combination of Foreleg (*Mes*), *An*, and *Hippo* never varies, although the positions do (ibid 183). The comparison between the sacrifice at the centre of the imperishable or immortal stars and the sacrifice at the centre of the Nuer and Dinka worlds should not be overlooked or underestimated. In these images, I believe, we are looking at the vestiges of a religious ritual practised in the prehistoric and Predynastic periods, which fell into disuse or was altered unrecognisably by the state priests with the development of new rituals more relevant to Dynastic Egyptian life. The Foreleg continued to be a central offering in the mortuary iconography, but *An* and *Hippo* either slipped entirely from the pantheon, as in the case of *An*, or perhaps served a more restricted role in the protection of pregnant women, as in the case of *Taweret*. That a female hippopotamus goddess should be at the centre of the main sacrifice needs further explication, for one would expect a supreme or at least major deity to be the focus of such important ritual. In the Senmut texts, she is identified as Isis, although if Isis is present, she normally stands behind *Hippo* (Neugebauer & Parker 1969: 189). Although only once is she referred to as *Wrt*, the Great One, her iconography suggests that she may have shared a past with *Taweret* and that the various recordings of her name are due to copying errors or lost information.

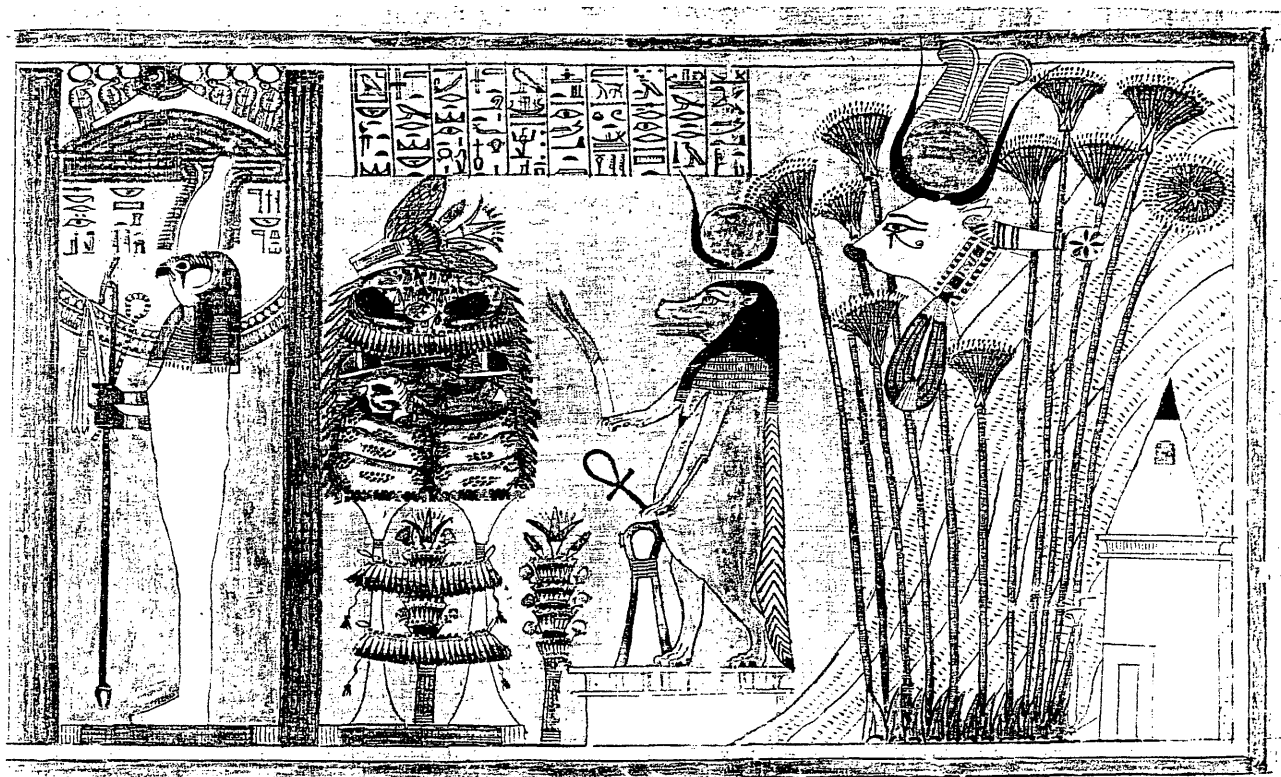
One suggestion as to the nature of *Hippo* comes from the rare sacrifices of cows made to *Buk*, as protector and source of life (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 46). Conceivably, a female deity was the focus of the Predynastic Egyptian sacrifice. Alternatively, the central sacrifice in the name of an invisible god could be conducted through a goddess resembling *Buk* or *Abuk*, and very much like *Taweret*, as giver and protector of life.

