

# THE DINKA OF THE SUDAN



Francis Mading Deng

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By  
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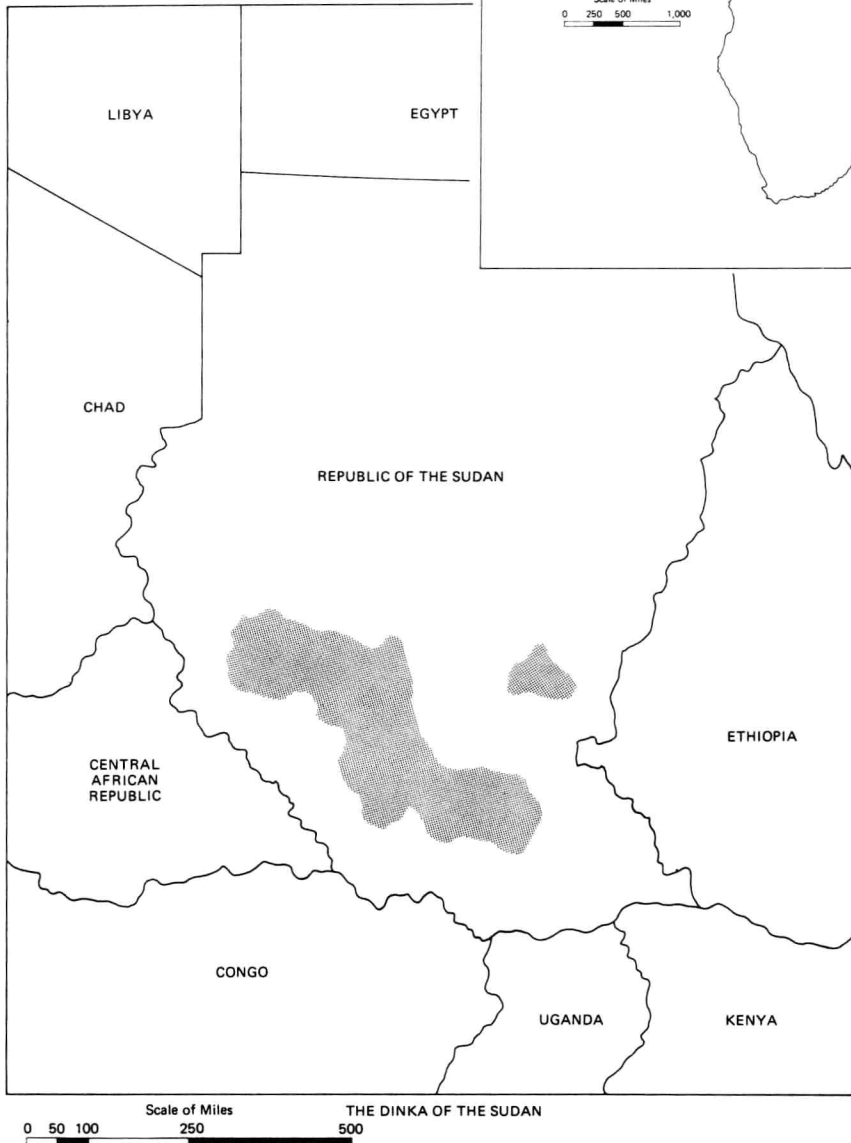
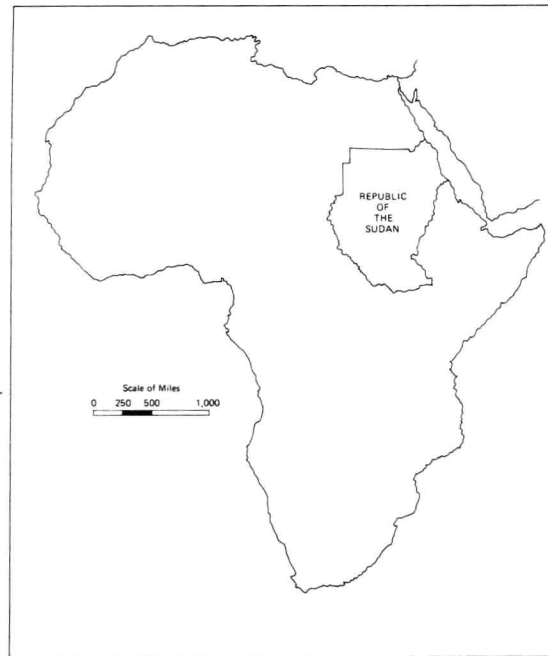
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*To the memory of my brother,  
Chief Abdalla Monnyak de Deng,  
who, on September 17, 1970,  
with our brothers Lino Chan  
and Abugaber Bulabek and our  
uncles Arob Mahdi, Col Guiny,  
and Kiir Jal, fell dead before  
a firing squad of assassins.*

