

DINKAS OF THE SUDAN

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[Music: Nuer music, hold as background for Lienhardt's opening remarks.]

LIENHARDT: If you were to travel up the River Nile, first through Egypt and the desert lands of the northern Sudan, you would reach at last the country of this people, who are very tall and very black. They call themselves Jyeng; but foreigners in their land, who find this name hard to pronounce, call them 'Dinka'. The Southern Sudan is divided by many rivers; and as you approach it, carried by a little steamer which paddles along by day and by night, you will pass all the creatures which love the river—ducks, black-and-white geese, pelicans, hippos, crocodiles. Further inland are all the wild big-game animals of Africa, including the lion and the leopard, hiding and resting by day, killing and feeding by night. This is the world of the Dinka; and some night, when your steamer stops for a few hours, you will perhaps hear in the distance drumming and singing. It is the beginning of a dance; perhaps you would like a Dinka to speak about it.

Editors' note: Text of a talk recorded for BBC Radio's Home Service for Schools on Tuesday 26 February 1957 and broadcast on Friday 1 March 1957. Lienhardt wrote the script and narrated it, the part of the Dinka being performed by Errol John. Only very minor changes have been made to the copy of the text surviving in the author's papers, including those on it in the author's own hand. Acknowledgement is due to the BBC (Rights Archive) for permission to publish this material here.

[*Music: Fade in Nuer record on words 'you will perhaps hear', hold for a few seconds, then fade out under next speech.*]

DINKA: Yes of course, it is a dance. But you are mistaken when you think it is a Dinka dance. That is not really the music of our people. It is the music of our neighbours, the Nuer tribe. Long ago we used to fight with them and seize their cattle.

L: Yes, and of course I really knew that this was Nuer music but I thought it didn't matter very much. But you Dinka, you are very like the Nuer tribe, aren't you? A visitor can't always tell the difference between you and them.

D: And we cannot always tell the difference between you British and the French and the Germans and the rest. We call you all 'red foreigners', because we say that when God first made people he made you red and hairy. And he gave you rifles to hunt with and motor cars to love. But he made us, and the Nuer, smooth and shiny and black; and he gave us spears to hunt with and cows to love. So I suppose that you are all the same—you and the French and Germans and the rest—and we are all the same, we and the Nuer.

L: Yes, but you know it's not quite so. Even a stranger can learn to tell a Nuer. He has six long scars right across his forehead, from one ear to the other. The Dinka have different marks on their foreheads—in fact I have seen them make them. When a Dinka boy is growing big, and his father thinks that it is time to let him do the things which only a man is allowed to do, he will say, 'Now you are old enough to have the marks of a grown man. You may have the lines cut on your head.' The youth calls together the other boys of the village whose fathers have agreed; and they shave off their hair, and pay a man to cut V-shaped lines deep into the flesh of their foreheads, from the top of the nose right over the scalp. When these cuts heal, they leave scars for life; and those are the marks of a fully grown Dinka man.

D: Yes, that is so; and in some places they cut the girls' heads too—they say that their faces will then become long and beautiful, instead of fat and round. Now that many of our boys are going to school they don't have these cuts made any more. Still, the other boys who do not go to school look forward to the time when their heads will be cut. They have to be very brave of course, for it is painful, and if you twist your head away from the knife you will have a bad wavy scar for the rest of your life. But until those marks on your head have been made, you are only a child, looking after goats, helping your mother, running errands for everyone, and cracking open roasted tortoises for your grandfather to eat. When you have your head-scars, you are a man; you help your father and your older brothers with the cattle, and that is what every Dinka boy wants to do. Even the school-boys want to own cows and bulls; when they first started schools for us, every boy

had to take a cow to school and look after it there. Cattle are the most important things in our life.

L: And there perhaps we might mention another custom. When a boy reaches manhood, his father will give him an ox as a present.

D: Yes, that's right.