Bringing together the sacrifice at the centre of the Imperishable Stars and the sacrifice at the centre of Nuer and Dinka life through *Taweret* and *Abuk/Buk* is not the only explanation for the presence of a





**FIG. 4.16** Detail from the Region of the Imperishable Stars  
From the tomb of Seti I c 1300 BCE



**FIG. 4.17 Taweret or Ipet, Goddess of Protection**  
 Left to right: Sokar-Osiris, Taweret/Ipet, Hathor as cow

female deity at a sacrifice. *Hippo* can be understood in another way – as a totem spirit or Clan-divinity, protecting and uniting one clan among many. Clan protectors are pacified or petitioned by the sacrifice of cattle, for they can intervene in human affairs, where the Supreme God cannot. The lower on the scale of spirit, the more immanent the divinity, and the more elaborate and frequent the sacrifice (ibid 119). *Hippo* could have been an important totem or Clan-divinity in Predynastic Egyptian culture.

The Egyptian astronomical texts depicted in tombs rarely enter discussions of Egyptian religion. The deities, especially in the Northern Sky, are strangers in our general knowledge of Egyptian deities, especially those who stand at the heart of this region of immortality and the final home of the deceased king - *An* and *Hippo*. If any essential elements play a part at all in general discussions, it is a minor part, as *Taweret* or the Foreleg. Their anonymity or insignificance contradicts the importance of the celestial region, demonstrated by the references in the *Pyramid Texts* to the Foreleg, the Imperishable Stars, and the Mooring Post.

As demonstrated by Neugebauer and Parker's compilation of illustrations (Neugebauer & Parker 1969), during the entire history of Egypt, this scene appears on the tombs and coffins of deceased kings and nobles, indicating that at least at some time the players once held a prominent place in Egyptian religion. Perhaps the priestly formulation of the more familiar Ennead and the rationalisation of deities into a systematised genealogy supplanted them.

Another suggestion of a similar sacrifice comes from the protodynastic Narmer's macehead (Fig. 4.9), thought to depict an early sed-festival (Baines 1995: 118). To the right of the main activity is a kraal containing a bull or ox and two antelope. Above the kraal, an ibis, a heron, or a phoenix, sits on a reed shrine-like structure, and to the right stand a forked or notched staff and a jar on a plinth. The forked pole and jar echo the forked stick and libation gourds of the Nuer and Dinka sacrifice, while the meaning behind the enclosed animals is obvious. The bird is less easy to explain. Perhaps the sacrifice is intended for Thoth, a local heron god, or the mythical phoenix, the primordial bird rising from the ben-ben stone at the beginning of creation.

