

## DINKAS: PEOPLE OF THE SOUTHERN SUDAN

GODFREY LIENHARDT

*Edited with an Introduction by Ahmed Al-Shahi and Jeremy Coote*

### *Introduction*

WE publish here the broadcast script of a talk by Godfrey Lienhardt about the Dinka. It was broadcast on the BBC Home Service for Schools, in the series 'Geography: Life and Work in Africa', in May 1953 and is published here for the first time. This was the third of Lienhardt's radio broadcasts,<sup>1</sup> and as with the two

We are grateful to the BBC Written Archives Centre (Caversham Park, Reading, RG4 8TZ) for allowing Coote to copy the microfiched copy of the script of Lienhardt's talk held there and for providing him with access to the relevant files (BBC WAC RCONT 1 Lienhardt, Godfrey, Talks 1952–62; BBC WAC RCONT 12 1963–67). All quotations from Charles Armour's letters are reproduced with the permission of the BBC. We are also grateful to Sue Brooks for assistance in preparing the text for publication. Extracts from a draft of our introduction and from the broadcast script itself were read by Coote at a special meeting of the 'North-East Africa Seminar' held at the Oxford Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology on 11 June 1999 to mark the publication of the special issue of *JASO* (Vol. XXVII, no. 1; Hilary 1997) published in Lienhardt's memory. Except in one instance, in the text of his talk Lienhardt consistently used 'Dinka' to refer to both one and many Dinka. The title of the talk as broadcast, however, was 'Dinkas' and despite its now rare usage we decided to retain it here.

<sup>1</sup> For a list of Lienhardt's talks, and (where relevant) details of their subsequent publication, see Al-Shahi 1997: 10–11. For further discussion of Lienhardt's broadcasting career, see Al-Shahi and Coote 2000.

previous ones Lienhardt had been suggested as a broadcaster by E. E. Evans-Pritchard. In January 1953 the BBC approached Evans-Pritchard to ask if he would give a talk on the Dinka in the coming summer term's Geography series for 13–15 year olds. Through his secretary Miss Phyllis Puckle, Evans-Pritchard suggested that the BBC approach Lienhardt, who agreed to do it. On 24 February, Lienhardt met with Charles Armour of the School Broadcasting Department to discuss the programme. No record of that meeting survives, but we can gain some idea of their conversation from a letter Armour wrote to Lienhardt on 26 February outlining what the talk should cover:

Although it is for a geography series, I don't want you to limit your talk to solid geographical facts, although it is clearly necessary to explain the geographical background of the rains and the floods, etc., but I should like it to include those interesting details of Dinka life which you were telling me. I am sure the social customs ought to have the most stress. I will leave the details of the content to you, because my comments can be more constructive when I have seen a draft of the script.

A fortnight later Lienhardt had completed a draft. He forwarded it to Armour on 16 March with a covering letter:

Here is the script. I have deliberately made it rather long so that you can adapt it to your purposes. I am afraid I do not find that the 'shown to the children' manner comes very easily and although I expect you to do with it what you like I had better warn you that I fear I shall not be able to speak it naturally, if much more 'tiny-tottery' is introduced.

Armour replied briefly on 23 March: 'You need have no qualms—no more "tiny-tottery" is likely to be introduced, rather, I think, the changes will be in the other direction.' A further letter from Armour dated 2 April is much more detailed, and it is clear that much of the structure and content of the talk was provided by the producer (though by no means all that Armour suggests found its way into the script as broadcast):

I think there is most delightful material in your script, but my criticisms arise from the method of presentation. For the Secondary Modern children one should organise the information very neatly in main topics. I found on re-reading your script several times that it tends to merge very much into a general picture. Also I find lacking one very important person, namely yourself. It seems indefinite. So often a scene described would go so much better if it was recounted in the first person, so giving the children the feeling that they are actually seeing everything along with yourself.

