

Richard Critchfield's article (Opinion on, May 18), "Witchcraft, Magic Survive in Sudan Village," was a perfect example of an objectionable, highly ethnocentric style of reporting that I had thought had long disappeared. In the words of T. S. Eliot, Critchfield clearly "had the experience, but missed the meaning," in that his six- week stay resulted in only exterior views, with no knowledge of the rich culture of the people.

Consider, first, his terminology:

nouns include *witch doctor*, *tribes' man*, *blood sacrifice*, *magic*, *potions*, *slavery* and *half-hyena*. His adjectives are typically *incessant*, *scorching*, *childlike*, *throbbing*, *weirdest*, *notorious* and *ferocious looking*.

Then there are such phrases as "99 black African *tribes*," "99 goats would be sacrificed," "completely naked," and the overall picture is clear—it depicts the African villagers as foolish creatures in the grip of silly superstitions.

Furthermore, Critchfield states that this area was "closed to outsiders during 58 years of British rule." Not true—a quick check at a standard reference work showed 33 periodical articles on these people (Ngimang) and their immediate neighbors. (The whole of the Southern Sudan was closed for nearly 15 years in the civil war that followed independence).

During the years of British rule, an eminent social anthropologist, the late Prof. S. F. Nadel, carried out extensive research, from 1938-41 among the "Hill Tribes of the Kordofan," including the Ngimang. His book; "The Nuba," is a well-known anthropological classic. Nadel describes in some detail the spirit cult, which is the basis for Critchfield's misleading account of the "witch doctor." This cult centers on "individuals capable of producing a state of trance and mental dissociation which is interpreted as spirit possession."

It resembles, as Nadel says. "classical shamanism,™ and is a common phenomenon throughout Africa; I have myself studied a similar cult in Ghana. Critchfield shows no awareness either of earlier studies, or of the complex symbolism involved in the cults: it is as though a foreigner, with no knowledge of our language or history, were to describe a church service, a sports event, or a judicial court.

Nadel also clarifies the slavery allegation, pointing out that a slave was usually adopted into the family of his cantors. and that the adoption was complete.

I am not suggesting that it is only professional anthropologists who can interpret other cultures. Leni Riefenstahl's superb book, "The Last of the Nuba," (1974) is about another group in the same part of the Southern Sudan. With her stunning photographs, and detailed, accurate text, we are given, as one reviewer said, "a final glimpse of the genuine natural world that once surrounded and protected our roots—a world not without subtlety, high art and deep human feeling." These qualities obviously escaped Critchfield.

Surely the Southern Sudan has enough problems, healing the wounds of the civil war, without adding to them by this crude and uninformed reporting.

Despite my criticisms, I find this article useful as I shall use it in my freshman class, inviting the students to comment on its accuracy and implications;

DAVID BROKENSHA

Professor

Department of Anthropology University .of California

Santa Barbara

I wish to raise a protest against the tone of Critchfield's article. It does a disservice to the people it purports to describe, and I hope your readers do not mistake this kind of blatantly judgmental journalism for anthropology.

His report is based on six weeks of study in the Sudan, hardly a sufficient amount of time to arrive at valid generalizations. He uses the tired clichés of moving "back thousands of years" and encountering the village "witch doctor" (a term anthropologists never use). If he is going to use a term popularized by Hollywood, no wonder he sees his character as coming from Hollywood casting.

Further he states that the people have a "deep, innocent and childlike faith in a God" and are "possessed of fear" of the many phenomena surrounding them. These value judgments are patronizing and condescending, and serve to perpetuate stereotypes of other peoples of the world. We are civilized: they are savages: we are rational; they are irrational, and so on.

If we must suffer this kind of writing, of which the accuracy can be questioned, I hope your readers will be aware of the dangerous moral and ethical ramifications of the author's words.

DAVID M. HAYANO

Associate Professor

Department of Anthropology

California State University

Northridge.