Loss of Culturally Vital Cattle Leaves Dinka Tribe Adrift in Refugee Camps

By Stephen Buckley
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The dancing begins at 7:25 a.m. as the thump of a drum splits the cool morning air in the Mangalatore camp for the displaced. A bull's horn wails. A swell of song fills the air. Young men run and leap, legs splayed, Jordanesque, heads rising above the hopping, singing, chanting, ululating crowd.

Hundreds of Dinka tribesmen and women have gathered at the Duk-Fuel family compound for a traditional dowry celebration. But the occasion is marred by what is missing: There will be no cattle given to the Duk-Fuel family today, historically the central transaction at this ritual.

The Duk-Fuels must settle instead for cautious promises. The family whose boy wants to marry a Duk-Fuel girl vows to give plenty of cattle when the four-decade-old war in this, Africa's largest country, someday ends. "We will honor our agreement," the boy's uncle says.

For all its joy, the dowry ritual reminds these Dinka families that the war has robbed them of a symbol central to their identity and culture — cattle.

Mabil Duk-Fuel sits in the family compound next to his niece Nyandier Duk-Fuel, 17. Joining them are Mabil's brother Mayar and another niece, Agot. Both girls will marry soon, although the next day's dowry ceremony is primarily for Nyandier.

The men say the absence of cattle has transformed the dowry process. Negotiations used to be held in which the boy's family agreed to give cows, sometimes as many as 100, to the Dinka girl's relatives; several families would make such overtures toward a single girl, in a process akin to competitive bidding.
The Dinka of Mangalatore camp for the displaced have lost all their cattle, a measure of their wealth, to the war. They now have been forced to cultivate the land instead.

Nowadays the negotiations are still held, but they are about handshakes and pledges. There is no livestock available to change hands.

Holding the ceremony without cattle, Mabil says, reminds Dinkas that they have no property. "You cannot regain your land," he says through an interpreter. "That is the great loss. . . . We hope our leaders are working hard to get us back our land."

Before the war caused institutions to collapse in southern Sudan, the Dinka were not only farmers and cowherds, but also high court judges and civil administrators and doctors. They were the south's richest and proudest tribe.

The cow has always been the focus of their culture. Cattle stood at the heart of virtually every important tradition and ceremony in Dinka life. Myths rose up around the animal. The Dinka wrote songs about it. They created dances to honor it.

Dinka see the animal as the highest form of wealth. Today some Dinka retain their cattle, but many have lost their herds, which were killed in fighting or abandoned during the rush to camps for the displaced.

**A Life Shattered**

The loss has pierced the Dinka, so much so that they have altered their governing myths. Stories that once celebrated the tribe's greatness — they believed they were a people favored by God — now describe a people full of dismay and self-doubt. One story, about how the Dinka came to love cattle, has been turned into a tale of woe, in which God is punishing the tribe for devoting so much of itself to the animal.

"They have been shattered," said Francis Deng, a Dinka who is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington. "They see themselves in a negative light for the first time. . . . You can see how [the war] has torn at their self-confidence, their sense of dignity."

War's obvious impact on Sudan has been well-documented. Beginning in 1955, with an 11-year respite, the conflict between the government in the mostly Islamic north and armed groups in the Christian and animist south has left the country without institutions or infrastructure.
The vast south, measuring 322,000 square miles, has four miles of paved road. In many areas, 90 percent of the population has no access to health care. The conflict has destroyed so many schools that, in the words of one veteran aid worker, "an entire generation of Sudanese is . . . illiterate."

Roughly 500,000 Sudanese refugees have poured into neighboring countries, and thousands of others, especially professionals, have fled to the West. Fighting also has displaced about 4 million people within the country.

But the conflict also provides a case study of how war transforms societies in ways both subtle and profound. As the south's largest tribe, the Dinka have been among the most deeply affected.

Dinka fighters long made up the core of southern separatist guerrillas and have paid with heavy loss of life; the more numerous noncombatants among the Dinka have seen long-dear traditions and values slip away.

In Sudan the chaos of war has led to lost dialects, diluted traditions and shaken beliefs. It has shredded traditional family structure, so that millions of elderly — usually taken care of by their extended family — must fend for themselves.

The war's one unexpected benefit is that it has forced more interaction among tribes. In many camps for the displaced, groups of people who traditionally have been among the south's most isolated must now tolerate each other as neighbors.

"The positive aspect is that the tribal lines are being blurred," said Deng, of the Brookings Institution.

In the past, "intertribal marriage, or even marriage with a member of the same tribe from another part of the country, was very difficult. You didn't marry outside the tribe."

But perhaps the biggest impact is that many Dinka have no cattle. "They are literally fish out of water," Deng said. "They have been deprived of what has made them productive, healthy, dignified human beings."

**Life in the Camp**

A dirt road slices through the Mangalatore camp near Kajo Keji, about 10 miles north of the Ugandan border. The 14,000 people here live in mud and straw huts surrounded by plots of limp, leaning corn.
Children play on a tank destroyed in battle after the Sudanese People's Liberation Army took the town of Kaya. (By Carol Guzy/The Washington Post)

The camp is virtually all Dinka, with their distinctive appearance — very dark skin, narrow square shoulders, almond-shaped eyes, tribal scars on their foreheads. They tend to be quite tall. Manute Bol, former center for the Washington Bullets, is a Dinka. He stands 7 feet, 7 inches.

