The Peoples of South Sudan: The Nuer

The Nuer people of South Sudan are one of the main ethnic groups of South Sudan. Also, they are the second largest ethnic group of South Sudan, with over 3,500,000 people in their population. The largest ethnic group of South Sudan are the Dinka, with 4,000,000 people in their population. Unfortunately, due to years of conflict and history, the Nuer and Dinka are fierce rivals. This ethnic rivalry has been one of the main causes of the South Sudanese civil war and continued conflict between the two ethnic groups.

The Nuer people originated from Ethiopia and during the middle ages migrated from Ethiopia to the present region of the Upper Nile in South Sudan. During the colonial era, under British rule various ethnic groups contended for power in the imperial government. However, the Nuer was not one of these groups. During colonial rule the Nuer fought the British in multiple rebellions in order to protect their cultural identity of animism and pastoralism. These rebellions were swiftly crushed, but the Nuer continued to be the most troublesome ethnic group during colonial rule. In contrast, the Dinka embraced colonial rule and, as a result were able to achieve high positions in the government. This is one of the foundational reasons for the conflict between the Dinkas and the Nuer.

The current Dinka-Nuer rivalry also stems from a thousand-year-old myth. In Sudan folklore, there are two groups, the Dinka and Nuer. These groups are represented as two sons of God, who promised his old cow to Dinka and its calf to Nuer. One-night the Dinka son came and took the calf from God by imitating the voice of Nuer son. When God realized that he had been cheated, he became angry and charged Nuer to avenge that act by endlessly raiding Dinka's cattle. Today the Nuer raid cattle and seize them openly often by force with death and violence. The second reason is power due to the Nuer and Dinka constantly trying to gain more power over one another in the South Sudan government. For example, Riek Machar, the former VP of South Sudan under Salva Kiir, the current President of South Sudan, accused that Salva Kiir of trying to assassinate him and his entire cabinet in an effort to monopolize power in favor of himself and the Dinka. Machar and his cabinet are Nuer, while Kiir and his cabinet are Dinka. In response, Machar fled with his entire cabinet to Nuer territory and gathered an army. This sparked the 3rd South Sudanese Civil War, which ranged from 2014-2019. It was only resolved recently when Kiir and Machar agreed to a power sharing agreement. The agreement means that Kiir and Machar will share power. Therefore, neither the Nuer nor the Dinka can monopolize on power. The war shows how far both the Dinka and the Nuer are committed to seize and monopolize power, and how deep the Dinka/Nuer rivalry goes.

The Nuer culture is similar to that of the Dinkas: It revolves around cattle being used for marriages, traditions and worship. The Nuer religion is either Christin or animist, with an emphasis on cattle and animism. Both the Dinka and the Nuer do not use cattle for profit or as part of their economy. Instead they rely on cattle for sustenance. This means that they only farm enough food to sustain their own tribe and population and do not involve themselves in national politics unless their land is invaded. However, the Nuer do have the choice of leaving their home to find industrial jobs in the city or other kinds of work for the government. The Nuer language is called Thok Nath and originated in Ethiopia.

The Nuer are traditionally divided into tribes. The heads of these tribes are Chiefs who are always the eldest members of their families. The Chiefs of each of these tribes then elect a Paramount Chief who represents their interests in the South Sudan government. The Chief’s rule through both respect and fear.

In conclusion, even though the Nuer and Dinka despise each other, they both have many similarities, and if they embrace those similarities, internal peace should finally come to South Sudan. This concept is essential in John Garang’s philosophy of “Sudanisim.”