

Tradition and Turmoil: The Role of Cattle in the Lives, Culture, and Conflicts of South Sudan's Dinka Society

Vikram K. Porwal, **Abhinav Prakash, *S.N Nayak, ****Vivek Kumar*

Abstract

The lives of the Dinka people of South Sudan deeply integrated with cattle. This paper delves into their existence around cattle camps, examining the complex dynamics and ensuing conflicts. The paper explores the traditional customs and beliefs to kinship structures and economic activities of Dinka tribe. Cow, often referred as Cattle, in several research articles are at the core of Dinka culture and serves as the source of sustenance and symbol of social status. The value associated with cow ownership and exchange are crucial for social cohesion and inter-community relations which is important to understand before conceptualizing any community development activity with the researched community. Additionally, the communal lifestyle of the Dinka fosters a strong sense of solidarity and collective identity. However, the resilience of Dinka culture has been tested by decades of conflict and displacement, driven by external forces that have deeply permeated community life, placing traditional lifestyles and cultural practices at risk. This paper also investigates the initiation of young individuals into adulthood and the community's decision-making processes and discuss implication for social work education and practice. It outlines the division of labor among different genders and age groups. Through a thorough analysis of Dinka culture and conflict dynamics, the study illuminates the complexities of identity, resilience, and survival amid prolonged violence.

Keywords: Dinka Tribe, South Sudan, Cattle Rearing Tribe, Conflict, Social Work Education and Practice, Community Development

* Vikram K. Porwal, PhD Scholar, Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, served as Police Advisor at the UNMISS (United Nations Mission in South Sudan) as part of the Indian Contingent for the UN Peacekeeping force, Email Id: porwalvk@gmail.com

** Abhinav Prakash Freelance Research Consultant, Email id: abhinav.rsb@gmail.com

*** S.N Nayak Professor, Centre for Rural Development and Technology, Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, Email id: snn@rdat.iitd.ac.in,

**** Vivek Kumar Professor and Dean, Centre for Rural Development and Technology, Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, Email id: vivek.kumar@rdat.iitd.ac.in

INTRODUCTION

In the South Sudan, amidst its vast and varied landscapes, dwell the Dinka (Jieng) and Nuer (Nei ti naadth)—the two largest and most influential ethnic groups in the nation. Within these communities, the traditional way of life centers around the revered and vital presence of cows, symbols of wealth and anchors of societal status. For the Dinka, particularly the Dinka Bor subgroup, the practice of transhumance—the seasonal movement in search of greener pastures, cleaner water, and safety from pests and diseases—has shaped their culture and survival strategies (Deng 1998). This nomadic lifestyle not only underscores their deep connection with the environment but also highlights the symbiotic relationship between their cultural practices and the rhythms of nature. These are intrinsic of the Social Work Education and Practices.

Cattles in Dinka society are much more than livestock; they are considered communal property, cherished by the entire community, yet owned by individuals. The theft or loss of a single cattle can mobilize the entire community, reflecting the deep communal bonds and the collective responsibility valued among the Dinka. This shared commitment to protect and recover livestock epitomizes their interconnected social fabric. Understanding these nuances of Community is essential for any Community Development initiatives.

Furthermore, cows represent prosperity and are central to the Dinka's economic philosophy (Mayik 2020). Contrary to conventional banking, the Dinka invest in cattle, which they see as a faster and more fruitful multiplication of resources. This investment strategy is so integral that anyone preferring bank savings over cattle ownership is viewed as selfish. In times of need, a family might take on the responsibility of tending to relatives' cattle, providing sustenance through milk, which becomes a lifeline for both nourishment and social support.

Cattle also play a pivotal role in marriage and family formation. Ownership of cows is essential for a man to marry, intertwining economic stability with familial and social responsibilities. This complex web of cultural significance attached to cattle showcases not only the economic dependency on livestock but also the cultural and social dimensions that define and distinguish the Dinka community.

