

# **Ritual and Sacrifice Among the Dinka of Southern Sudan: Implications for Christian Evangelism and Discipleship**

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## **I. Introduction**

### **1.1 The Dinka People of Sudan**

The Dinka people of Southern Sudan comprise the most numerous ethnic group within the country. During the past twenty-one years of civil war with northern Sudan, over two million Dinka have died and many more have been displaced. At the same time, there has been a great increase in the number of Dinka converting to Christianity. Contact with the global body of Christ has been difficult and limited, due to the danger and hardship of travel in Southern Sudan. Thus, the Dinka church has been developing much in isolation, determining how to respond to the unique cultural, historical and spiritual challenges it is facing. One of these challenges is confronting the worldview of African traditional religion. This paper will examine the impact of African traditional religion on the Dinka people and their understanding of Christianity. Specific attention will be placed on the Dinka rituals of animal sacrifice. Implications for evangelism and discipleship will also be discussed.

### **1.2 Primary Sources**

Primary sources of ethnographic study of the Dinka people are works by Dr. Francis Madang Deng and Dr. Godfrey Lienhardt. Several of their works are referenced in this paper, and they are my primary references for further study. Dr. Deng is a Ngok Dinka. He grew up in Southern Sudan as the son of a Dinka chief. His formal studies were at the university in Khartoum, and later at Yale law school. He was a teacher and a diplomat, and brings the unique perspective of a Dinka to the critical scholarship of an anthropologist. Dr Lienhardt was an

Oxford University anthropologist, for whom the Dinka ethnography was a major professional focus. Although these two men provide excellent research and insight into Dinka culture and belief systems, their studies are primarily from the 1960s and 70s, and thus do not address contemporary issues. This research project has validated my conviction that there is a great need for additional ethnographic field study and updating among the Dinka of Sudan. The impact of war, increased contact with other cultures, and adaptations in religious and social institutions have had an impacted Dinka religious beliefs and practices. This research paper is one of these attempts to understand this phenomena, and to develop more effective strategies to minister to the spiritual and cultural issues facing the Dinka.

## **II. African Traditional Religion (ATR)**

To begin this study, I will focus on African Traditional Religion as a whole, and then specifically on Dinka practices of ATR. A brief examination of African Traditional Religion will give a foundational conceptual framework within which we can examine Dinka practices in particular. It should be noted that there is a tension among theologians as to whether we can speak about ATR in the singular or only consider ATRs in the plural as distinct religions. Francis Anekwe Oborji presents this dilemma in his article “In Dialogue with African Traditional Religion: New Horizons.” He summarized the arguments of John S. Mbiti who initially argued that African Traditional Religions should be regarded in the plural.”

The main thesis of Mbiti’s argument is that Africans are notoriously religious, and that their religious beliefs and traditional socio-cultural and political organizations vary according to ethnic groups. . . . Moreover, ATRs are tribal religions, which cannot be propagated to another tribal group. There is no conversion from one traditional religion to another, because religion is part of the tribal life. Furthermore, ATRs are not “Book” religions, nor are they formulated into set of dogmas. Every member grows assimilating whatever ideas and practices are held in his family and community. (Oborji p.14)

Although there are a number of unique tribes and religious practices, for the purpose of this study I will agree with the premise that Oborji presents in validating the examination of ATRs as a whole. In reference to a paper by Bolaji Idowu, Oborji states:

The main emphasis of Idowu's argument is on the common racial origin of Africans, and the similarities of the major characteristics of their culture and religious beliefs. With regard to the former, Idowu argues that Black Africans presumably come from one common stock and therefore, they retain certain common traits as well as similar cultural and religious beliefs and practices. As regards the latter, he contends that the concept of God the names given to God, for example, are not only common over the entire continent, but that one finds that God goes by the same or similar names over wide areas of Africa. Moreover, many translations of the Africans' names for God suggest that God is the Creator, Almighty in heaven. Since the real cohesive factor of religion (in Africa) is the living God, and without this factor all things would fall to pieces, "it is on this identical factor that we can speak of African Traditional Religion in the singular." (Oborji p.14)

