

**Saint Joseph the Worker Catholic Parish**  
Diocese of Malakal - Comboni Missionaries (MCCJ)  
Leer, Unity State – Republic of South Sudan

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**SEMINAR ON TRADITIONAL EXPERIENCES OF RECONCILIATION**

*The Nuer Reconciliation Ceremonies*

Leer, 8-9 November 2013

**INTRODUCTION**

This seminar was held in Leer, Unity state, Republic of South Sudan, on 8-9 November 2013. It was promoted by St. Joseph the Worker Catholic Parish and facilitated by Fr. Raimundo Rocha, with the assistance of Michael Gatluak and Matthew Popuom. Sixty people from both Catholic and Presbyterian churches of the four southern counties of Unity state attended this Seminar, including the guest speakers: two elders and three head chiefs from Panyijiar, Leer and Mayiendit counties. The aim of this Seminar was to promote and draw lessons from the traditional Nuer reconciliation ceremonies so that more initiatives may be taken at the grass roots level to promote peace and reconciliation among individuals and communities.

It was understood from the outset that in the process of the traditional Nuer reconciliation a cow is slaughtered. If the elder speakers thought they could make that performance as a demonstration, a cow had been provided for. It was also said that the intention of having such a seminar had nothing to do with magic or evil actions, but it was solely to look into the Nuer traditional reconciliations ceremonies to know it and to draw lessons from its positive aspects to promote reconciliation and to encourage the young generation to apply this method of reconciliation, which seemly had been, to a great extent, forgotten. The five guest speakers did their presentations. People were allowed to make questions. In the end there was no need to slaughter a cow. The second day was conducted by the facilitator who led the group to do an exercise having in mind the way forward. Some action points were worked out based on the inputs of the first day.

**DAY ONE – THE WORDS OF THE GUEST SPEAKERS**

On the first day, the facilitator welcomed the participants and explained the aim of the Seminar. Since it was a seminar, there were some guest speakers to talk about the Nuer Reconciliation Ceremonies. The following is a summary.

Guest speakers:

1. Kerubino Nyuon Yar – Head chief from Panyijiar County
2. Riek Diang Teny – Head chief from Leer County
3. Mayok Lam – Head chief from Leer County
4. Nguen Nirew – Elder from Mayiendit County
5. Simon Thak – Elder from Mayiendit County

## **First speaker - Kerubino Nyuon Yar, head chief from Panyijiar**

Our grandfathers had laws for life. ‘*Thuc*’ means rule, law. If there is a conflict, a person makes ‘*thuc*’ and the problems or conflicts will disappear next day. Our laws are overlooked nowadays. It is not for everyone to make laws. There are some people in the community in charge of certain duties and roles. These are:

- The *kuär muɔn* (the chief of land)
- The *kuär yɔɔk* (the chief of cows)
- The *kuär taŋ* (the chief of stick)
- The *kuär bieth* (the chief of spear)

If a person fights someone else and wound that person, they have to take a cow or goat to be killed in the reconciliation. When the wounded person feels better, he or she is advised not to take any revenge against the person who did it to them. If he or she did, they would die. When the reconciliation ceremony takes place, if people want to fight again, whoever throws a spear will die. There is a land lord (*kuär muɔn*), chief of spear; if he bends the spear, then, there is peace, because he said this is my spear and no one could spear a person again, and so this happens. This happens to the chief of stick (*kuär taŋ*) and also to the chief of spear (*kuär bieth*). This is all part of the ancient ceremony of reconciliation led by chiefs and elders. Unfortunately all those values are forgotten.

What is the reason for giving cows? They are for the reconciliation ceremony. The following is what would happen in a traditional reconciliation ceremony. If someone kills some else, another person would have to kill another one in revenge. The killing from both sides could go on and on generating a spiral of violence. According to the people involved in the killing, to spear a person under this revenging circumstance is not a ‘crime’; revenge has to take place as a kind of ‘compensation’ for the life of those who were killed. However, violence and death will not stop. At some point the chiefs/elders call on the conflicting parties to solve the issue peacefully. Then, they will perform the traditional ceremony rite for conflict resolution. In the reconciliation ceremony, when the chief (*kuär muɔn*) spears a cow, the two sides are expected to reconcile. People share that meat. After this ceremony, revenge is not to take place. Violence is finished. However, if an individual does something wrong, that person would die ‘naturally’ as a kind of punishment for breaking the reconciliation agreement. So, no one will die because now they are reconciled. The issue is over. God ‘punishes’ only evildoers and those who are against other people.