Now for my suggestions in detail. Could not we start with a more precise introduction of how one gets to this part of the Upper Nile and the geographical conditions there? When you have made these clear, then I think you

should say why you went to live with the Dinkas, because the children will be interested and it will make it more convincing to them. Then you should describe how you made the journey to the Dinkas, how you got to know them, and how you lived with them. Next, I suggest you describe the differences between the Dinkas and the other tribes, the fishing, the farming, and your excellent story of how the Dinkas go courting and get married. Perhaps you may find in the writing the distinction between the other tribes comes more satisfactorily at the end, I will leave that to you....

The main points are to bring yourself more convincingly into the script and to assemble the main topics into more precise compartments.

Armour adds that he cannot remember whether he had previously sent Lienhardt examples of other geography scripts, so he is enclosing two.

Lienhardt's next draft was ready some two weeks later. He wrote on 20 April: 'I agree with your comments, of course, though I'm not sure that material which is exceptionally complicated can be presented in an entertaining and concise manner in the time available, so I doubt if the second effort is any better than the first.' However, Armour seems to have been quite happy with Lienhardt's 'second effort'. He wrote, on 4 May:

I have made some amendments to your script, rather of a minor character, except I have added the wedding scene and the description of the babies from your original draft. In order to get back to a proper length I have cut the introduction a little. If any of my changes give any wrong impressions, please put them right.... A small point. I should like some references to the Dinka standing around on one leg with spears. We ought to draw attention to this characteristic attitude. You will know the best place for putting it in the script.... I am quite fond of the Dinka.

Armour requested that any further changes Lienhardt might care to make should be sent by return of post for incorporation into the final duplicated copies of the script, though amendments could also be made in rehearsal.

None of the drafts that went back and forth between Lienhardt and Armour seems to have survived. The version of the talk published here, therefore, is taken from the broadcast script held at the BBC Written Archives. This has a number of amendments on it in Lienhardt's hand, which it must be assumed were made before—indeed for—the broadcast, and these have been incorporated. Apart from a few very minor, clarifying amendments to the punctuation, we have made no changes to the text. The words reproduced here are, so far as we can establish, those spoken by Lienhardt in the broadcast.

It is clear from the script that the broadcast ended with a recording of Dinka singing and drumming, and it seems that other snippets of Dinka music might have been used earlier in the broadcast to provide atmosphere. The recordings of Dinka music were apparently supplied by the linguist A. N. Tucker, at the time Reader in

African Languages at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. After a rehearsal in the morning, the eighteen-minute talk was broadcast live on the BBC Home Service (Schools) at 14.20 on Wednesday 13 May 1953.

We can gather from the fact that Armour commissioned a further schools talk from Lienhardt (this time for 11 year olds; later published as Lienhardt 1997) that the BBC were happy with Lienhardt's broadcast. It certainly seems the listeners were. On 15 June 1953, Armour wrote to Lienhardt enclosing reports from schools:

You will see from the enclosed reports from schools that your talk on the Dinka went down very well. Only the other day I was in a small country school in Norfolk, and when I asked about geography broadcasts the teacher immediately said, 'The talk on the Dinka—that's the one which all the children remember.'

Unfortunately, we have not found the reports (if indeed they survive), but it seems from what Armour says that the broadcast was enjoyed by a generation of British schoolchildren.

Neither Armour nor Lienhardt himself would have imagined in 1953 that the broadcast script would be published 50 years later. We believe, however, that it is well worth making it available in this published form. While it contains no new or previously unpublished ethnographic information, it does, we think, provide insights into the circumstances of Lienhardt's fieldwork that will be useful for reassessments of his work. More especially it is worth preserving as an example of an attempt by a young anthropologist to provide an accessible word-picture of another way of life, dealing with at least some of the complexities without introducing too much 'tiny-tottery'.