L: This ox now becomes his close friend. He gives it a poetic name, picks insects and mud from its body, polishes its horns and ties tassels on them—tassels made from the hair of a lion if he can get it. Then sometimes he will wear his best beads (for in the villages young people don't need clothes) and take his ox for a walk. He will sing a song he's composed, and his music will be the sound of a bell on the ox's neck. The girls will look up from milking, and admire him. And one of them will think, 'There is the man I want for my husband.'

D: But no girl will want him unless he owns cows. Who ever heard of a good marriage in my country without a present of cows? He will need thirty cows before he can marry the girl.

L: That is true—you cannot get married in Dinkaland without giving a present of cows to your bride's family. People there say that the girl's family has had all the trouble of bringing her up. She has been taught by them how to make pots and baskets, how to cook and make flour and beer. And so why should her husband take her away from her family without giving them something to make up for all their trouble? When there's a wedding, all a man's uncles and aunts and cousins will give him cows as wedding presents, and he will give them all to his wife's family. But in fact the bride and bridegroom scarcely appear at all at their own wedding! They stay in the background, and their relatives do all the talking and dancing and singing.

[Music: Fade in Nuer record on the words 'talking and dancing', hold for a few seconds. Fade under.]

L: Then after the wedding, the guests go home, some of them carrying large joints of meat tied to their spears—for the father of the bride will have killed a bull and made a big feast. And then, for a long time, the husband mustn't go near his wife's family, perhaps until he has children of his own.

D: And that is how it should be. We like some of your British customs; but you marry without cows, and that is bad; and you speak to your mother-in-law, and that, well, that is really shameful.

L: Yes, I know you all think so, but we have our customs and you have yours. Then comes the time when a baby is born. For that, a young wife goes home to her mother, who will teach her how to look after it. She will have to make a cradle (for you have to make most things yourself in Dinkaland); and when the baby is strong, she'll set off back to her husband with the baby in the cradle on her head. She has to balance it very carefully; and perhaps she must walk for twenty miles.

D: She ought to know how to balance it, if she's not a fool! She has had a lot of training. Haven't you seen how our little girls always carry pots of water from the river on their heads? It makes their necks strong; and if they carry things like that in their hands, instead of on their heads, they cannot carry a stick. And then what will they do, when they meet a snake or a wild dog?

L: Yes, indeed. But talking of babies, I was surprised to find that a very small Dinka baby is quite pink, not black. But sometimes it's not wise to look at a baby very closely, if you are a foreigner. Some mothers may think you are a witch and want to eat it.

D: Yes, many people say that there are witches in our country. I don't know whether to believe it or not; but certainly there are all sorts of magicians. You see we have no real doctors; and so when a man has a pain, he will go to a magician—his cousin might be a magician—and he will perform magic to take the pain away. I have seen some magicians take bits of charcoal out of a man's back, and say, 'There, I have taken away your backache.' But I think that is a trick. More important magic can bring the rain, though.

L: The rain—yes. Rain is very important for the Dinka; because for half the year there is no rain at all. Then the rivers begin to dry up, until the fish are so thick in them that they sometimes die and float to the top, like overcrowded goldfish in a bowl. And the grass dries up and withers away. There is nothing good for the cattle to eat. Then the Dinka have to leave their villages (carrying all their household things, remember) and make a long journey with the cattle to the swamps, which don't dry up. They camp out by the swamps for months, until the rain comes again and the earth in the villages becomes wet, and soft enough for sowing corn. But if the rains are late, it is a hard time for the Dinka. The cattle stop giving milk, and the crops will be spoilt at the harvest. So the Dinka believe that some powerful magicians can persuade God to let the rains come. They pray about it; and sometimes, certainly, a cloud comes out of the clear sky, and rain falls.

[Rain and thunderstorm, as loud as possible.]

D: That sounds like a spring storm in my country. Sometimes people are struck by lightning, but we don't mind too much. We say that God has taken them away, and get on with our planting and gardening. This time after the spring rains is the only time when the weather is right for gardening.