*May this book be a modest symbol  
of the cause for which they died.*

# Foreword

## About the Author

Francis Mading Deng was born in 1938 at Noong, near Abyei, the administrative center of the Ngok Dinka of which his father was Paramount Chief. He attended elementary and intermediate schools in the Southern Sudan and received his secondary education in Khor Taggat in the Northern part of the country. Afterward, he entered Khartoum University where he graduated with LL.B. (Honors) in 1962 and was appointed to the Academic Staff of the Faculty of Law. He then proceeded to England and the United States for graduate studies, obtaining the LL.M. and the J.S.D. degrees from Yale University in 1965 and 1967 consecutively, after which he joined the United Nations Secretariat in New York in the Division of Human Rights. During his period at the United Nations, Dr. Deng also taught Legal Anthropology at New York University and African Law at Columbia Law School. In 1971, he took a leave of absence from the United Nations to undertake a post-doctoral research project with the Yale Programme of Law and Modernization. A year later, he joined his country's foreign service and served consecutively as Ambassador to the Scandinavian countries, Ambassador to the United States of America, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and Ambassador to Canada in the status of Minister of State. After leaving the foreign service in 1983, Dr. Deng was Guest Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington D.C. for a brief period and was subsequently appointed the first Distinguished Fellow of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund in New York.

Other books by Dr. Deng include the Award-winning *Tradition and Modernization: A Challenge for Law Among the Dinka of the Sudan*; *Dynamics of Identification: A Basis for National Integration in the Sudan*; *The Dinka and Their Songs*; *Dinka Folktales*; *Africans of Two Worlds: The Dinka in Afro-Arab Sudan*; *Dinka Cosmology*; *Recollections of Babo Nimir*, and the *British in the Sudan*, which he co-edited with Professor Robert O. Collins of the University of California, Santa Barbara.

## About the Book

This case study is written by Francis Mading Deng, son of the late Paramount Chief of the Ngok Dinka. That fact in itself suggests that the reader is in for an unusual experience as he or she reads this case study. There are many passages in this book where we are privileged to enter the cultural system with the insider's view and with his interpretations. This, by itself, is not a guarantee of good ethnography, for the perspective of the outsider to the system is essential as well. But Dr. Deng also provides us with this other perspective. He holds a Doctorate in Law from Yale University and has been closely associated with the work of Dr. Godfrey Lienhardt, Oxford University anthropologist, for whom Dinka ethnography has been a major professional concern.

This case study has a strategy. It starts with the life goals of the Dinka, then lays out the major points in the life cycle of individuals in Dinka society, pursuing the meaning of events in these periods out into the whole of the cultural system. From this strategy we acquire a rich and well-balanced view of Dinka life, but at the same time, find personal experience within it. The reader learns of the structure of society, sex roles, courtship, kinship, age-sets and rivalries, the family, property, mores, law, religion, philosophy, poetry, and dance.

While reading this book we experience the rich qualities of Dinka life and at the same time the intellectual gratification of conceptual analysis. Dinka life has a quality that beguiles and stirs the reader. The gentlemanly qualities subsumed by the term *dheeng*, apparent in pride and manners, are of high importance. For instance, men must eat fastidiously, talk elegantly, and stand and walk with poise. Yet there is much raw violence in Dinka life. This violence is most striking among the unrestrained youth, but it dominates much of the life and behavior of Dinka men. There are other paradoxical qualities in Dinka culture. Like many of the world's peoples the Dinka think of themselves as superior people and yet they are subservient to their cattle. Young men identify with their "personality" oxen, decorated with tassels and worked leather and wearing a bell that clanks rhythmically as the young men and their oxen walk about to be admired, particularly by the girls. This identification with the cattle is a phenomenon that is quite alien to the Westerner, so an attempt to understand it will move us closer to the heart of Dinka culture, and to other African cultures where the famed "cattle complex" is, or was, significant.

The author uses effective techniques of communication, allowing, for example, his own experiences as a Dinka youth to enter into the description. Another unusual feature of this case study is the use of songs, composed in free verse, to give us the Dinka flavor to events such as courtship, loss of pride, displays of temper or aggression, mocking of rivals, or announcement of events. From these songs we can at least dimly sense the real qualitative differences between Western

and Dinka patterns of thought and expression; and at the same time, we can sense the common-human quality of the emotions and motivations involved.