To sum up, the Sacrifice at the Centre of the Imperishable Stars identifies a number of possible Clan-divinities or Totems and possibly some higher divinities. Presiding over the sacrifice is *Hippo*, an emblematic or mediating hippopotamus divinity with lion and crocodile attributes. Nearby, but not always present, are *Lion*, *Croc*, *Sak* (a crocodile "totem"), a scorpion, a vulture, and a falcon or hawk (Neugebauer & Parker 1969: 183-190). The sacrificing officiant is a falcon-headed deity, *An*. Also present are two anthropomorphic beings, the goddess *Serket* and an unnamed man, who sometimes spears the crocodile and sometimes has his left hand raised and right hand gesturing towards the crocodile. The core group, however, includes *An*, the officiant; *Mes*, the sacrificial beast; and *Hippo*, the presiding deity. Absent is any reference to a supreme being such as Re, Atum, Ptah, or Amun, or any of the cosmogonic gods. While *Hippo* could be a female deity equivalent to *Buk* and *Abuk*, she could also be a totemic deity of the sacrificing clan represented here but probably long forgotten.

Indications are that sacrifice at the centre of the earliest Egyptian religious ritual involved the tethering of the bull or ox to a ceremonial post or peg. The animal would first have been consecrated to an invisible, supreme divinity, whose intervention was either invited or discouraged. The religious specialist, either priest or senior member, performed the sacrifice by spearing the animal, and the foreleg, the most honoured part, went to the most honoured individuals, or in the case of a mortuary sacrifice, went symbolically to the deceased or the god of the underworld. Presiding over the sacrifice would be a less remote, more accessible deity, such as *Taweret* or, in the case of the Narmer macehead, possibly Thoth.

The Egyptian sacrifice clearly concerns the fate of the soul in the afterlife, as this scene consistently appears on tomb ceilings and the inside of coffins. The contemporary Sudanese sacrifice, however, serves the living rather than the dead, for, unlike the Egyptians, the Sudanese do not have a well-developed mortuary culture. Despite this departure from the parallel, insight into Predynastic concepts of soul can be gleaned from contemporary Sudanese beliefs, which, under the right centralising forces, could develop to endorse the divinity and immortality of a king as they did elsewhere in Africa.

## The "Soul", Eschatology, and Mortuary Rituals

The Nuer deal with death quickly and without ceremony (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 144): "They may weep but they do not attend the burial, for death is an evil thing and only those who must get rid of the corpse should go near the grave" (ibid 144). However, death is not entirely final, for if hyenas dig up a corpse, the spirit will haunt the people (ibid 145), and so the body is buried carefully, on its right side facing west.

Like the Ancient Egyptians, the Nuer associate the passage of life with the sun's movement from east to west: life with the east and death with the west (ibid 1956: 145). The burial practices of Predynastic and Dynastic Egypt similarly placed the body facing west. Dynastic mythology also demonstrates a central concern for the preservation of the body, and the predation of jackals rather than hyenas was the threat. The disturbed dead haunted the Egyptians as well, and "improperly buried or untended corpses were held to be responsible for disease and torment" (Ritner 1999: 184).

The Dinka, as well, celebrate life rather than death. Mortuary ceremonies are brief. They strip the deceased of decorations, shave the head, wash and anoint the body with oil, and place it in a shallow oval grave. Like the Nuer deceased, the head faces west, as death is associated with the setting of the sun. Sacrifices complement the ceremony and are also conducted at later intervals to ensure the ghost does not disturb the living (Lienhardt 1961: 289).

Unlike the Ancient Egyptians and most likely the Predynastic Egyptians, the Nuer and Dinka do not have a highly developed eschatology, although the elementary forms of Nuer and Dinka religion are apparent in Egyptian philosophy. Like the Egyptians, the Nuer and Dinka believe that the afterlife resembles this life; that the body is buried but the soul "has joined God" (ibid 159). Although ghosts can return to haunt the living if unfinished business remains, essentially the Nuer and Dinka achieve immortality through continuation of the clan rather than continuation of the soul (ibid 162).