At the end of his presentation, Kerubino Nyuon asked why the Church is now calling people to talk about the traditional reconciliation when in the past it dismantled people’s tradition. The facilitator in reply said that *Africae Munus* (AM), a Church document issued in November 2011 in Benin by his Holiness Pope Benedict XVI on ‘the Church in Africa in service to reconciliation, justice and peace’, in number 38 of this document the Pope and bishops of Africa say that the ‘Church appreciates the positive aspects of African traditions and cultures’. There are negative elements in them. However, we need to look at the positive elements of tradition. Also, in number 36 it says that ‘there is a need to study the African tradition’ and in number 49 is written that ‘the elderly participations in ceremonies are to be valued because they have wisdom and experiences’.

## **Second speaker: Nguen Nirew, elder from Mayiendit**

There are two ways of reconciliation for when a person is killed or when a relationship is broken.

## **1. Way of reconciliation for the case of murder**

The chief (*kuär muən*) calls the two sides. Compensation is paid in cows by the family of the murderer. The chief determines the number of cows to be paid. A cow is killed and a bone is broken (by *kuär muən*). The parties share the meat of that cow with some water – all drink from the same bowl. They are now reconciled.

**The rite of breaking the bone** - The meat of the thigh of the cow is cut. The meat is roasted. 'Keeth' is mixed with this roasted meat. The two sides or groups eat this roasted meat mixed with gallbladder (*keeth*). Some milk is also shared. Sometimes a cow with a calf is given to the diseased family. At this point the enmity is over. That conflict has been peacefully solved through the traditional rite. From now on, any person or group who makes an attempt to take revenge will suffer some kind of trouble 'naturally'.

## **2. Way of reconciliation for the case of a broken relationship**

The one who caused the conflict would feel pain in his heart or other part of his body. He fears retaliation. Now he calls the elder to reconcile. The elder reconciles the two groups or persons through negotiation (dialogue) without killing a cow. When a person's hand, leg is broken or one's eye blinded by another person in a fighting, the compensation is done depending on the family of that person. It can be 2 or 3 cows to be paid. When people really fight, there is a cow to be killed for the reconciliation. After reconciliation is done, anyone who attempts to do any harm will die 'naturally'.

When boys go into fighting they will remember the advices of the elders and they would stop fighting. It happened to the son of a chief. He was pierced with a spear and the person who did it came to kill a goat for the wounded to feel better. He advised his son not to revenge because God is on the side of the one pierced him first. It happened also between Nuer and Dinka sometime ago. They were reconciled through the killing of a cow. They shared the meat and got reconciled.

When a person is hit on the head by someone else, compensation is paid through cows. When a person is killed by an unknown person, a pit is dug. A cow is brought, the elders pray when the cow is killed. Something bad is expected to happen to the unknown killer. Young men, who are present together with the unknown killer, would say not to kill the cow. The killer would come forward spontaneously. People would go and pay compensation. Then, the problem is over. Reconciliation has taken place.

### **Third speaker: Riak Diang Teny, head chief from Leer**

When a woman kills another person, the cows for compensation are contributed by the paternal uncle of the man. When a woman is killed by her husband, he pays the remaining cows of the dowry, if any. The husband will give to his wife's family, if they need. A cow is given to the family of the dead. Some milk is shared by the people. A bull is contributed by those who killed the person. The bull is slaughtered for reconciliation.

If in a fighting or in an accident a person gets a leg or arm broken or an eye blinded, how many cows paid in compensation? The chief of the land will decide on how many cows. He will take some for himself and some will be given to the family of the injured person. If they need more, more will be demanded. One cow from those he takes is used for the reconciliation ceremony. A cow/goat is killed and the people reconciled when the elders hear the news of conflicts between

their children (youth). *Kuär muɔn* reconciles through their brothers. Reconciliation is made through the breaking of a bone when a girl is already married and shares water and food. No marriage takes place with someone from a clan from which someone else has been called on to solve conflicts, unless there is no more conflict.

#### **Fourth speaker: Mayok Lam, head chief from Leer**

When a woman commits adultery, the rite of reconciliation goes is like this. A *tukul* is made in front of the hut/house with two doors. There is a spear (*mut*) in the *tukul*. The couple is put inside. The *tukul* is set on fire. The two guilty persons run out, each through a different door. A goat is killed and the intestine is spread over. They are reconciled.

People believe that a Nuer man gets sick when one of his wives sleeps with another man and when a Nuer man commits adultery with another woman he cannot bring diseases to his own wife. The reason is that the man says he married his wife by paying cow dowry for her, while his wife has paid nothing. Men call this disease/sickness *kɔɔr*. It is caused by the mixture of the two male's sperms found in the same woman.

#### **Fifth speaker: Simon Thäk, elder from Mayiendit**

**A couple reconciliation** - When there is something wrong between the family/couple, the woman makes wine and calls the brothers of her husband. They discuss the matter and they reconcile. When a woman has an affair with another man, the father of the woman gives a cow with a calf to the husband of his daughter. This would solve the matter.