Dinka tribes usually lack mobile communication and are often cut off from the outside world. However, they are sometimes able to access mobile networks when they move to higher ground. Gradually, they have become aware of electronic gadgets in the towns and villages. One interviewee recounted that when he was young and, in cattle, -camp, he saw a radio for the first time. Upon hearing it, he initially thought that the head of a human being was inside the box speaking. Over time, he became familiar with these technological devices (Deng 1998).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Cow and Dinka Community: Understanding Economy, Culture and Social Fabric

In the Dinka community of South Sudan, cows hold an intrinsic value that permeates through every facet of life, notably in marriage and social status. The cow is not merely an animal; it serves as a pivotal element of their culture and economy, symbolizing wealth, status, and prosperity (Mayik 2020). This profound reverence is underscored by the traditional practice of paying bride prices in cows, a custom reflecting the social and economic standing of both the individual and their family (Jok 1999).

Marriage within the Dinka society is a communal affair involving intricate negotiations over cattle, which can define the social ties between families. The number of cattle offered as the bride price reflects the groom's wealth and his family's standing in the community (O'Sullivan 1910). The bride price acts as guarantee of the groom's ability to support his wife, ensuring that the respect of the union within the community.

Cattle also symbolize continuity and serve as social insurance. The ability to accumulate cattle influences various aspects of a Dinka's life, including marriage prospects and community standing. A man lacking sufficient cattle faces challenges in finding a marriage partner, as he would not be able to meet the expected bride price. Thus, owning cattle is essential not only for individual prosperity but also for maintaining the social fabric of the community (Jok 1999).

Furthermore, cattle rearing shapes the daily life and future of the Dinka community. It influences settlement patterns, migration, and even conflict, as cattle raids can lead to disputes between different groups (Shinn 2004). The centrality of cattle in the Dinka's existence underscores their reliance on livestock not just for subsistence but as a cornerstone of their identity and heritage (Lako 1985).

The significance of cattle in the Dinka community illustrates a complex interplay of economics, social customs, and cultural identity, highlighting how integral cattle are to the social structure and personal identity within this community. Cattle represent more than just animals; they are a critical asset, intertwined with the community's survival, prosperity, and social cohesion (Ogilvy 1981).

History of South Sudan

The Republic of South Sudan came into existence on July 9, 2011. It is geographically landlocked. Historically, this area was known as the province of Equatoria (Smith 2012). It was later captured by Islamist Mahdist revolutionaries in 1885, only for the British to overthrow them in 1898. By

1899, an Anglo-Egyptian Sudan was established, positioning Equatoria as its southernmost province. Throughout these years, despite being largely isolated, Christian missionaries were active, converting many inhabitants to Christianity and teaching them English (Jesse 2017).

Prior to the independence of Sudan in August 1955, Southern Sudanese army officers mutinied in Torit, igniting the First Civil War which continued until 1972 (Mai 2015). This was succeeded by the Second Civil War from 1983 to 2005 (Keiza 2013), culminating in nearly five decades of conflict that finally ended with the independence of the Republic of South Sudan in 2011, marking the longest civil war in African history.

First Civil War

The First Civil War, also referred to as the Anya-nya Movement, began in 1955 when leaders in Southern Sudan accused Khartoum authorities of ignoring the commitment of greater autonomy and attempting to impose Islamic identities on them (Jack 2009). This conflict, ended in 1972 with the signing of a peace agreement in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where a degree of autonomy to Southern Sudan was given by establishing the Southern Sudan Autonomous Region (Ladouceur 1975). However, this autonomy was short-lived as the arrangements were canceled by the Sudan government, sparking the Second Civil War in 1983 (Alemayehu 2017).

Second Civil War

Second Civil War, primarily a fight for political autonomy and resource control (Leben 2014), persisted until the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed in 2005 granting regional autonomy to Southern Sudan and included provisions for a national power-sharing arrangement and a secession referendum in 2011 (Gebremichael et al 2018). The referendum, held in January 2011, witnessed around 99% voting in favor of independence, leading to the establishment of the Republic of South Sudan.

Research Question

The aim of study is to examine contemporary conflict in South Sudan in relation to livestock in Dinka tribe. The specific research questions are:

1. To understand significance of cattle in Dinka Lifestyle and culture.
2. To examine conflict associated with cattle and its implication on social life.
3. To examine community disputes in relation with armed conflict.

Methodology

Our research unfolded in Western Lakes State, South Sudan—a region marked by its expansive plains and a community primarily composed of the Dinka tribe. Conducted over the year from 2017 to 2018, this study involved

visits to local schools and personal interactions with key members of the society and education sector.