Comparable to Egyptian philosophy, the Nuer world view understands the human being to be composed of roughly three parts: the flesh (*ring*); the life (*yiegh*); and the soul (*tie*). At death, these three components separate, with the *yiegh* returning to "God". The *tie* becomes a shadowy entity, the ghost, which can trouble the living and sometimes must be propitiated. Evans-Pritchard made a

lengthy attempt to clarify these concepts, which may not always be so clear in Nuer philosophy. Since they do not like to talk about death, and prefer to focus on this life, the Nuer appear unconcerned about what happens in the next world (ibid 154), and hence were vague about afterlife beliefs.

The disparities between the Egyptian and Nuer eschatologies and funerary rites outweigh the similarities, making it necessary to turn to other African religions for a more convincing parallel. However, one can legitimately imagine that should the Nuer develop a more complex society, the special people, such the *colwics*, would become the focus of an increasingly complex funerary culture and eschatology. The *yiegh*, *tie*, and *ring* of these special people, like the *k3*, *b3*, and body of the Egyptian king, would receive specialised attention, including a mortuary sacrifice with the beast's honoured leg as the principal offering. Given the nature of the development of divine kingship cults in Africa, it is feasible that the *colwic* cult would be incorporated into any cult surrounding the development of a Nuer chief or king.

Most other Africans have a well-developed concept of the afterlife. The ancestors are "ever-living and watchful" (Parrinder 1962: 24), and as the "living dead" (Mbiti 1969: 83-91), they are propitiated and consulted in various ritual ways. The dead "are nearer than before"; as they are invisible, they can be anywhere (ibid 27). Ancestors are believed to fertilise the earth and promote the growth of crops (Parrinder 1962: 60). Nearer to God than humanity, they mediate between humanity and God (Mbiti 1969: 162): "God, however, rarely intervenes in the moral life of [humanity] on earth; for the most part, it is the ancestors who act as the official guardians of the social and moral order" (Ray 1976: 146).

Multiple souls form a common concept in African religion (Ray 1976: 133-140), with at least one of up to eight surviving death (Dieterlen 1965: 18; Parrinder 1962: 134). The surviving aspect may hover around the grave, be reborn into the family, or it may become a guardian spirit to the living. In the afterlife, the dead enjoy a similar life to the living, but at the same time, can be invoked at the grave, travel to the land of the dead, and be reincarnated (Parrinder 1962: 134-7). Often the ancestor's "soul" will be housed in an image or a shrine (Burland 1973: 223; Ray 1976: 140-146; Sieber 1973),

and the attention paid to it differs little from that which might be paid to a deity. Like the Dynastic Egyptian *k3* statues and their houses, these ancestor figures and shrines become the mediators between humanity and the dead.

Some ancestral spirits attain the status of divinity or near-divinity, such as *Nyikang* of the Shilluk. In this and other cases (Mbiti 1969: 163), the offerings and rituals surrounding them are so closely associated with the High God as to make them indistinguishable (ibid 163), resembling the relationship between the dead Egyptian king and the underworld god, Osiris.

Despite the widespread belief in a life in the hereafter in many African philosophies, usually such life only persists if those on earth remember the dead in ritual and thought (Mbiti 1969: 162), as in Nuer and Dinka belief. Remembrance usually takes the form of mortuary rituals, with subsequent offerings performed by the descendants, reminiscent of Egyptian practice. For those who leave no children, ancestor status may be closed to them (Fortes & Dieterlen 1965: 16). In many ancestor belief systems, once forgotten, over a few generations the individual ceases to be.

Thus, the multiple soul concept, preservation and positioning of the body, and the continued rituals of serving and preserving the dead in some kind of afterlife link the Egyptians to their contemporary African counterparts, and illuminate the possible eschatological beliefs of the Predynastic Egyptians, in the absence of texts and material evidence. These concepts of soul and afterlife have no counterpart in the ancient religions of Palestine or Mesopotamia.

In searching among the Nuer and Dinka peoples for individuals around whom a mortuary culture could develop if these peoples moved towards statehood, the most likely candidates are the leading figures of these communities. In the absence of political leaders, the following discussion assesses the suitability of the most prominent religious figures: the Nuer Leopard Skin Priest and the Dinka Master of the Fishing Spear.

