The Peoples of South Sudan: The Dinka

The Dinka are one of the main ethnic groups of South Sudan. In fact, they are the largest ethnic group in South Sudan, with a population of over 4,000,000 people, according to a survey made in 2011. The Dinka mostly live in the Northern South Sudan regions of Bahr el Gahzal and Upper Nile. However, they also have a sizable diaspora scattered throughout the world. Over the years the Dinka’s ethnic rivalry with the Nuer has driven their leaders to plunge South Sudan into a civil war which was only recently resolved. This paper will discuss the history, culture and politics of the Dinka.

The Dinka originated from the region of Gezira in what is now Sudan. In medieval times the Dinka created the kingdom of Alodia, a Christian multi-ethnic empire dominated by the neighboring kingdom of Nubia, in what is now Chad. Due to the Dinka being ruled by the Nubians in Medieval times, the Dinka absorbed much of the Nubian vocabulary, which is why much of the Dinka language comes from the Nubian language. Sudan was a British colony from 1899-1953, which included the regions of what is now Sudan and South Sudan. The economy and military power of Sudan dominated South Sudan after independence in 1953. As a result, Sudan attempted to force their dominant Muslim culture upon the traditionalist Dinka culture.

This forcefulness led Dr. John Garang, a Dinka, and many others to fight for the independence of South Sudan. Not just for the Dinka but for all of the ethnic groups of South Sudan. Garang believed in “Sudanisim”, a political ideology that all Sudanese should set aside their ethnic and religious differences and embrace one commonality, being Sudanese. South Sudan went through two civil wars over the course of 50 years to gain their independence. South Sudan did gain its independence in 2011, but Dr. John Garang, the father of South Sudan, never got to see it. Dying in a helicopter crash in 2005, foul play being suspected. Dr. Garang also never was able to see Sudanisim take hold, and ethnic rivalries soon plunged South Sudan into civil war in 2014, just as he had feared.

The Dinka culture is based on their pastoralist lifestyle. Pastoralisim revolves around cattle, which are used for ceremonies, traditions and rituals. Cattle are not for commercial profit with the exception of selling cattle to buy necessary food and medicine in times of great need. Cattle are also a source of cultural pride for the Dinka. The more cattle a person has, the more respect other Dinka give them. The Dinka are also farmers. Some of the crops they harvest include: Maize (e.g Corn), sesame, pumpkins, okra, and cassava. However, the Dinka rarely ever sell these crops. This is due to the Dinka’s main goal of sustenance. This means that the Dinka are mainly concerned with having enough food in order for their people to survive. As opposed to growing a business or economy. Their wealth is demonstrated through their cattle.

Since the arrival of Abrahamic religions, Dinka religion has been based on the worship of one god, who speaks through spirits that take temporary possession of individuals in order to speak through them. The Dinka also sacrifice cattle to this god in times of drought in hope of bringing rain. However, not all Dinkas are animist. Many missionaries in the 19th century reached South Sudan. Since then, Christianity has been a major religion for the Dinkas.

The traditional Dinka political system is structured around the concept of clan chief. A collection of clans headed by clan leaders form a higher political body known as the sub-chief, and several sub-chiefs fall under the position of the executive chief, who serves as the communicator between the government and the people. Throughout Dinka history, the position of highest tribal administrator has changed from paramount chief to court president to executive chief. Ideally, the paramount chief presides over regional courts, which stand above the executive chiefs, the sub-chiefs, and clan leaders.

Many Dinka have risen above their station and have been able to find great positions of power in their country. Examples include; John Garang who led South Sudan to freedom and Salva Kiir Mayardit the current President of South Sudan. These Dinka were able to accomplish this through education, which is obtained through connections. This allows them to be highly valued by the government in respect to their education since the vast majority of South Sudanese citizens cannot read or write.

Recently, many Dinka officials in the South Sudan government, including Salva Kiir, have been accused of monopolizing power in favor of the Dinka. These accusations have been largely made by Riek Machar, the former Vice-president of South Sudan under Salva Kiir. Machar is a Nuer, the second largest ethnic group in South Sudan and fierce rival of the Dinka. In 2014 a supposed assassination attempt was made on Machar and all the Nuer officials in the South Sudanese government. This assassination was never carried out though, as Machar heard about it before it could occur. Machar then fled into the bush along with all other Nuer officials and formed the SPLA-IO (Sudanese People’s Liberation Army- In Opposition) to fight Salva Kiir for power. The recent South Sudanese civil war was resolved on May 12, 2019 when Salva Kiir agreed to a power sharing agreement between him and Machar, effectively ending the 5 year long 3rd South Sudanese Civil War.

In conclusion, even though the Dinka are the largest ethnic group in South Sudan, they are also the most feared due to their large population and alleged attempts to monopolize power. However, in the future maybe John Garang’s dream can be realized and all of the ethnic groups of South Sudan can coexist in harmony and embrace their commonality of all being Sudanese.