AHMED AL-SHAHI, JEREMY COOTE

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DINKAS: PEOPLE OF THE SOUTHERN SUDAN

*Announcer: Geography for Schools. Life and Work in Africa. Today you are going to hear about the Dinka people who live in the Southern Sudan among the swamps and grasslands on either side of the White Nile. Until recently, not a great deal was known about the Dinka. To tell you what it is like to live among these people, we have in the studio Godfrey Lienhardt, who has just returned from the Sudan.*

When I first went to the Sudan in 1947 I travelled by train from Khartoum, the capital, to Kosti on the White Nile. Then I took one of the Nile paddle steamers to Juba, which is near the southern border of the Sudan. For the first few days I sat on deck watching the country slowly go by. First the land of various Arab tribes, then, about three hundred miles south of Khartoum, the country got greener, the desert gave way to flat grasslands stretching as far as the eye could see. Here, instead of the Arabs of the north, I met the naked negro people of whom the Dinka are the most numerous. I had seen my first Dinka in Khartoum. He was working in the zoo there, feeding the lions. He agreed to come with me to teach me a bit of the Dinka language on the journey, and then to visit his own people again. As he knew a few words of English, I hoped I could talk a little through him to some of the Dinka on the way. Every time the steamer stopped to put down passengers, or pick up more wood—because the steamer burnt wood as fuel—we pushed our way on to the bank, through crowds of people trying to sell chickens, sheep and other things to the Arab sailors. But I found I couldn't say much to the Dinka, we mostly just stared at each other. I admired their fine beads and big ivory bangles, their great height, and the ostrich feathers in their hair, and they, as I only later discovered, examined the British passengers and commented on their small size, their hairy legs, and their thick necks. The Dinka are very tall and slender, and are given the name of 'storkmen'. On the whole, they find Europeans rather unpleasant to look at. What they particularly dislike about us is our having teeth at the front in the lower jaw. They think this is very ugly, for they take theirs out, rather painfully, with the point of a spear. This makes their language very difficult to speak properly, because all the sounds can only be made well if you have no lower front teeth.

Travelling to Juba, the boat threaded its way for several days through the swamps of the Southern Sudan. These swamps have really to be seen to be believed, for on both banks of the river, as far as the eye can see, there are only reeds, and papyrus grass. Nobody can live there. You can shoot crocodiles from the steamer if you like, and you see quite a lot of hippos too, but along this central stretch of the White Nile, you don't see many people. Their villages are built many miles away from the river, on higher ridges which are not flooded when the river rises during the rainy season. I should have told you before that I first went in December, when the country was drying up. For you see, not a drop of rain falls in

the Southern Sudan from November until March, but in April the rains begin. Then, until November, all the land near the rivers is deeply flooded. When the rains stop, the country begins to dry up until most of the land becomes just hard, dry clay. The rivers sink and sink until really big ones have become no more than miserable little trickles that you can step across easily without getting your feet wet. In places which were covered with water only a few months before, you may be lucky if you can find a single pool of slimy water to drink, and with insects skating on it too. Later I got used to drinking that water, after filtering it through a bit of cloth and then boiling it. It still tasted like mud. Still, if you want to live with the Dinka you can't be too fussy about such things.

By the time the steamer had arrived in Juba, we had passed south of the land of the Dinka, so I took a lorry in Juba, piled it high with my tables, chairs, tins of food, cooking utensils, and everything else needed, and we travelled 400 miles by the main road north-east [*sic*; the direction is actually north-west] to Wau, a town in Dinka country. Now their land is so big, on both banks of the Upper Nile, that it was hard to know where to stay to get to know the Dinka. You see, there are just over a million Dinkas in a land bigger than Britain, and they are very spread out. But I eventually decided to go to a little village called Pan Acier.