## Leopard Skin Priests and Spear Masters - Religious Officials

The Nuer and Dinka diverge drastically in the myths and functions of their main religious officiants: the Nuer Leopard-Skin Priests (Fig. 4.12) and the Dinka Masters of the Fishing Spear. The former are landless officiants (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 292), who represent the Nuer people to their high god rather than god to the people. As religious functionaries only, they lack political authority (ibid 290). Since these priests are deemed to have a mystical connection to the earth (ibid 167, 291), rather than the sky, the Nuer place spiritual significance in their cattle, through their symbolic relationship with *Kwoth Nhial*, rather than in their priests. The priests' power and ritual attention go to the lesser-esteemed activity of cultivation (ibid 292), and their more important functions are in connection with homicide, where they intervene, invoke, and sacrifice in order to release the slayer from extreme danger and prevent a blood-feud (ibid 293).

As a wearer of a Leopard-Skin, the priest looks important, but like the *sem* priest of the Egyptians, who also wears a leopard-skin, he is a mere officiant. With no real spiritual powers (ibid 303) and with "duties [which] are tiresome and ill-rewarded" (ibid 293), the Nuer Leopard-Skin priest is no candidate for veneration after death. Rather, the Nuer prophets are the religious figures deemed to receive messages from "God" (ibid 304), and some famous ones are commemorated with pyramidal mounds, such as the one in memorial of Dengkur.

The Egyptian *sem* priest officiates at funerals and the *sed* festival, and his most important task may have been to perform the opening of the mouth ceremony for the deceased (Fig. 4.15b). That the Predynastic Egyptians had a similar office is suggested by the fine furred black pelt found by Brunton and Caton-Thompson in the Predynastic grave 5735 at Badari. The position of the pelt around the deceased's waist led them to comment on its similarity to the "priest's leopard-skin in historic times" (Brunton & Caton-Thompson 1928: 15). However, neither this individual, nor the Nuer priest, qualifies as a special soul around whom a mortuary cult could grow.

The Dinka Masters of the Fishing-Spear, on the other hand, trace their ancestry to the culture hero, *Aiwei Longar*, the first fishing spear master (Lienhardt 1961: 171-218). Spear masters are associated with light and illumination, a characteristic of Divinity (of the sky) (ibid 140-1) rather than the earth.



The spear masters possess prophetic "vision" to varying degrees, and can see into the truth of situations (ibid). Unlike the Leopard-Skin priests, they mediate between god and humanity rather than merely represent humanity to God.

The spiritual role of the spear masters necessitates that they cannot die as others do, for their death would diminish the vitality of the entire group (ibid 208). They transcend death, providing a bridge between human and superhuman forces (ibid 206). The denial of the death of the spear masters has led to myths and legends surrounding their burials and the general acceptance across Dinkaland that spear-masters are interred alive, although Lienhardt never actually saw such a burial (ibid 298-319).

According to Dinka accounts, when the Spear-Master senses imminent death, he requests his burial rites with full honour (*dhor beny ke pir*). A grave is dug and a raised platform resembling an ordinary Dinka bed is placed within it. The strips of hide stretched across the wooden frame come from the skin of a sacrificed bull and the wood from the *akoc* tree, renowned for surviving drought and leafing early. Sitting upright on his mortuary bed and protected by another raised platform above, the master sings songs as the Dinka fill the grave with sacred cattle dung, for he is not to be covered with earth (ibid 300-1). In some accounts, he speaks to the elders from the grave, and when he ceases, they fill it with dung. The attendants sprinkle milk on the grave (ibid 309), and when the dung collapses, and "The master has been taken into the earth", a shrine is constructed (ibid 302-3). In other accounts, he is strangled first and his limbs broken (ibid 308). After the burial, the homestead of the master is surrounded by drought-resistant *awar* grass, vital to cattle during drought.

