

NUER

LANGUAGE & CULTURE

The Nuer language is a Nilotic language and it is closely related to Dinka.

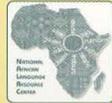
The Nuer are organized into named territorial sub-groups, which are composed of further sub-divisions, associated with specific lineages. The lineages are a major structural feature of their political order. These territorial groupings and lineage groupings are closely aligned. Prior to the imposition of British colonial rule, there were no formal positions of leadership binding Nuer communities together. Their political system at that time was organized around ever-shifting relations of alliance and feuding among different territorial and clan sections. This system was subsequently modified during the British colonial era through the imposition of formal hierarchies of Nuer government chiefs.

Cattle remain a central focus of the livelihood strategies, culture and social life of Nuer living in their southern Sudanese homelands. Cattle exchange continues to be an essential element of Nuer marriage negotiations, bloodwealth payments, initiation rites and the like, but cash and guns have also become increasingly valued trade items. Fishing and agriculture also remain major subsistence activities. Rural residence patterns are generally formed around extended family groups. Initiation ceremonies for men, which involve cutting six incisions across the initiate's forehead, are in decline, though they are still avidly practiced by some Nuer, particularly those in eastern Upper Nile.

Today, many Nuer people practice many religious traditions with the majority being Christians while some are Muslims. Importantly, many Nuers continue to respect indigenous prophets.

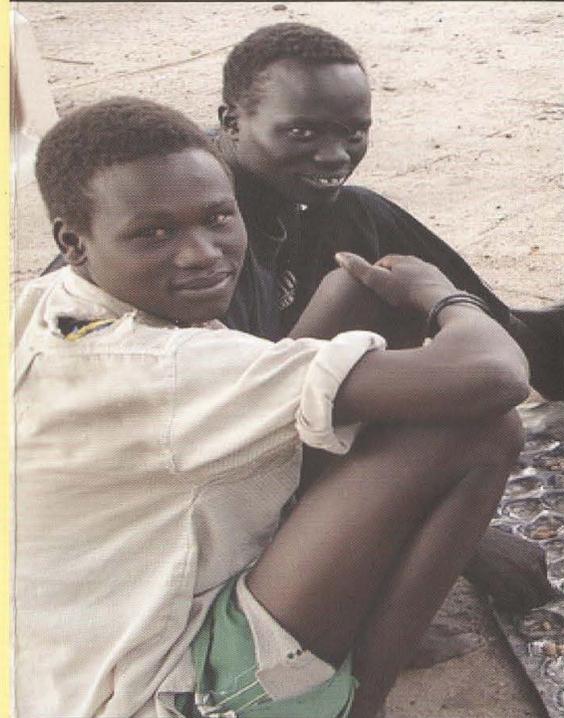
STUDYING NUER IN THE U.S.

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



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NUER YOUTHS PLAYING BAO

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WHY STUDY NUER?

Nuer is one of the major languages spoken in Sudan and Ethiopia. Nuer is the second major language spoken in southern Sudan, after Dinka. Scholars and linguists will find the language's relative uniformity across different areas where it is spoken fascinating.

Scholars interested in issues of war and reconciliation, sovereignty and self-determination, development and poverty, as well as processes of social, economic and religious change more generally will benefit from learning Nuer given the long history of armed conflict over their oil-rich homelands in southern Sudan. Other dimensions of Nuer culture and history that have attracted widespread interest include their religious dynamism, unique initiation rites, complex marriage ceremonies, and profound respect for cattle.

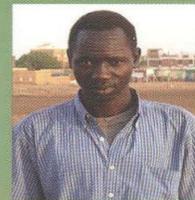
Today the Nuer language is spoken by well over 1 million people in southern Sudan. Many other Nuer-speakers currently live in northern Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Egypt, the U.K., Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the U.S.A., primarily as a result of Sudan's, decades-long, north/south, civil war. There has been steadily growing interest in the study of the Nuer language in many of these diasporic Nuer communities, most notably within the South Sudanese Diaspora Organization with members in thirty cities across the United States of America, in the U.K., Australia and New Zealand.

WHO SPEAKS NUER? PEOPLE AND HISTORY

Also called Naath, meaning "human beings," the Nuer people occupy a vast swath of swamp-laden, savannah lands extending from west of the White Nile in Sudan to lowlands of southwestern Ethiopia. Their traditional livelihood strategies revolve around cattle and sorghum raising, supplemented by seasonal fishing. Physically tall and lean, the Nuer are related linguistically, culturally and historically to the Dinka, who live to their immediate north, west and south. Archaeologists and oral tradition indicate that the Nuer began to expand eastwards across the White Nile in the 1800s. As they migrated gradually to the east, they incorporated many Dinka and Anuak into their communities, while simultaneously pushing many Anuak southwards and eastwards into Ethiopia. Atuot Nuer traditions indicate their origin with the Dinka in western Nuerland. These traditions state that their ancestors separated due to a dispute over cattle ownership.



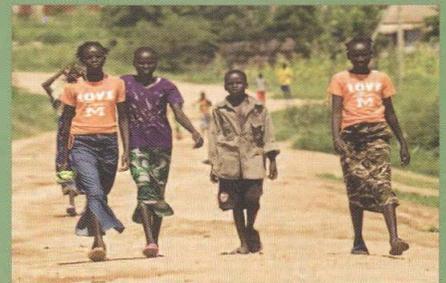
Young Nuer men enjoying coffee.



Nuer man.



Nuer woman and child.



Nuer girls in Ethiopia.