To get to the village I had to walk with carriers for the last twenty-five miles of the journey, and some of the carriers with my food and furniture on their heads got lost, so when I arrived in the village nobody really knew what I wanted, and there was nowhere to stay. But the Dinka were very kind. They took me to one of the large huts, made of mud and thatch, where they keep their cattle at night, and they said I might stay there. They brought a large bowl of sour milk too—they much prefer their milk sour—and, although I had to pick out a few cow hairs, I was hungry and tired enough to enjoy it. I can't say I much enjoyed sleeping in the cattle house, since the Dinka always build a smoky fire at night to keep mosquitoes away from them and their cattle, and until you get used to it, you are half-suffocated by smoke. There is not much room either, between the goats and cows and visitors, all of whom sleep together in this large hut. Around it are several smaller huts where the family sleep. They are all nicely made of mud and thatched with grass. So I slept that night with goats nibbling my mosquito net and I woke up to find twenty or thirty Dinka all standing round to have a look at me as I got up. At first, I must say I found it rather trying to shave with five or six Dinka all trying to look at themselves in the shaving mirror at the same time, and occasionally feeling my whiskers also.

This was December, and all the people were together in the village. The harvesting was almost all finished. Every morning the cattle were taken out by the young men and spent the day in the pastures nearby. In the evening, they were brought back and tied to their different pegs—for each one has a peg of its own—near the homesteads. Some were put in the cattle houses. Others were tied outside. Little boys ran about making the smoking fires to keep off the mosquitoes. The

women were cooking the evening meal. The only lights in the village, of course, were firelight and my lamp; so after supper people used to gather round me in the lamplight and talk. In this way, I began to learn a little Dinka; but as I say, it is a difficult language. I was very proud of my first sentence. I asked a man, 'Have you finished building your hut?', and I was quite surprised when everyone burst into laughter. Later, when I knew the language better, I discovered that what I had *really* said was, 'Are you married to an ostrich?'

So life went on through December and into January. This was the dry season and the country was by now drying up. As the river fell lower and lower, it was time to start the fishing. An old man took a goat to the river and pushed it under the reeds. This goat was a present for the spirits of the river, to make sure that they brought a plentiful supply of fish to the Dinka. Every day we all went down to fish, the men carrying fish-spears, the women carrying baskets. Then, in water up to the waist, we walked up and down all together, the men thrusting the spears into the water and the women trapping the fish in the baskets. In the deeper places, we fished from canoes, which are just hollowed out tree trunks, and unless you are expert they tip you over and throw you into the river in no time. The worst thing that happened to me in the water was to tread on an electric fish, which gave quite a nasty shock. The Dinka seemed to find this funnier than I did.

In January and February, it is time to burn the dry, dead grass. This grows high above a man's head, so while it is standing you are living like a rabbit in a cornfield. As it becomes dry enough, the Dinka start great fires. Clouds of smoke rise in the air, with a lot of birds circling over the fires to catch the half-roasted grasshoppers driven out by the flames. All the grass round my village was dry by about the middle of January. Little new shoots came from the tufts of burnt grass, but they were soon eaten by the cows. So the chief sent off some men to see if the land further down the river, where it was swampier, was dry enough to take the cattle to.

The men came back and said that the swamps were drying up, so all the Dinka started to prepare for the big move to the main rivers and their flood-plains, where they keep their cattle from about January until April. Every day, more families were ready with their cattle, their womenfolk carrying cooking pots, ropes, and sleeping mats, and even quite small children helping to carry part of the household on their heads. Then they would go off with great excitement, for they love this change of atmosphere and air, and they know too that the cattle give the best milk in the wetter pastures well away from the villages. From our point of view, nothing much happens in these dry-season camps. The older people sit about all day making rope out of grass or skin and talking mostly about cows; the young men watch the cattle, and have dances in the evening; and the children play about, much like British children on the sea-shore, but instead of making sand-castles, they make little cattle-houses of mud, and they collect big snail shells and pretend that those are their cows. When the rains start again in April or May, it is time to go back to

the villages to sow the seeds of millet, the grain from which the Dinka use to make their porridge.

In May and June, everyone is hard at work hoeing the ground and scattering the seed. The cattle are looked after by a few young men, and again are brought in to the villages at night. It is a worrying time, there are so many things that may spoil the grain. The rains may stop altogether for a week or two after the seed has begun to sprout. While the children and old men watch the growing crops and scare away the birds, the young men go off again with the cattle to camps in the forest, and stay there until the harvest time in September. They then return to the village, and all live together until the grass near home becomes dry again, and again it is time to move off to the swamper pastures.