Although the details vary from one region to the other, they have in common the avoidance of a natural death due to disease or old age. Like the Shilluk, the Dinka fear that the weakening of their spiritual leader will weaken the entire group. "Their deaths are to be, or are to appear, deliberate, and they are to be the occasion of a form of public celebration" (ibid 313). The burial is associated with a social triumph over death and the factors which bring death, through the use of objects and materials associated with life or rejuvenation: the riverain association of the *awar* grass; the *akoc* wood which retains moisture and leafs earliest; the *dhot* wood, also used in mortuary bed construction, associated with dry-season pastures; and milk, which serves as a funerary libation (ibid 317). Each of these

substances symbolises life to the Dinka, and the mortuary ritual preserves the 'life' which they receive from the spear-master, not the individual master's life (ibid 316).

In Dinka philosophy, the abstract notion of 'life' as *wei* is sometimes translated as soul or spirit (Lienhardt 1961: 206-7). *Wei* can be augmented or decreased, and is measured by strength, health, and vigour. The bull, as a figure of vitality, fertility, and strength, has more *wei* than a man. Fishing spear masters have more than is necessary for themselves, and therefore can sustain others and their cattle. As the Dinka strive to preserve the *wei* of the spear-master through the mortuary ritual, so did the Egyptians strive to preserve the life essence (*ankh*) of the king, as embodied in the *b3* and *k3*, through their complex mortuary ritual.

At least one Predynastic community singled out individuals for special burials involving the use of raised beds within the grave. Kathryn Bard commented on two bed burials at Armant (Bard 1994: 72), which stand out from the general practice of wrapping the body in a mat and placing it on the floor of the grave. One grave seemed particularly well-endowed. We do not know if the funeral of this individual, like the funeral of the Master of the Fishing Spear, celebrated the return of life and fecundity, but the gradual development of mortuary culture, focused on the preservation of body and souls (the *b3* and *k3*), led eventually to the doctrines and practices surrounding the immortality of the king, who brought life to the community, specifically through the regulation of the Nile flood.

For the Nuer, the *colwic* spirits rather than the Leopard-skin priests receive special mortuary attention as links with divinity. The *colwics* become like deities or ancestors, and receive sacrifices at memorial shrines erected for them. The shrine is a typical *riek* shrine – a low mound shaped from earth, with a shrine-stake erected in the centre (Fig. 4.10) (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 52-62). A similar Dinka *yik* shrine commemorates the Spear-Masters, demonstrating that a similar material representation can contain multiple meanings in a heterogeneous collection of related small-scale groups, while at the same time point towards a Nilotic "archetypal" shrine in commemoration of those special souls who have attained a privileged relationship to the high god in death and become a link for the living with divinity.

## **CONCLUSION**

The earliest cultures of the Egyptian Nile resembled in many ways the cultures of today's Sudanese Nilotes in their pastoral/horticultural economies, egalitarian social structures, and impermanent dwellings. The comparisons of the artefact remains of Predynastic, early Dynastic Egypt, and the African tribal cultures, particularly the Nuer and Dinka, support the hypothesis that Egyptian religion had its roots in African tribal culture and that the influences from the Near Eastern cultures of Palestine and Mesopotamia were technological rather than intellectual or religious. The establishment of this ethnographic parallel helps to explain a number of elements of Egyptian Predynastic religion: the development of nome signs from totems; the early beliefs and practices which may have preceded the rise of the pyramids; those religious elements chosen as the basis for divine kingship; the archaic elements indicated by the sacrifice at the centre of the Imperishable Stars; the origin of the bull cults; the origin of the *Sem* priest; the invisibility of high gods; the importance of Isis, Nephthys, and Horus as mediating bird deities; the development of the *k3* concept from the vital spiritual essence of cattle; and the important distinctions between cosmic, invisible gods and the immanent deities accessible to humanity.