## **2.1 Essential Characteristics of African Traditional Religions**

Oborji's study provides helpful insights in conceptualizing African Traditional Religion as a whole. He states that essential characteristics of ATR are:

1. A spiritual view of life, including the idea of God, as the first or ultimate cause of all things.
2. Respect for the dignity of human beings, particularly manifested in the traditional way of educating within the family, in initiation rites, and the traditional social and political life.
3. The sense of the family, evidenced by the attachment to the family and the body of ancestors.
4. Closely linked with the family is patria potestas of the father of the family, implying authority and demanding respect: it is sometimes accompanied with a typically priestly function.
5. The sense of community life expressed by participation in the life of the community in which the individual is introduced by various initiation rites.

(Oborji 2002:16-17)

In summary, Oborji states that Africans believe in one God who is the creator of humanity and the universe. African religions and myths also speak of an estrangement between God and humanity.

The central idea in this myth is that human beings are the architects of their misfortune and of this withdrawal of God from humanity's immediate surroundings. African Traditional Religion has therefore, the characteristic of trying to re-capture this primordial relationship with God. . . . this is principally to be achieved through approaches, not always directly to this good God, against whom humanity has sinned (by causing God's withdrawal from the created universe), but through the mediation of the deities, and the ancestors. . . . Furthermore, in ATR, misfortune is generally interpreted as the work of evil spirits, or witches, or sorcerers, or evil eye, broken taboos, perjured oaths, or even the deities or ancestors. However, it is believed that when good spirits, like the Supreme Being, the deities and ancestors inflict some physical evil, they do so as a premonitory, corrective or punitive measure. They are believed to be for the overall good of the individual and the community."

## 2.2 Sacrifice in ATR

Africans who adhere to these traditional religious beliefs seek to avoid evil, or when they deal with it to recapture the original state. Sacrifice is one prominent example of a ritual used to control or cope effectively with evil when it occurs. Sacrifices involve the shedding of blood of human beings, animals or birds. Sacrifices can atone for an offense, seek the favor and assistance of a god or affirm an oath. They may be made to God, the deities or the spirits. Once again, I will refer to Oborji's summary of sacrifice in ATR.

In ATR, when blood is shed in making a sacrifice, it means that the purpose of the sacrifice must be a serious one. This is because, in African traditional society, as Mbiti confirms, life is closely associated with blood. So, when blood is shed in making a sacrifice, it means a human or animal life is being given back to God, who is in fact, the ultimate source of all life. Such sacrifices may be made when lives of many people are in danger. The life of one person or animal is sacrificed in the belief that this will save the lives of many people. Thus, the destruction of one becomes the protection of many. Commenting on this, Metuh remarks that offerings accompanied with blood, a ritual killing or offering demonstrate that

immolation is an essential element in ATR. He goes further to say that in this type of sacrifice, something is always done to the offering to show that it has been removed from human use and given over to God. In addition, in some cases, as Metuh underlines, it is what is said at the ritual sacrifice that gives the clue as to the type and purpose of a particular sacrifice. As he puts it: “Sacrifice is primarily a ritual prayer. It allows man to achieve communion with God through mediation of the offering.” (Oborji 2002:22-23)

### **2.3 Life as a Continuum**

In ATR, life is seen as a continuum, and there is no heaven or world to come. Rituals invoke the powers of divinities to work on behalf of human beings and to put right broken relationships. When they die, human beings aspire to join the ranks of their ancestors and to use their enhanced powers to work on behalf of their families and clans. Oborji states that life is viewed as a communion with the created order, the universe, the spirits, ancestors, one’s family and the community, but also with the Creator God. The final aspiration of every person is to reach the spirit land of one’s ancestors and to be venerated by one’s descendants as an ancestor.

