

DINKA

LANGUAGE & CULTURE

The name Dinka – applied to both the language and its speakers - means “people.” Like the Nuer and the Masai, the Dinka are largely pastoral. They migrate regularly in response to the seasons and their agro-pastoral needs. Livestock, especially cattle, play a central role in Dinka culture and worldview. Traditionally, boys tend goats and sheep, while older men are responsible for the cattle.

Though the Dinka groups retain the traditional pastoral life of Nilotes, they have added crop cultivation in some areas; growing peanuts, beans, and corn (maize). Women do much of the farming; men clear forests for cultivation sites. There are usually two plantings per year, a cultural practice that incorporates strategies for dealing with the annual cycle of one long dry season and one long rainy season.

Traditional homes are made of mud walls with thatched conical roofs, which might last about 20 years. The homesteads are situated to enable year-round access to grass and water. Today, permanent villages are built on higher ground above the flood plane of the Nile. The women and older men tend crops on this high ground while younger men move up and down according to the rise and fall of the river.

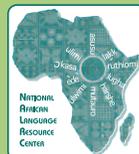
The Dinka do not have traditional systems of kingship but rather “chiefs of the fishing spears” or “spear masters” as ritual community leaders. This elite group of leaders provides health through mystical power. Their role, however, has become limited due to changes brought about by colonial rule and modernity. The Dinka society is largely egalitarian. All people, wealthy or poor, are expected to contribute to the common good. Primary forms of Dinka art are expressed in the form of poetry and song, through which Dinka history and social identity are taught and preserved. The Dinka sing praise songs to their ancestors and the living. Certain songs are reserved for specific occasions like festivals, field work, and initiation ceremonies. Besides poetry and song, men and women contribute artistically in different ways. Women make pots and weave baskets and some men are blacksmiths, producing various implements for the community.

Dinka traditional religion holds that the spirits of the departed become part of the spiritual sphere of earthly life. They believe in a universal God called Nhialac who is the creator and source of life. Humans contact Nhialac through spiritual intermediaries and entities called yath and jak which can be appealed to through rituals. These rituals are administered by diviners and healers. While traditional practices are a strong component of Dinka belief systems, some Dinka people also practise Christianity or Islam.

In recent years, the Dinka people have been affected by the civil war in Southern Sudan. The war experiences and their effects on the society are documented in the movie *Lost Boys of Sudan*. Some famous Dinka people include the model Alek Wek, former NBA player Manute Bol, and singer Ajak Kwai.

STUDYING DINKA IN THE U.S.

Please contact the National African Language Resource Center, or check the NALRC web site at <http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu>



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AJAK KWAI, A FAMOUS DINKA MUSICIAN
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WHY STUDY DINKA?

Dinka, a Nilotic language, is the most widely spoken language in Southern Sudan, with over 4.5 million speakers. Understanding Dinka constitutes a gateway into the world of one of Sub-Saharan Africa's oldest people. Besides understanding how the Dinka have lived in the Nile Valley and interacted with their neighbors, understanding Dinka also offers a window into the current situation in Southern Sudan. Recent media interest in the Sudanese conflict has also spawned interest in learning Dinka, one of the major languages of Southern Sudan. The film industry in particular has shifted world attention on Southern Sudan, and thus, on Dinka language and Culture.

Given the renewed interest in the Sudanese conflict and world attention on Southern Sudan, knowledge of Dinka is particularly essential for diplomatic personnel, strategic planners and negotiators. With growing prospects for peace, workers involved in rehabilitation, reconciliation, peace-building and general reconstruction will find Dinka a useful language to master.

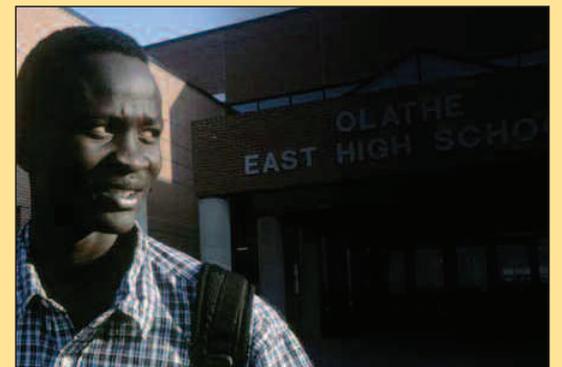
The Dinka people speak a series of closely-related languages, which are grouped by linguists into five broad families or dialects: Northeastern, Northwestern, Southeastern, Southwestern and South Central. Each subgroup is known by the name of its dialect and over thirty dialects have been identified among the five language groupings. Many Dinka speakers are bilingual, speaking Sudanese Arabic in addition to their mother tongue. However, the Dinka language is written in Latin script rather than the Arabic one.

WHO SPEAKS DINKA?

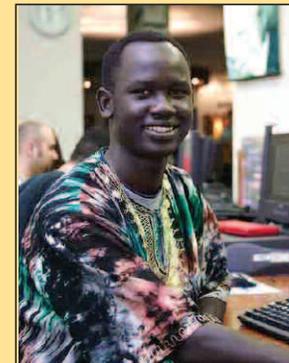
Dinka is the language of the Dinka people, the largest ethnic group in southern Sudan. Ancient pictographs of cattle in Egypt have given archaeologists reason to associate the Dinka with the introduction of domesticated cattle south of the Sahara. The Dinka inhabit the Bahr el Ghazal region of the Nile basin, Jonglei, and parts of southern Kordufan and Upper Nile regions. They are one of several closely related peoples living in southern Sudan, along both sides of the White Nile, but their geographic distribution also covers a wide area along the many streams and small rivers that are concentrated in the Upper Nile province of southeast Sudan and across into southwest Ethiopia.



Dinka song and dance



The documentary, *Lost Boys of Sudan*



Abraham Leer, one of "lost boys" of Sudan