Perhaps the Predynastic Egyptians and the Sudanese Nilotes shared a common ancestor. The heterogeneous nature of the Predynastic community brought together religious and iconographic elements from various peoples, including Nubians, who found new life along the Nile during the mid-Holocene droughts. Possibly the Levantine propensity to use figurines blended with the typically African spiritual world and concepts of the soul(s) and the afterlife, just as the Levantine use of domestic animals and plants blended with the African pastoral/forager economy. On the other hand, contemporaneous African peoples with rich iconographic traditions could have contributed to the Predynastic artistic and material expression of spiritual concepts. Whatever the origin of the figurines, they seem to have functioned within a typically Nilotic spiritual system, making an examination of the religion of today's Nilotes a profitable means of inferring possible meaning(s) for these artefacts.

In understanding Predynastic religion, the main possibilities and observations to be taken from this chapter's discussion are:

1. Predynastic religion followed the typical three-tiered structure, which divides the spiritual entities into supreme deities, deities of the sky or air, and deities of the below, or totemic manifestations. Given the general absence of icons or material entities representing higher deities in contemporary African religions, if icons from the Predynastic represent deities at all, they would be either those who mediate between the spirit and material worlds or the totemic spirits of the earth – the clan emblems by which the various Upper Egyptian groups identified themselves. This point is supported by the presence of images associated with Taweret, Hathor, Khenthamenthis, Thoth, Anubis, and Horus, and the absence of icons suggestive of Osiris, Ptah, Re, Amun, and Atum, aside from the bull imagery.

2. The Predynastic Egyptians conceived of a female deity, who, like *Buk* and *Abuk*, belonged to the above and the below simultaneously. As the protector of women, bringer of life, and presiding deity over the harvest and childbirth, she developed or divided into a number of Dynastic deities, including Isis, Nephthys, Hathor, or Taweret. As the great protectress and thwarter of calamities, she was conceived as the deity presiding over the central axis of the universe, to which the archetypal sacrificial beast was tethered. She had an important connection to the grave figurines and was the focus of the mortuary sacrifice over which she presided.

3. African mortuary beliefs and practices, like those of the Nuer and Dinka, place special emphasis on certain important members over others. For the Nuer, the "souls" of these special people go directly to the supreme god, often in bird form, as did the soul of the Egyptian king to the Region of the Imperishable Stars (*Pyr.* 1216, 1770). The Dinka mortuary practices and beliefs surrounding the Masters of the Fishing Spears could provide the nidus for the development of divine kingship with an accompanying cult of immortality, should the Dinka move towards statehood and central authority.

For the Predynastic Egyptians, like the twentieth century Nilotes, these mortuary practices and beliefs varied from group to group, although many would overlap. As the culture became more unified and centralised, however, beliefs and practices became more standardised.

4. The posture of a section of the figurine complement suggests a connection with Nilotic culture still practised today. The raised arms and apparent dancing posture of the figurines reflect the same cow and ox dances of the Nuer, Dinka and Atuat. How the ox/cow dancing figurines would translate into mortuary symbolism presents a major problem in developing this line of comparison. Also the bird associations of most of these figurines complicates this line of thought, as will be discussed in Chapter 6.

5. The grave figurines of Upper Egypt can be evaluated in the context of African mortuary beliefs in light of the strong parallel between Egyptian religion and that practised in Africa today. Placing the figurines within the context of Nilotic culture as a whole makes it unlikely that they represent any supreme concept of divinity. If they do represent divinities, they are immanent spiritual entities who can safely take earthly forms, as do *Buk* and *Abuk*. As mediating deities, they would need to intercede between the human and divine worlds, and hence the eschatology would focus on an "invisible" high divinity or spiritual entity. Those mediating deities who come most readily to mind are Isis, Nephthys, and Horus, the first two reminiscent in some ways of the Nuer twins – bird-like souls, who are identical, yet separate. They protect and serve the higher, more inaccessible god of the underworld, Osiris.

The following chapter focuses exclusively on this last idea, presenting Osiris as a possible candidate for a Predynastic mortuary deity as the focus of the grave culture and the figurines.