In summary Oborji states, “ATR is not a redemptive or prophetic religion. Especially if redemption is to be considered from the point of view of shedding of blood of one person (freely given), for the eschatological salvation of humankind. In ATR, religion is not meant to obtain such salvation. Rather, the role of religion is to enlist the help of God, the deities and the ancestors and to harness the forces below human beings to strengthen the life of women and men on earth.” (Oborji 2002:29) The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions concurs with this assessment. It states, “African religions tend not to be concerned with personal salvation or dogmas about God. They are instead religions of structure, in which self-realization arises through participation in the socio-cosmic web of relationships first laid down by God and the primal beings. God and the spirits are primarily worshiped because they, together with man, maintain the divinely established order.” (Crim p.6)

## **2.4 ATR as Folk Religion**

According to the above stated summary of African Traditional religion, it would fall into the category of what Paul Heibert refers to as Folk Religion. He differentiates formal religion from folk religion in the following manner. Formal religion deals with the questions of ultimate origin, purpose and destiny of the universe, society and self. Folk religion deals with meaning in this life and the problem of death, well being in this life and the problem of misfortunes, knowledge to decide and the problem of the unknown, and righteousness and justice and the problem of evil and injustice. (Heibert p.74) Heibert contends that Christian missionaries often present the answers to questions of origin and ultimate destiny, while adherents to folk religion are left with little or no answers to the problems of daily life and misfortune. Thus, they often maintain the practices of their folk religion under the umbrella of Christianity. The challenge for missionaries working with adherents of ATR, or those who come from ATR backgrounds will be how to discern what aspects of African culture can be expressed in genuine Christian worship, and which elements are reflections of ATR, which may be in conflict with Christian doctrine. At the same time, missionaries must develop strategies to answer the questions posed by practitioners of ATR, and to show that Yahweh is involved in our day-to-day struggles and activities. Discernment in contextualization will require careful study of the subtleties of symbol and ritual and the meanings they convey.

## **III. Traditional Dinka Beliefs and Rituals**

With this understanding of ATR, let us now examine more closely the Dinka people of Southern Sudan. For the purposes of this paper, unless otherwise indicated, when I refer to the



Dinka culture or religion, I will be referring to the traditional religion of the Dinka people within the context of ATR. The Dictionary of World Religions provides this description of the Nilotic religions. “The cattle-herding Nilotic peoples of Sudan and Uganda (the Nuer, Dinka, Shilluk, etc.) are especially remarkable for the intensity of devotion to God. It is customary to offer brief morning prayers (in some areas also evening prayer), in which God is thanked for the gift of another day of life, and his help is invoked for the day’s tasks. Impromptu prayers are usual before any special activity such as a hunt or trading voyage is begun. The heavens are God’s particular dwelling place, from which he looks down on the “black ants” who humbly worship him. Doubt of God’s existence is inconceivable to such people as the Nuer.” (Crim p.6)

Francis Madeng Deng describes the Dinka religion in the following manner:

In their practical life, the Dinka are more concerned with their ancestors, clan spirits (*yieth*: singular, *yath*), and independent spirits (*jak*: singular, *jok*) than with God. There is an important ethical and functional dichotomy between these sets of spirits. The ancestors and clan spirits are partial and protective, while independent spirits are “free” and largely destructive. But the destructiveness of *jak* is not always negative: It may be a resort to a necessary evil to enforce, reinforce or sanction a virtue. . . . A spirit may also be called upon to mediate between man and another good or evil spirit. Spirits usually have particular characteristics that manifest themselves through human experience. Some of them are know to inflict specific types of pain or illness. Some are know to have certain likes and dislikes. When they “fall upon” a man and possess him, they can be identified by the aberrational behavior they induce in him. (Deng p.122 and 123)

To appease the spirits and to gain some control over human experience, rituals, such as those involving sacrifice, are often used. The Reader in the Anthropology of Religion contains a chapter by Godfrey Lienhardt entitled “The Control of Experience: Symbolic Action”. In this chapter, Lienhardt address in depth the concept of sacrifice in the culture of the Dinka. Lamek describe Lienhardt's article in this manner, “Lienhardt’s particularly subtle discussion of sacrifice is couched in a more general model of what he calls symbolic action. Lienhardt shows how

sacrifice provides a victory over death by placing its control in human hands. More generally, he argues that ritual can provide a means for humans to express control over, and hence shape, their experience. This control, as he says, is generally understood, to effect not physical circumstance, but what he calls the moral realm.” (Lambeck p.330)