### **DAY TWO – THE WAY FORWARD**

The works of day two started with a review of day one. Participants were asked to point out the most significant points presented by the speakers on the first day. Here is a summary:

- Respect and love for elderly
- Obedience to parents
- The role of the elders in solving conflicts peacefully
- Advices by chiefs and elders to marry one wife alone (for men)
- Prayers and application of rules in reconciliation. E.g. do not make conflict again. If one dies, he is guilty.
- The old practice of burning a *tukle* with a couple guilty of adultery inside is not to be applied anymore, but to have the elder involved for reconciliation in this case
- The values of traditional reconciliation and Christian reconciliation
- The value of Christian funeral prayer
- To encourage the reconciliation among elders themselves

#### **Working groups – the way forward**

The participants were divided into five groups. Here is a summary of their works:

Conflict issues	Root causes	Involved parties	Effects of conflicts	Possible solutions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Stealing</li> <li>- Fighting (over boundary, water or for freedom)</li> <li>- Oppression (leading to fight)</li> <li>- Badly planned water channels</li> <li>- Tribalism</li> <li>- Law breaking</li> <li>- Land conflict</li> <li>- Power struggle</li> <li>- Injustice</li> <li>- Political game</li> <li>- Cattle raiding</li> <li>- Adultery</li> <li>- Fishing accident</li> <li>- Nepotism</li> <li>- Misunderstanding</li> <li>- Raping</li> <li>- Gender based violence</li> <li>- Sloping a girl</li> <li>- Disobedience</li> <li>- Urination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Greedy</li> <li>- Hatred</li> <li>- Gossiping</li> <li>- Despising</li> <li>- Bad thoughts</li> <li>- Adultery and fornication</li> <li>- Invasion of other space</li> <li>- Insecurity</li> <li>- Scarcity of water and grazing land</li> <li>- Youth fight over a girl</li> <li>- Drinking</li> <li>- Stealing</li> <li>- Killing without any reason</li> <li>- Flood</li> <li>- Draught</li> <li>- Hunger</li> <li>- Beating of child/woman</li> <li>- Urination</li> <li>- Breaking utensils</li> <li>- Bad pride</li> <li>- Women carelessness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Youth</li> <li>- Elders</li> <li>- Chiefs</li> <li>- Commissioners</li> <li>- Soldiers</li> <li>- Police</li> <li>- Women</li> <li>- Traders</li> <li>- Witch crafts (<i>kujur</i>)</li> <li>- Teachers</li> <li>- Health workers</li> <li>- Government</li> <li>- Politicians</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Death</li> <li>- Insecurity</li> <li>- Instability</li> <li>- Disrespect</li> <li>- Unemployment</li> <li>- Underdevelopment</li> <li>- Poverty</li> <li>- Suffering</li> <li>- Displacement</li> <li>- Poor sanitation</li> <li>- Food and water scarcity</li> <li>- Lack of health care and education</li> <li>- Psychosocial problems</li> <li>- Displacement</li> <li>- No implementation of laws</li> <li>- No free movement</li> <li>- Violence</li> <li>- Corruption</li> <li>- Mismanagement</li> <li>- No peace</li> <li>- No relationship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unity</li> <li>- Reconciliation</li> <li>- Peace through negotiation/dialogue</li> <li>- A void evils things</li> <li>- Advises</li> <li>- Mercy</li> <li>- Forgiveness</li> <li>- The rule of law</li> <li>- Church actions</li> <li>- Promote peace and traditional elders</li> <li>- Jobs</li> <li>- Good education</li> <li>- Church promotion of unity</li> <li>- Promotion of security</li> <li>- Promotion of game and sports</li> <li>- Roads improvement</li> <li>- Reconciliation elders with rules and also government</li> <li>- Inter-marriage</li> <li>- Mercy from the side of the bad effect. E.g.: a man in Koch was killed, his father killed a cow and united the whole Koch; he said that he bought the land for his son and there was unity</li> </ul>

### Action points

As a conclusion of the two days seminar, the participants agreed on the following action points:

1. To call on Churches and on the experiences and wisdom of the elders to promote peace and reconciliation among individuals and communities through dialogue and negotiation;
2. To avoid what is evil and act with love and mercy;
3. To apply the Rule of Law (National Constitution) by both citizens and government;
4. To promote sports and cultural activities (dance, drama, song composition...) for peace;
5. To form local reconciliation commissions and collaborate with the Peace and Reconciliation Commissions (government and churches);
6. To write a letter to the four counties' commissioners with our suggestions and action points.

Secretaries:

Michael Gatluak & Joseph Pal