



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

By Stephen Buckley, *Washington Post* Foreign Service
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EXCERPT 1:

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 [agreements; discussions] 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 [proposals; offers] toward a single girl, in a process akin to competitive bidding.

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."



Dinka bride-to-be Nyandier Duk-Fuel. (By
Carol Guzy/*Washington Post*)



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EXCERPT 2:

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.”



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. (By Carol Guzy/*Washington Post*)