There is a health center and a primary school, and organizations such as the American Refugee Committee and Norwegian People's Aid make regular food and supply distributions.

The residents toil to make life as normal as possible. They have opened kiosks that sell cigarettes, soap, sugar and batteries. Men have opened a bicycle-repair shop under a tree. A woman has set up a clothing store, with turquoise and pink and black-and-white polka-dot dresses hanging on a line of bamboo.

The seemingly normal life, however, cannot hide evidence of the Dinkas' upheaval. Many children here have lost both parents. And the camp is filled with elderly couples left without relatives to care for them.

In one tiny hut, Beer Lual's flesh and hair are as white as the pile of ashes at his bedside. Most of his teeth are gone. His skin is taut across his chest. His breathing is shallow and wheezy. His limbs, thin as smoke, are limp.

Lual, 72, lies on a piece of tarp. His hut, which he shares with his wife, Yar, 60, holds their belongings: half a bag of sorghum, leather sandals, a ragged trench coat, a pair of corduroys, an empty plastic cup, a can stuffed with rags.

Lual and his wife did not expect things to turn out this way. They expected to while away their last days in the company of their 10 children, who lived around them in Bor, nearly 200 miles north of here.

Before fighting forced him to flee to Mangalatore four years ago, Lual owned hundreds of cattle, raised lots of goats and chickens, caught fish from the lake near his property. He and Yar lived a good life.

But war took the lives of their five sons; marriage has separated them from four of their daughters. Their 14-year-old daughter tries in vain to care for them.

"Nobody takes care of us," Beer Lual said in Dinka through an
During a Dinka dowry dance, men try to jump the highest to impress the women and family of the new bride-to-be. But now instead of cattle as dowry, there are only promises.

(YBy Carol Guzy/The Washington Post)

A Dowry Ceremony

Africa's longest civil conflict has taken a dramatic turn in recent months. The Sudanese People's Liberation Army has churned through government-held ground since March, retaking at least nine towns in the south.

The rebels are believed to be within 40 miles of Juba, capital of the south, but the government continues to hold the city and refuses to allow anyone to come or go — in effect, making its residents human shields rendering a rebel attack virtually impossible.

Nonetheless, "we are in a better position than we have been in the last 14 years," the rebel chairman and commander in chief, John Garang, a Dinka, said in an interview in Nairobi. "Government cannot reverse the trend and regain the initiative. . . . The war is over."

On the morning of the dowry ceremony, Garang's words seem far away, as 30 young men run through a field in a line. One carries a multicolored parasol — red, green, yellow and blue. He is a brother of Galuak Gek Kuryom, 25, Nyandier's suitor. Galuak, a distant cousin of Nyandier, is in another town this morning, caring for a sick friend.

The celebration roars on without him. In minutes about 100 men, women and children crowd into the Duk-Fuel compound. Someone from Galuak's family plants a flag in front of Nyandier's hut.

Another group of about 75 residents from the camp gathers on the fringes, watching quietly. Nyandier and Agot also stand on the fringe. Nyandier wears a splendid yellow dress, a gold stud in her nose, gold and silver earrings, a silver bracelet on her left wrist. Her hair is done...
She carries a black parasol and a white handkerchief.

And when it is time, she and Agot point to groups of young men to dance for them. Two or three young men at a time rush to within inches of Nyandier and Agot, and twist, wave, hop, clap, sing and shout. Other teenagers and young men do the same thing to other girls, as scores of attendants dance around a mango tree.

Then more than 100 people, including Nyandier and Agot, form a giant circle and dance. The men, voices like a wave, sing. Plumes of dust hug their feet.

The dancing will go on for two hours.

Across the yard, dowry negotiations are about to begin. Nyandier's relatives sit under a thick-trunked tree across from Galuak's kin. The two sides, about 20 men in all, are quiet.

Galuak's kin sit in a tight circle. They engage in polite but intense conversation. They trace numbers into the ground.

First: "22."

Then: "25."

They are deciding how many cows they will promise to Nyandier's family.

Finally, one relative addresses the other side. A young man stands between the two groups, repeating what has been said.

One of Galuak's uncles: "I want your daughter to be the wife of [Galuak]. Please give this girl to us. Then I'll give you what you want. . . . We are from one family. We have known each other a long time. Let's make an agreement."

A few minutes later, Moses Mawan, 50, Galuak's uncle and official representative here: "Before, when we were in Bor, people bought cattle in these situations. . . . Now, none of this exists, only the agreement. But we cannot stop our daughters from getting married."

Then one of Nyandier's uncles responds: "We don't have anything to say now. As you know, there's competition. So we have to wait for the other" suitors.

Then the groups break up.

The nearby dancing wanes. The singing quiets. Agot and Nyandier relax. The sun has grown hot.

As relatives and neighbors scatter to their huts, the only sounds heard are the beat of the drum and the soft plaintive moan of the bull's horn.
This series of occasional articles will look beyond Africa's wars, disasters and tragedies and chronicle how people on the continent go about their daily lives.

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