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DINKAS OF SUDAN - INFORMATION

BACKGROUND

The Dinka (pronounced deen –kuh) are called *Muonyjang* (singular) and *Mounyjieng* (plural), meaning 'people of the people.' It is the largest ethnic African tribe constituting about 55% of the population of the entire nation and found mainly in Southern Sudan. Dinka people are often noted for their height. Historically the Dinka were split into twenty tribal groups and further into kinship groups. The traditional Dinka lifestyle is migratory and weather-dependent. In the dry season they herd cattle at riverside homes and move on to fixed settlements during the rainy season where they grow millet. The traditional ways of life are changing but is still regarded as valuable by many. Movement towards the cities and earning of money to buy cattle is, in some instances, replacing the traditional practices of teeth extraction, initiation and the courting of brides. For more than fifty years civil war has displaced the Dinka people. The lengthy civil unrest has resulted in Dinka people being dispersed around the world.

COWS: Dinka have a strong attachment to their cattle. They are highly valued and essential to the traditional lifestyle. They provide milk, cloth, dung for making firewood and houses, urine for medicine and ultimately food. There is a relationship of respect towards the cows which are cared for and sung to.

LANGUAGE

The Dinka have a diverse vocabulary to describe their world. It is estimated that they have more than 400 words to refer to cattle alone; their movements, their diseases, and their variety in colour and form.

RELIGION

Dinkas are chiefly monotheistic (believing in one deity). Nhialic, the creator, is thought to be the source of all life and death. Lesser manifestations of the creator's power are honoured by the Dinka through ritual sacrifices. Rituals are performed at births, deaths, to cure disease, and in times of crisis. The Christian missionaries provided the only formal education environment and as a result most educated Dinkas became Christians.

SOCIAL CUSTOMS

MARRIAGE: This is an important custom as clan members who live in the same region are prohibited from marrying. The bridegroom's family agrees upon the number of cows to be passed to the bride's family as the price for the marriage to proceed. The number ranges from between 50 to 200 cows.

CHILD REARING PRACTICES: Culturally it is not seen as appropriate for men to attend the birth of their children. Traditionally, women had the assistance of family members after the birth of their child. Husbands offer little help. It is common of the mother to rest for 40 days after the birth of a child, and allow the female members of the extended family to step in and help. This presents some problems in Australia where the extended help is often not available. Dinka names are generally chosen from the names of ancestors and clan totems. A child's name is combined with that of its father, grandfather or even the founder of the clan. Traditionally, a wife does not take her husband's name. This means men are able to trace their ancestry but not women. Children's names often reflect the circumstances of their birth. Upon attaining adulthood, men cease to refer to themselves by their birth names. In its place they adopt 'ox-names', derived from the characteristics of their favourite cattle. The importance of the patrilineal (through the father) lineage is stressed to children from an early age. A child will be taught to recite his father's lineage to the most distant traceable ancestor. The knowledge of kinship structures is also important because it is believed that kin will support each other unconditionally.

TEETH EXTRACTION: Boys and girls have their lower front six teeth extracted. This occurs about the age of ten. It is viewed as enhancing the beauty of the child as well as, in the case of boys, a rite of passage. New immigrants will sometimes have false teeth inserted to replace lost ones.

INITIATION: A series of neat and systematic cuts on the forehead is inflicted upon most young men of 16 to 18 years old as a rite of passage. An initiate is called a *parapool* literally, 'one who has stopped milking'. This is associated with the practice of young boys whose responsibility, prior to initiation, is to milk the cows, but after the initiation, will go on to assume more responsibility.

STATUS OF WOMEN: The abduction and rape of Dinka women, and subsequent selling into slavery in northern Sudan, still occurs.

CUISINE

Millet is the mainstay of the Dinka diet. It is supplemented with cow milk, fish, meat, beans, tomatoes or rice depending on the season. Dinka men do not traditionally cook or even be near when the women cook.

References:

<http://strategyleader.org/profiles/dinka.html> (accessed on 31/03/08)

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dinka_tribe (accessed on 31/03/08)

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Additional Comment:

The experience of Dinka refugees from the war is portrayed in the documentary movies 'Lost Boys of Sudan' by Megan Mylan and Jon Shenk and 'God Grew Tired Of Us'.