L: And now, in late spring, the corn is sprouting. The older men are watching the cattle some way from the village—of course there are no fields for cows in Dinkaland, and they must be watched so that they do not stray. Also, there are lions in the woods which might attack the cattle, and then you need a strong spear. In the river, when the cattle go to drink, a crocodile may be waiting. It waits quietly until a calf has waded a little way into the stream, and then it seizes it, and lashes round with its heavy tail to sweep its meal right out in the water. So the cattle have to be watched all the time, until they are brought back at night to be tied up near the village, where the women are grinding corn.

D: And preparing porridge and sauce for the evening. We only eat one large meal a day. You English always seem to be picking at food, like birds. Little girls will be out gathering vegetables for their mothers to cook. Boys are looking after the goats, and playing at herding cattle. They collect large snail-shells, and pretend they are their cows, and play at looking after them. Then in playing they forget about the goats; and the goats go and eat the best corn growing in the neighbours' gardens. And then all the women shout and sometimes quarrel, and the little boys run away and leave them to it. But the girls shout to support their mothers; men say that it is a mistake to interfere when the women quarrel.

L: But they make it up of course sooner or later, and help each other with their gardens, which are now growing well; but the country round them is becoming flooded, for the rains are heavy. The cows are stamping about in mud, which is bad for their hooves. So this is the time for the young men to go camping again, this time in the forest where it's drier. The old people and the girls stay behind to chase off the birds, antelopes, and sometimes monkeys, which come to feed in the gardens.

D: And if the birds are very troublesome, it may be necessary to call in a magician who knows how to make the birds listen to him. He will come to your garden, and sprinkle milk and other things on your grain, and tell the birds to leave it alone. Sometimes they do, and then you pay him something. Sometimes they don't, and then you say that he is not truly a magician. Because some people pretend to be magicians, and some people are real magicians. You have to find out for yourself which are which. I don't think our boys are taught that in school.

L: And what a pity! But of course you can't leave everything to magicians. You have to be constantly watchful if you are a Dinka. The mother who is preparing food has to see out of the corner of her eye that the baby isn't crawling too near

the fire; the little girl who is weaving a mat must watch at the same time to see that a dog isn't going to sneak up and run away with the family's fish. The boys, as I have said, are playing games and watching to see that the goats don't eat their neighbours' gardens. The grown-up men are watching out for lions and crocodiles which might seize the cows; and the cows are searching for the best tufts of grass. As you see, it's a very watchful kind of life; but it is a dangerous country, and you have to be careful.

D: Still, we like it. It's a good land for cows. And in the evenings, there are dances. Even the little girls can go and dance a few steps. They make little bunches of bells and tie them round the waist so they hang down behind. And then they jig up and down to make the bells tinkle. And the young men wash off the ashes which they usually rub on their bodies to keep flies away. For the dance they rub oil on their bodies, and sometimes put markings on them with coloured powder, to make themselves look like their oxen. And so, dressed up in their beads and ivory bangles, they go to the dance. They begin it by beating the drums and singing alone, to let the girls know they want to dance. Like this:

[*Music: Singing on Nuer or Dinka record.*]

L: Sometimes they are disappointed. The girls think it is too cold, or too dark, for a dance. There are no lamps to light the way, and you can scarcely see your partner unless the moon is bright.

D: I don't think *that* matters very much. You go to a dance to dance, not to see. But it is true that our girls do not always have time to dance. Cooking and grinding are hard work, and when you have to carry all your water from the river—and that may be a mile or two away—you may be tired. And Dinka dancing is not like your dancing, just walking about arm in arm. We have to stamp and jump and shout—we pretend that we are bulls, and we hold our arms like the horns of a bull. It is very beautiful—but it is very tiring too.

L: And then of course at night all the insects in Africa come to keep you awake—or so I thought, even in a mosquito net; and in the morning, there are again the cows to be milked, the goats to be let out, the fish to catch for supper, the corn to grind, the babies crying for attention, the goats spoiling the garden, and so on and so on. But in the evening, a large bowl of porridge, the cattle safely tied to their pegs near home and making the pleasantest music for Dinka ears.

[*Cows making terrific bellows.*]

L: And then, another dance.

[*Dance music to end.*]