You may be wondering, perhaps, why the Dinka go to so much trouble for their cattle, moving about with them in all weathers to find the best grass. First, it is because they need their milk and meat, for they cannot grow enough grain, or catch enough fish when the rivers are high, to live on fish and grain alone. But they never kill an animal just for food, and they hate selling cows. They will eat one if it dies naturally, and sometimes they kill a bull as a present for their God, and eat the meat themselves. But the most important thing about cows for the Dinka is that you have to use them when you get married. Then, you have to give your wife's father a large present of cows, between fifteen and thirty, or perhaps more, to make up for taking his daughter away from him. Also, although it sounds strange to us, Dinka young men sometimes go courting with their favourite oxen. A pet ox, with decorative tassels hanging from its horns and a large bell round its neck, is taken along by its owner. Off they go together, the young man and his pet, to the place where his girl is milking her father's cows. The young man walks round with his ox, singing a song to please her, and she sometimes looks up and thinks how handsome they both are, the man with his tall, slender body all shiny with oil, and his best beads on, and the ox well-groomed and decked out. I once asked a Dinka girl whether she would rather have a good-looking man with an ugly ox, or an ugly man with a really fine ox. She said that she would rather have the ugly man with the fine ox, though perhaps she was pulling my leg, as Dinka girls liked to do.

A Dinka marriage is quite an exciting affair. The bridegroom's people go and dance for days at the house of the bride. She stays out of the way, and so does her mother, because it is thought a bad thing for a man to see his mother-in-law before marriage. The old people talk, and the young people dance. Then the time comes for the cows to be handed over, and there is often what looks like a fight. The girl's people complain that there are not enough cattle, and the man's people say there are enough, and then they pretend that the marriage is not going ahead after all. But usually some old man comes and calms them down, and they all settle happily to eat the marriage feast. The unfortunate bridegroom does not take much part in all this. He has to stay on one side out of the way, wearing a leopard-skin,



and with a huge helmet made of black ostrich feathers on his head. When the wife has her first baby, she goes home to her mother, who will teach her how to look after it properly.

Dinka babies, by the way, are quite a light red colour when they are born, though their parents are very black-skinned. And you can't please the parents by praising the children. They think that anyone who shows too much interest in their babies is jealous of them, so it is not polite to say how healthy or fat a baby is. It is polite to say that it is a miserable little thing, and talk about it as though it were nasty and ugly, if you talk about it all. If you say nice things about it, its mother will be very angry, and if after that it gets sick, she will think that it is your fault. Actually, though, the babies are very pretty indeed, though they do sometimes yell loudly when they see a strange white face approaching. Their parents don't try to stop them from crying. They think it is a good thing for a child to be afraid of strangers and strange things; otherwise, it will not know how to look out for danger when it grows up. And a small child in that country has to know when to run away, for some day he will certainly meet a snake, if not a lion or a leopard. Then, the Dinka say, if he has not been taught to be afraid, he will be hurt, because he will just stand there looking at the animal.

I wish there were more time to tell you some other things about the Dinka. You see it is a hard country they live in, and in some ways the Dinka are a hard people to get to know. Proud and sometimes fierce. But, when you know them, and get used to talking about cows all the time, they are a most enjoyable people to live with. I hope to see them again this summer and I shall be glad to hear the songs they sing to their cattle, and the beating of their dancing drums. And now, just to give you an idea of what it is all like, we have a recording of a Dinka song. It was made on a small portable recorder, so perhaps the quality is not of the best. Still—here it is.

[*Song and drumming*]

*Announcer: And that ends Geography for today. The talk on the Dinka of Southern Sudan was given by Godfrey Lienhardt. Next week you will hear about Cocoa Farming in the Gold Coast.*

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