To gather our primary data, we utilized a blend of personal in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and open-ended questionnaires, reaching approximately 125 individuals through interviews and engaging over 50 participants in group discussions. Our respondents ranged from students, school leaders, and teachers to community and village chiefs, local UN staff, and residents, ensuring a balanced representation of genders.

We chose a purposive sampling approach to select interviewees from four strategically picked schools, representing a mix of urban, semi-urban, and rural environments within Western Lakes State. The schools—spanning from government-run institutions to a missionary school—were vital in providing diverse perspectives.

The in-depth interviews were designed to be semi-structured, allowing us to explore complex topics like the interplay between education and conflict and other socio-economic and cultural dynamics deeply. We conducted these interviews with a commitment to ethical standards, ensuring all participants were fully aware of the study's purpose and confident in the confidentiality of their responses. To understand the demographics better, we targeted 10% of the senior-most students and their teachers at each school for interviews, maintaining equal representation across genders.

Findings

Cattle in Dinka Life and Conflicts

Cattle hold a profound significance in the Dinka community, often valued even above human life due to their central role in the socio-economic and cultural fabric. An interviewee emphasized, “The old cows are also slaughtered for their meat; thus, it becomes food for the cattle keepers too. Cows and bulls are also slaughtered during different celebrations like marriages. The hides are used as mats, and horns are sold in markets for making handicraft items. Cows are also paid as fines for committing certain offenses as per the traditional laws. And importantly, a cow is an insurance against any need arising in the family. Cows can be sold to cover any emergency like treatment, fees for studies of children, to purchase food or clothes for the family, etc. However, a cow is never sold for earning money.” This highlights those cows are the most precious asset of the Dinkas, and they cherish cows more than their own lives.

One large cattle camp can have 1-2 Paramount Chiefs, i.e., up to around 2000-5000 cows. Many owners belonging to the same family or clan keep their cows there. The cows keep multiplying every year as long as they don't contract diseases or are not stolen. Cows frequently change hands during marriages, similar to money circulation. For instance, if your cousin is

getting married, you give cows, or if your sister is getting married, you will receive cows. This cyclical exchange continues when an old cow becomes unproductive and is sold for slaughter; the money received is used to buy a younger, more productive cow. Thus, the cattle lifecycle keeps rotating. If there is ample grass and water, a cow can live up to at least 10 years. When it is sold for slaughter, the owner gets a younger one in its place, and the cycle of births and increasing numbers continues.

Dinkas often shy away from revealing the real number of cows they own. As one interviewee explained, “Because in our community, when you say that you are a wealthy person and you have many cows, nobody will accept this as it is like asking a man how much money he has in his account. So, it is really difficult to determine the number of cows; however, by the size of the cows that he is keeping, you can have an idea. A person always keeps saying that he doesn’t have many cows because it is believed that if he says so, he will never have them again, so it is considered bad luck.”

In addition to cows, the cattle keepers also rear goats and chickens for their own consumption, which are often tended by children in the camp. This integration of livestock management into daily life and rites of passage underscores the deep connection between the Dinkas and their cattle.

Cattle raid and Conflict within the community

Among Dinkas cattle raids and the conflicts are integral within the social fabric, reflecting the importance of cattle as economic and cultural symbol. The escalation of violence in cattle raids has increased manifold due to the availability of modern firearms.

This shift has not only increased the lethality of these engagements but has also altered the community’s approach to conflict and defense. The youth, particularly the “Gelweng” or community defenders, play a pivotal role in these dynamics. Traditionally tasked with protecting livestock, these young men are now often armed, increasing the intensity and scale of conflicts.

An interview with a Dinka elder shed light on the pervasive impact of cattle raiding within the community. The elder explained:

“When a raid occurs, it’s not just a loss of property; it’s a loss of life, pride, and potential peace in our community. Every cow taken or lost in a raid affects our social standing and future. One of the young respondent said, , ‘When they steal our cows, they steal our future. We have no choice but to defend our livestock, even if it means risking our lives.’

This quote captures the gravity of cattle raids in the Dinka community, illustrating how they’re perceived not only as economic loss but as a direct threat to social integrity and individual futures. Such perspectives underscore the complex motivations behind the community’s engagement in and response to these conflicts.

Cattle raids cause inter-community tensions, leading to vicious circle of violence and counter violence that can persist across generations. which further entrenches the community's reliance on self-defense and retaliation.