### **3.1 Delaying an Action**

In the article mentioned above, Lienhardt describes four symbolic actions, three of which involve sacrifice. The first is “thuic” “which involves knotting a tuft of grass to indicate that the one who makes the knot hopes and intends to contrive some sort of delay”. (Lienhardt p. 331) He gives the example of the master of a fishing spear whose people have been troubled by a lion. To assist with the hunt, the master may take a stone to represent the lion, and tie grass around it to aid the people in their attempt to kill the lion. Lienhardt states that, “No Dinka thinks that by performing such an act has assured the results that he hopes for. Rather, it is a prelude to the actions that follow.” (Lienhardt p. 331) In contrast the ceremonies for cleansing people from incest, for death and for peacemaking are intended to control mental and moral dispositions—there are no technical or practical actions to follow.

### **3.2 “Separating” Partners in Incest**

Leinhardt describes the ceremony for “separating” the partners in incest, and thus neutralizing the incest retroactively. In serious cases a bull, or even a cow in calf, may have to be used to free the partners from the consequences of their sin. Cattle are highly revered in the Dinka culture, and thus such a sacrifice is great indeed. The master of the fishing spear will make invocations with the guilty parties in front of them, and other kin people as witnesses.

Afterwards all will go into the water, and the guilty parties will be submerged in the water, being dunked and washed by their kinsmen. The sacrificial animal will also be put into the water and dunked a few time, symbolizing the passing of the sin onto the animal. The animal is then killed, and the sexual organs of the animal are cut in half. This represents the single origin of the partners in the incest. Thus, although incest is a moral offense, its consequences are controlled by symbolic action.

### **3.3 Peace Making After a Homicide**

The next ceremony that he presents is an example of a peace-making ceremony between two families, after a homicide had taken place. The two parties sat about 20 yards apart. His kin represented the killer. The cattle, which were to be paid in compensation to the family of the victim, were placed between the two parties, with a small bull. Liendhardt was told that the one who directs the ceremony should be either a master of the spear or a diviner or prophet, and should not be related to either party. The kin of the killer seized the forelegs of the bull, and those of the man who was killed seized the hind legs. Together they turned the bull on its back and each thrust a spear into its chest. The bull was then cut in half and

“the entrails were taken out and scattered over the two parties, and each party went off separately to divide its meat. After this the leader went to the spot where the bull had been slaughtered, and placed a spear among the remaining bits, and thereafter taking some of the remains and throwing them over the two parties, who by this time had resumed their places. The parties then advanced in sixes, three from each side, and holding the spear between them in both hands bit into it, following this with spitting to the left, to the right, and downwards upon their own chests. They are said sometimes to spit upon each other. Ashes were then sprinkled over the knees of the parties, and this was the end of the ceremony. No form of words was spoken. It was believed that, after the conclusion of this ceremony, anyone who reopened the feud would surely die.” (Lambek p.333)

Lienhardt concludes that the biting of the spear symbolized an oath to abide by the settlement. He interprets the spitting, scattering with entrails, and dusting with ashes as forms of purification and blessing.

### 3.4 Mortuary Rites

The third symbolic action that he describes is the mortuary rites of the Dinka. Lienhardt says that the Dinka do not talk much about death, and are not likely to bring funeral ceremonies to the attention of others. When a man dies his decorations and ornaments are removed. His head is shaved and his body is washed and then anointed with oil. A skin or hide shield is put on the floor of the grave, and he is placed upon it. He is laid on his side with his head facing to the west, his knees are flexed and his hand is positioned under his head, in the position of sleep. His exposed ear is covered with a skin so that dirt will not enter in it. The burial party crouches, facing away from the grave, and pushes dirt into it with their hands. They then wash off their knees over the grave, and a relative places a mat over the grave.

After three days the family of the deceased person bring a small kid that is a twin, to the grave. They take straw from the dead man's hut, throw it near the grave and set it on fire.

