South Sudan’s Cultural Shift Toward Dinka Values

Robert Morris University

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Most countries have existed for hundreds of years, so it is rare to find new ones. South Sudan was recently created and is still in disarray, but the bloody revolution was worth it to the strong people of South Sudan. After several failed attempts of creating a democratic government a proper election was held where “the overwhelming majority of the southern Sudanese people—97.85 percent—cast their votes. Of these, 98.83 percent voted to become an independent country. On July 9, 2011, South Sudan became an independent state” (Jennifer, 2014, p. 448). Despite being recently created, there is hundreds of years of culture throughout the country. The main tribe in South Sudan, the Dinkas, are heavily persecuted for their beliefs that differ from the area, but they have a very rich and diverse culture that deserves to be experienced.

As mentioned before, the Dinka people are persecuted because they are different from a lot of the surrounding area as they are Christians in a heavily Muslim area. The main reason they seceded from Sudan was because their government was restricting their religious freedom. The Dinka people saw government-sponsored construction of mosques and religious schools throughout South Sudan and the expulsion of Christian missionaries in 1964. Which convinced South Sudanese of the government’s hostility to Christianity (Johnson, 2016, p. 147). Yet, despite their new circumstances they have kept and held onto their traditions and values. In South Sudan, Dinka is still a prominently spoken language, followed by Arabic (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA] Factbook, 2019). Showing that Dinkas carry their traditions wherever they go in the world. When a study was done on the refugee camp filled with primarily Dinka, Nuer, and other Western Nile people the common response was that they are “‘…carrying the culture of Sudan.’ This culture included traditions of patriarchy, communality, bonds of kinship, respect for elders, and a Christian lifestyle” (Baird & Boyle, 2012, p. 17). That culture is what makes this group extraordinarily interesting.

Much like many parts of the world, the Dinka culture carries an extremely patriarchal mindset. Men are the head of the household and are the providers, and unfortunately the recent wars only reinforced this mindset. As stated by Baird and Boyle (2012), “In the patriarchal Sudanese culture it is not uncommon for a husband to use physical force to ‘control his wife’” (p. 14). Despite that, they are some of the most hospitable people to be around. It is common to be invited inside to share a drink or eat, while both parties exchange stories about life. Although, it is considered very taboo in a regular conversation to talk about religion due to the several conflicts that emerge over it in the area. Also, when talking in a Dinkaen household, the guest should never talk or criticize family matters. In the Global Road Warrior Database (2019) they recommend that when someone is in friendly conversation, they should be careful to avoid prying inquiries about family, particularly concerning the women in a household. Their household structure is different from America and it is important to respect that when visiting.

To continue, the Dinkaen people also have interesting values. The area that they claimed as South Sudan is rich in gold, oil, and diamonds, but farming and cattle take precedent over anything. The Dinkaen people stress the importance of farming and cattle ownership. The land they are on is very poor agricultural land, so cows, lambs, and other livestock are vital to survival. When Angela Impey (2013) investigated the Dinkaen people she remarked that the “Dinkas are distinguished by their passionate attachment to, and identification with, cattle, which are inextricably linked to all aspects of social, religious and political life.” (Impey, 2013, p. 16). Which really puts the local cuisine into perspective. Dinkas put a lot of pride into the meals that they share with friends, but they almost never contain beef. The main types of meat in most of their meals is either lamb or fish. Amazingly, despite having limited resources, the Dinkaen people still were able to make some delicious treats. A common treat that is served at room temperature and hovering between hot pastry and a cozy dessert, Kuindiong, is at once nutritious and heavenly for those with a sweet tooth (Crofts, 2010, p. 110). The Dinka people also have a very diverse palette for drinks from rich coffee to their own type of alcoholic beverage. Which is usually locally brewed alcoholic beverages like *merissa* (a type of beer) and *aragi* (a distilled spirit made from sorghum) are common in the South of the country which is surprisingly only found only in their region (Global Road Warrior, 2019). So even though they are surrounded by what American’s would see as wealth they focus on agriculture and livestock.

Unfortunately, despite their rich, interesting, and diverse culture, they are heavily persecuted in their area. Since the South Sudan’s independence, they have already had three civil wars leaving the area scarred with war. When the united nations send aid to the country, they always note that South Sudan has one of the least developed telecommunications and Internet systems in the world; since domestic mobile providers are waiting for a political settlement and the return of social stability in order to expand their networks (CIA Factbook, 2019). The war also left them with some unfortunate necessities of all-out war. The CIA states “as of the end of 2018, UNICEF estimates that more than 19,000 child soldiers had been used in the country's civil war since it began in December 2013” (CIA Factbook, 2019). Despite recovering from war, this is an incredible group of strong and resilient people.

The Dinka people uphold their Christian values despite what they have been through to keep it. Family and friends are everything to them; the Dinka people are extremely hospitable and will willingly give you a deep glimpse into their culture. Additionally, the Dinkaen people use their land to raise cattle and other livestock in order to create tasty dishes to feed their families. It is crucial to remember that the Dinkas live through each other. No matter where the Dinka people are, they will surely bring their rich culture with them.

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