The loss or gain of cattle through raids can significantly impact an individual's or family's standing within the community, thus intensifying the motivations behind these raids.

The violence around cattle raiding highlight the complex relation between cultural traditions and modern weaponry in South Sudan. Addressing these issues requires a nuanced understanding of the historical and cultural contexts of these conflicts.

Role of Guns in Conflict

In the context of South Sudan's Dinka community, the transformation of traditional conflicts through the introduction of guns has significantly exacerbated the intensity and lethality of cattle raids. As one community member vividly describes, "Earlier, our conflicts were settled with spears or machetes; now, everybody has got guns... and in a typical local inter-communal fight, as many as 100 people have died!". This statement reflects a profound shift from traditional weaponry to modern firearms, fundamentally changing the dynamics of community conflict.

Another interviewee elaborates on the complications arising from the widespread availability of firearms: "*The number of youth carrying firearms now outnumbers the government armed forces. It is really difficult for the government to execute the law. With political rivalry, the government is not able to focus on crimes like cattle raiding. They are rather concerned with the rebels who are attacking the government to overthrow the regime. So crimes like cattle raiding are petty for them. They just give political statements in such cases*".

This quote underscores the challenges the local government faces in regulating such violence, as the proliferation of arms among civilians has tipped the scales, making traditional forms of conflict resolution nearly obsolete and turning cattle raids into heavily armed confrontations.

These insights from the document illustrate how the introduction and accessibility of firearms have transformed traditional cattle raiding into a dangerous and deadly affair, complicating peace and security efforts within the community.

Modern Conflicts and the Role of Firearms in Community Disputes

The introduction of firearms changed the scale and lethality of inter-communal conflicts dramatically. As one interviewee mentioned, "*now everybody has got guns... and on any typical local inter-communal fight as many as 100 people have died.*" This escalation highlights the severity of

the conflicts and the ease with which disputes can turn deadly due to the availability of firearms.

Furthermore, the interviewee's remarks underscore a significant challenge in law enforcement within the region. The number of youths carrying firearms reportedly surpasses the number of government armed forces, complicating the government's ability to enforce law and order effectively. The political instability and focus on larger national conflicts have led to a neglect of local crimes such as cattle raiding, which are dismissed as lesser concerns.

These findings indicate a profound shift in the nature of community conflicts in South Sudan, from traditional, manageable disputes to heavily armed and deadly confrontations. This shift has not only increased the physical danger associated with these conflicts but has also strained the traditional mechanisms for conflict resolution, challenging the community's ability to manage disputes internally and peacefully.

How Dinka resolve their conflict

In the Dinka community, conflict resolution is deeply embedded in their customary laws and traditional court systems. These traditional courts, led by local chiefs and intellectuals, convene under the shade of large trees, offering a community-centric approach to justice. Here, disputes are resolved by hearing both parties and imposing fines, typically in the form of cows, for any wrongdoing. This system not only settles disputes but also prevents ongoing cycles of revenge, which can escalate into further violence.

One of the core aspects of these proceedings is the emphasis on communal and restorative justice. For instance, in cases involving death, the aggrieved family may opt for traditional justice mechanisms rather than involving the police. The offending party may have to provide a significant number of cows to the victim's family as a form of compensation. This practice of blood compensation not only seeks to heal the wounds of the aggrieved but also restores peace and order within the community, as a representative of the Dinka explained: "This settles the issue forever, and there is no need to take revenge and kill another person".

The role of elders is also pivotal in managing disputes, especially those related to the protection of cattle, which are of immense value to the Dinka. Elders instruct and guide the younger generation on the nuances of cattle rearing and take active roles in conflict resolution when disputes arise: "*The elder men...engage themselves only when some dispute arises relating to the protection of the cows*".

These insights reveal a sophisticated system of conflict resolution that intertwines legal, cultural, and ethical norms, ensuring community cohesion and the sustenance of traditional ways of life amid modern challenges.

Decision Making and Traditional Dispute Resolution in the Dinka Community

The Dinka community employs a robust and culturally ingrained system of traditional dispute resolution, overseen by local chiefs and intellectuals. These traditional courts, established under the shade of large trees, serve as the venues for daily hearings, providing a community-driven approach to justice. Disputes ranging from marital discord to more severe allegations are adjudicated here, with resolutions typically involving reparations in the form of cattle, a deeply valued asset within the community.

