

The Nuer Tribe of South Sudan and Ethiopia

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By Thokhat Khor Wiu



Sept 21, 2015(Nyamilepedia) — I did not know much about the Nuer sections and entire culture until December 27, 2014 when Honorable Reath Muoch Tang appointed me as a director of Community and Public Affairs in SPLM Mission Office in Washington, DC. This experience taught me so much about the sections of Nuer tribe and their culture. Thanks to the Representative to the United States Hon. Reath Muoch for assigning me to this important task of organizing all South Sudanese Communities in the US who are supporting the Opposition party under the leadership of Dr. Riek Machar. I intend to extend my study to the other South Sudanese tribes in the United States, but for now, this article is about the Nuer tribe of South Sudan and Ethiopia.

The Nuer tribe is a part of an African group of people whose culture is bound up in the survival of their cattle and pastoralism across the South Sudan and western Ethiopian State known as Gambella. This culture helps members of the Nuer to identify themselves as self-reliant and independent-minded. As of today, the Nuer culture still exists within four sections in each corner of society.

Nuer are divided into four sections who share the same culture and economic system and have expanded throughout many areas of the South Sudan and western Ethiopia. These sections are called Gawaar, Eastern Jikany, Lich and Lou Nuer. Gawaar are located in Jonglei (Phow State) and according to Abraham Tuom (personal communication, May 20, 2015) they are divided into three subsections including Laak, Gawar and Thiang. Eastern Jikany currently can be found in two states of South Sudan and Ethiopia, namely Adar State and Sobat State, and Gambella, a state of Western Ethiopia. Eastern Jikany are divided into five subsections, Thiang, Gaguong, Ciereng, Gajiok and Gaguang. Thiang, Gaguong and Ciereng are located in Uppernile State (Adar State) and Gambella Ethiopia, whereas Gajiok and Gaguong are located in Uppernile State (Sobat State) and Gambella, Ethiopia. The Lich subsection is located in Unity State (Lich State), according to Gatkier Machar (personal communication, March 6, 2015), Lich are also known as Bentiu Nuer and are divided into six subsections, Laak, Bul, Jikany, Jagay, Dok, and Nyuong. Lou Nuer live in Jonglei (Bieh State) and Gambella Ethiopia. In a conversation with Thomas Chan Puot (personal communication, May 26, 2015), he said that Lou are

divided into two subsections, Muor and Gon. Muor are further divided into three sections Jajah, Jimach and Galiak. They live mainly in the Akobo area along the Akobo river of Bieh State. The other subsection Gon is divided into two other sections, Ciedak who live mainly in Uror area and Gaba live in the Nyirol area.

According to John Garang Dau, the Founder and President of the Sudanese Institute of Technology who currently lives in Illinois and is a member of Dinka Bor from Jonglei State (personal communication, March 4, 2015), the Lou are, “brave and a people who like to have their voice heard all the time. They like to defend what is right and fight for the voice of the voiceless community who may not defend themselves, which was made obvious by the way they responded to the massacre of innocent people in Juba on December 15-18 of 2013 by the current President Salva Kiir Mayardit.” This response to the killing that occurred on December 15-17 is an example of not just the Lou Nuer, but all sections of Nuer. This aspect of the culture is found in childhood through adulthood and because of this, their culture of pastoralism and cattle has managed to survive and thrive across the South Sudan and western Ethiopia.

From my observation it becomes necessary at a very young age to gain good survival instincts in order to live and prosper. As a child, the expectation is that he or she be able to watch the cows while they are out during the day grazing away from home alone. This is dangerous as there are many wild animals including poisonous snakes, lions, leopards and hyenas forcing the child to remain focused and ready to fight in order to protect the cows and themselves. As the children grow older they remain involved with the care of the cattle, but their duties change.

The single young men have the duty of moving the cows safely from place to place as seasons change and the green grass is available elsewhere. This means long treks through dry places to the next waterhole, sleeping outdoors and hunting for food. They also have to protect the cattle from thieves, especially from the neighboring tribes. This prepares the young man for any sort of conflict related to people or animals. The life out of doors following the cattle also gives the young man a chance to meet and talk to the single girls of neighboring clans or sections and to form relationships with

them.

Before marriage the girls have almost as much freedom as the young men and they also are able to travel and meet other groups of single girls and guys while following the cows to the dry season cattle camps. Their duties also involve the cows, but in a different manner. Milking the cattle and cleaning up after them is included in their daily chores as is food preparation and working in the garden. This lifestyle does change somewhat, though, as the young people become married and start families. Once married, the duties remain much the same but on a larger scale as they now have to care for their own cows and family.

Marriage and cattle both evolve around each other and are important to the economic base of Nuer. When a young man chooses a girl to marry, his family and the girl's family have to discuss a possibility of blood relationship and whether or not there are any past bad relations between the families. On the man's side, there has to be seven generations separating the families and on the girl's side, there has to be five generations separating the families. It is also important to know whether or not there have been any murders perpetrated between the families. As this, if discovered to have happened, could stop the discussions and halt any further progress towards marriage. Once blood relations and murders are discussed, the families can move on to the engagement. The first thing to do to celebrate an engagement is for the man's family to give one cow to the girl's family, which is the equivalent of giving a ring in the western culture. This is a promise of marriage. During this time of engagement, there may be several gifts exchanged between the families, and an increase of respect applied between the families and the couple enabling them the opportunity for open meeting and conversation without fear of family member interference. This openness allows the families to discuss the wedding date.

At the actual wedding, the family members discuss the number of cows expected to be paid and if they are actually available and when they will be paid. The number of cows is fixed throughout all the different sections of Nuer. Each relative of the man's family will provide one or more cows towards the price. Payments can be made depending on the availability of the cows throughout the marriage instead of all at once. This method of

payment of cows for wives and the cows' movement between families and sections of Nuer has kept the culture and its economy alive for hundreds years.

Understanding the manner in which the Nuer live from childhood through marriage surrounded by cattle gives a better understanding of how they have been able to survive for hundreds of years as a tribe. Not only have they survived, but they have thrived, settling across much of eastern South Sudan and western Ethiopia. With an economy based on cattle and their self-reliance, they have not needed aid or intervention until recently with civil war and the creeping in of western culture. Even with great change in the land and in how life is lived, the Nuer will survive and thrive as they have through past generations, having been instilled with the need for independence, strength and self-reliance.

The author, Thokhat Khor Wiu is a Director of Community and Public Affairs in the SPLM mission office in Washington D.C. He can be reached at ikhorwiu@yahoo.com

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