In the last chapter the author discusses the devastating North-South conflict—the 16-year-old civil war in which, it is estimated, over a million people have died and many more have been displaced. This conflict is seen as running much deeper than political differences alone. It is a matter of ethnic differences between the Arabic North and the Negroid South, of religious-cultural differences between Islam and Christianity, and of the differences between urban national and traditional tribal segments. This war is one of the tragedies of today's Africa where not only tribal and cultural loyalties determine rivalries and wars, but in addition legacies from the colonial past create seemingly unresolvable rifts resulting in savage civil conflicts. And the situation for the Dinka, as well as for other peoples in Africa, is compounded by the fact that not only the European powers built empires there, but also the Arabs—and in many areas Negroid peoples created state societies from conquests over each other. Nevertheless Dr. Deng is optimistic that these conflicts will ultimately be resolved, although at incredible human costs, and that the Dinka will find their way into a position of peaceful interaction with the other elements of the Sudanese nation, at the same time preserving many of the characteristics of traditional Dinka culture that have made his people unique.

GEORGE AND LOUISE SPINDLER



## Acknowledgments

The idea for this book first originated in 1963 when the editors of this series invited Dr. Godfrey Lienhardt to prepare a case study on the Dinka, and he suggested me as a co-author. Although our plans did not materialize, I have benefited a great deal from Dr. Lienhardt. He is both a friend and the leading authority on the Dinka. I am very grateful to Professor John Middleton who recommended to the editors of this series that plans for the Dinka study be resumed. For many years now my dear friend, Jane Glassman, has been a close assistant in my writings and without her editorial help and constructive criticism this book would not be what it is.

To my Dinka informants and to the composers and singers, I hope the book is a worthy tribute.

F. M. D.

# THE DINKA OF THE SUDAN



*The author, 1971. (Courtesy of Pach Brothers, N.Y.)*

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## Introduction

THE DINKA are a Nilotic people in the Republic of the Sudan. With a population of nearly two million in a country of only fifteen million people and over five hundred tribes, they are by far the most numerous ethnic group in the Sudan. Also striking is their vast territory covering about a tenth of the nearly one million square miles that make the Sudan the largest country in Africa.

To the nineteenth and even the mid-twentieth century travelers, the Dinka were better known as "giants about seven feet tall who, like the Nile cranes, stand on one foot in the river for hours looking for fish."<sup>1</sup> The word "giant" should not conceal the slimness of the Dinka. Another observer writes,

If you can picture to yourself a race of long-legged, well-built people so tall that a seven-foot man is no uncommon sight, so slim that a white man cannot fit his hand into their shield-grips or his body into their canoes (indeed, I cannot recall even having seen a fat Dinka); and if you can picture these people clad in nothing but beads and an expansive, cheery grin, you are at least visualizing the bare outlines of the portrait I am attempting to paint.<sup>2</sup>

These are, indeed, bare outlines: They do not say, for instance, that the one leg is assisted by a shafted spear; that fishing is only supplementary to cattle herding and agriculture; that women do not go naked; and that tall and slender as the Dinka are, the degree falls short of the description. But things have changed. As the Dinka have become more accessible to the world, exotic descriptions are giving way to more accurate information.

The land of the Dinka is in the rich savannah, segmented by the waters of the Nile and its tributaries. Large in numbers, widespread in settlement, and divided by many rivers, some are unaware of one another as fellow Dinka. A

<sup>1</sup> *Confidential Report to the United Nations on the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan*, 1947.

<sup>2</sup> Major C. Court Tresselt, *Out of the Beaten Track*, New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc. (1931), p. 112.

congeries of about twenty-five mutually independent tribal groups, they are united by their physical characteristics, their ethnocentric pride, and their striking cultural uniformity. Today, the vast majority of Dinka tribes fall under the administration of Bahr-el-Ghazal and the Upper Nile, two of the Sudan's three southern provinces, but one group, the Ngok Dinka, fall under the authority of Kordofan, one of the six provinces of the North.

In racial and cultural terms the Ngok are Southerners. The anomaly of their administration results from the fact that their chiefs signed allegiance to both the Turko-Egyptian and the Anglo-Egyptian colonial governments in El Obeid, the capital of Kordofan. For centuries prior to the advent of colonialism, the Ngok had been in contact with the Arab tribes farther north. The close diplomatic relations and cross-cultural influences between their leaders resulted in the centralized and hierarchal political system of the Ngok which sharply contrasts with the "acephalous," uncentralized nature of traditional Dinka society. The Ngok have always had divine chiefs, although their power was diffused into the lineage system. In most aspects of their culture, the Ngok have been little affected by their contacts with the Arabs. In view of their relative isolation from the bulk of the Dinka and close contacts with the Arabs, the extent to which the Ngok have retained their Dinka culture is remarkable.

The cultural continuity of the Dinka is often ascribed to their pride and ethnocentrism, which are conspicuous in their own name for themselves. They do not call themselves "Dinka" but *Monyjang*, which means "The Man [or the husband] of Men." This denotes that they see themselves as the standard of what is normal for the dignity of man and asserts their superiority to "the others" or "foreigners" (the *juur*: singular, *jur*).