The system is underpinned by the Customary Law Act, which codifies various offenses and their corresponding penalties. This legal framework supports the community's preference for settling disputes internally rather than involving external law enforcement. For instance, in cases involving death, the aggrieved family has the option to seek justice through these traditional courts rather than the police. If both parties consent, the offending party may be required to provide "blood compensation" by paying a designated number of cows to the victim's family. This method of resolution aims to prevent retaliatory violence, fostering long-term peace within the community.

Elders play a pivotal role in the governance of these processes, particularly in relation to the community's cattle. While the younger men and boys are responsible for the day-to-day management and grazing of the cattle, elders oversee the broader strategic decisions. When the cattle are brought back to camp, it is the elders who secure them and instruct the younger members on various aspects of cattle rearing. Their authority extends beyond agricultural practices as they are also the primary figures in dispute resolution within the camp. They intervene in conflicts only, when necessary, particularly those that might impact the safety and well-being of the community's livestock.

These findings illustrate how traditional practices and the roles of elders are central to maintaining order and resolving conflicts within the Dinka community. By leveraging age-old customs and the respected positions of elders, the Dinka ensure that both their cultural heritage and their primary economic resources—cattle—are preserved and protected. This system not only emphasizes the importance of community and continuity but also highlights the adaptability of traditional mechanisms in addressing both minor and significant disputes.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has illuminated the complex interplay between cattle, conflict, and community decision-making within the Dinka community of South Sudan. Cattle are not merely livestock but are integral to the socio-economic fabric of the community, serving as a symbol of wealth, a measure

of social status, and a critical component in rituals and dispute resolutions. It is important for future social workers to understand these nuances of the community which will enable the profession in handling the community conflicts more effectively. Thus, Social Work Educators should incorporate these case studies for enabling future social workers about the evolving nature of social complexities.

Cattle are deeply woven into the daily life and cultural identity of the Dinka. As shown in the findings, cattle influence marriage negotiations, social status, and economic stability. The concept of paying bride prices in cows, the role of cattle in traditional feasts, and their use as a form of insurance against familial emergencies underscore their value. This reliance on cattle has broader implications for community dynamics, particularly in how wealth is perceived and distributed (O'Sullivan, 1910).

The introduction of firearms has drastically altered the nature of conflicts within the community. Traditional conflicts over cattle and land, once resolved with spears and customary laws, have escalated into deadly encounters due to the proliferation of guns. The findings reveal that this modernization of conflict has not only increased the scale and frequency of violence but has also challenged traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution, leading to a cycle of retaliation and violence that is harder to control (O'Sullivan, 1910).

The traditional courts and the role of elders in the Dinka community represent a unique form of governance that emphasizes communal participation and internal resolution. Elders are pivotal in resolving disputes and maintaining order, especially in matters involving cattle. Their decisions are respected and adhered to, illustrating a well-established system of customary law that promotes reconciliation and prevents further discord (O'Sullivan, 1910).

In conclusion, the study of the Dinka community provides valuable insights into how traditional practices are adapted to contemporary challenges. While cattle continue to be a cornerstone of economic and social life, the challenges posed by modern conflict and the erosion of traditional governance structures call for a careful balance between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to new realities. Future interventions in such communities must consider these dynamics to effectively promote peace and sustainable development.

Furthermore, as the community continues to navigate these complexities, the role of external influences, such as government policies and international aid, should aim to strengthen, rather than undermine, indigenous systems of conflict resolution and economic management. This approach not only respects the cultural context but also enhances the community's resilience in facing modern challenges. Future studies should focus on examining peace resolutions and methods of social work practices in conflict affected area.

Limitations

The relentless inter-tribal conflict and the sparse development posed significant risks and made data collection exceptionally challenging. However, these same challenges brought a unique depth to our findings, revealing aspects of South Sudanese life that are seldom captured in academic studies.

Language barriers also presented hurdles; we relied heavily on local interpreters to bridge the communication gap during interviews and discussions. Although every interview and discussion was recorded with participants' consent to ensure we captured their thoughts accurately, the reliance on interpretation meant that some nuances might have been lost or altered in translation. Despite these obstacles, our team persevered, driven by the belief that understanding and documenting these experiences is crucial for fostering global knowledge and empathy towards South Sudan's complex socio-political landscape.

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