While viewing themselves as "Lords of Men" the Dinka are loving slaves of cattle and they will gladly admit this. In the spirit of a devout slave, a Dinka will kill and even risk his life for a single cow. They have a myth that explains their involvement with, and suffering for, cattle: The Dinka went hunting and killed the mother of the buffalo and the cow. Both, bereft and provoked, vowed to take vengeance against man. The buffalo chose to remain in the forest and attack man whenever he laid eyes on him. (To this day, the buffalo is one of the few animals that will charge against man without provocation.) The cow on the other hand ingeniously preferred to fight man within man's own system: to be domesticated to make man slave for her; to play man off against man; and to cause him to fight and kill for ownership, possession, or protection of her.

But, if the cow is subtle, the Dinka too has his reasons for being allured into her trap. Cattle provide him with much of his worldly needs. Cows provide dairy products that the Dinka consider not only the best, but also the most noble, food. While they deplore killing the animal out of craving for meat and will do so only in sacrifice to God, spirits, and their ancestors—and sometimes in honor of guests, or for special feasts—almost every animal is eventually destined for the fire or the pot, since every animal is eaten whatever the cause of its death. Through dedication and sacrifice, cattle protect the Dinka against the evil forces of illness and death. Their payment as "bridewealth" guarantees the continuation of the Dinka race, and the distribution of the bridewealth among a wide circle of relatives

cements the network of human ties so highly regarded by the Dinka. Cattle are also paid as bloodwealth in homicide and in compensation for a variety of other wrongs. Their dried dung provides the Dinka with fuel and fertilizer, their urine with disinfectant, their hides with bedding skins, and their horns with snuffboxes, trumpets, and spoons. So important for the welfare of the Dinka and so honored by them are their cattle that the Dinka speak of the cow or the bull as the "creator." With bridewealth sometimes going as high as 200 cows, the Dinka are probably the richest cattle-owners on the continent of Africa and certainly in the Sudan. They also keep sheep and goats. But to these animals they afford only a fraction of their devotion to cattle.

Less known is the fact that the Dinka are cultivators, although their production is generally on the subsistence level and sometimes below it. This is partly because of their lavish hospitality, extravagant festivity, and resentment of saving as miserly. Much, however, has to do with their rudimentary implements and the adverse climate both of which limit the size of the land they can till and the amount they can produce. So irregular are the rains that they may fall and people plant, then stop, and crops die, or soak the fields and drown the crops. While their land is full of all-season rivers, the Dinka do not use irrigation except on their small plots of tobacco which are cultivated during the dry season. Worms, locusts, birds, and a variety of animals are additional threats at all stages of cultivation.

For human beings and animals there is much discomfort in Dinkaland. The blazing sun of the dry season kills the grass and deceives the traveler with moving mirages of rivers and lakes. The soil dries up, forming wide and deep cracks into which humans and animals fall. The ground and trees are covered with sturdy thorns. Swarms of restless flies torment both men and herds. Armies of mosquitoes necessitate exhaustive fanning or escaping into the smoky and stuffy huts. The wet season comes with heavy and stormy rains that may fall for days, leveling the tall grass and impeding even milking and cooking. Thunder and lightning leave behind fallen trees, burning huts, and sometimes dead relatives—tragedies that for the Dinka are divine manifestations calling for dedication and sacrifice. The Nile and its tributaries overflow, leaving floods, swamps, and mud. Lions, leopards, hyenas, wild dogs, rhinos, buffaloes, hippos, crocodiles, snakes, and scorpions are a continuous threat—so much more real than travelers' tales can tell.

Although the Dinka is always in direct contact with a hostile environment, he loves his country. He is self-sufficient in a way not easily explained by the simplicity of his desires. As he sees it, God has been most generous to him. He has cattle, sheep, and goats and he grows a wide variety of crops. His rivers and lagoons teem with fish just as his land is covered with animals. There are also many kinds of wild crops, vegetables, and fruits to satisfy his craving. Honey is in plenty. Depending on the season, his skies and pools are marvelously decorated with birds of every color, shape, and size. His fields and home sway with butterflies. The land is flat, changing from dark clay to white sand; from desertlike openness to jungle-like forests. The greenness of infant grass carpeting the land after the early rains, the reflections of the sun through falling rains, and the bright rainbow linking opposite ends of his horizon are only examples of the beauties the rainy season brings. The radiant golden yellow rays of the setting sun spreading over the plains,





*A dry season landscape in Malual Dinka country with sleeping huts built on stilts. There are no cattle byres in the photograph. (Courtesy of the United Nations)*