Lienhardt's description continues:

The smoke blows over the people, and the people, and the senior member of the family, or master of the fishing spear if he has been called in, walks round the people beating the living kid on the ground. He finally holds the bleating kid over the fire a little, and then makes an incision in its belly and takes out the entrails. Their contents are sprinkled over the people, and the carcass is thrown away for the vultures. This "smoking" of the people is called *atol* (*tol-smoke*), and the kid is the *nyong atol*. The Dinka say that the offering is to please the deceased and a twin animal is chosen because twins have a special relationship to Divinity. . . After another day a sheep or goat is sacrificed. This is called the *alok* (from *lik, lak*, "the wash"?) and it lifts the prohibition upon drinking milk from the dead man's family. Some time later a whole bull is sacrificed, and prayers are offered and invocations made by a master of the fishing-spear. This final

sacrifice, called *apek*, propitiates the deceased, who without it would be likely to injure his people and kill their cattle. (Lambek p.334)

Lienhardt believes that the mourners fill the grave facing away from it so that they will not have to witness the final internment. The suffering of the kid of smoke represents that the suffering of the mourners is transferred on to the animal. The Dinka believe that the dead will haunt those who do not perform the mortuary rites.

The Dinka do not expect that the sacrifices will automatically achieve some specific result. When they perform a sacrifice for a sick person, they will often seek medical attention as well. Dinka often explain that when a desired result is not attained, the Divinity refused or there was an error in understanding the power behind a person's illness or troubles. Sacrifices are not made just on behalf of the person undergoing a difficulty or facing a special need, but on behalf of the whole community. Lienhardt summarizes the rites of sacrifice in this way, "In victimizing a bull or an ox the Dinka are aware of using or manipulating something physically more powerful than themselves; and through the identification of the victim with the divinities they also control something spiritually more powerful." (Lambek p.377)

#### **IV. Implications for Evangelism and Discipleship**

Traditionally the Dinka people of the Sudan have been known as a proud people who are resistant to change. Deng states that:

The cultural continuity of the Dinka is often ascribed to their pride and ethnocentrism, which are conspicuous in their own name for themselves. They do not call themselves "Dinka" but *Monyjang*, which means "The Man (or husband) of Men. This denotes that they see themselves as the standard of what is normal for the dignity of man and asserts their superiority to "the others" or "foreigners" (the *juur*: singular, *jur*). (Deng p.2)

A Dinka elder is quoted as saying, “All over the world, people look to us because of cattle. And when they say, ‘Sudan,’ it is not just because of our color; it is also because of our great wealth; and our wealth is cattle. . It is because of cattle that people of all the tribes look to us with envy.” (Deng p.169) Leaving the tribe was traditionally considered an unthinkable self-exile. However, the devastation of war, forced exile and displacement, the loss of cattle and thus much of the traditional way of life, and increased contact with the outside world have caused many Dinka to lose this sense of security and pride, and to question their way of life.

Evangelism and discipleship must employ contextualized strategies in this unique cultural and historical setting, but also must develop unique approaches to effectively confront non-Christian worldviews. This is evident in the case of the growth and maturation of the church among the Dinka of Southern Sudan. The Christian church must be able to respond to the concerns addressed by the Dinka people through their traditional rites and symbols. The greater body of Christ must support the Dinka in the process of discovering meaningful symbols that express Christian doctrine in a way that can be embraced by the community. The Dinka believers must be taught to evaluate traditional practices in light of the Scriptures and to determine which can be retained or transformed in Christian practices, and which are incompatible with Christian teaching. Paul Hiebert states, “After studying Scripture, the church must test its old ways in the light of the new. The gospel is a call to change, but if the leaders make the decisions about change, they become police enforcing their decisions. If the people make the decisions, they will corporately enforce them. To involve people in the process of critiquing their own culture in light of the new draws upon their strength.” (Hiebert p.386) As I present some implications for evangelism and discipleship, I will be the first to admit that these

observations are based on the etic perspective of an outsider, and will only be meaningful if evaluated and validated by Dinka Christians themselves.

#### **4.1 Relationship with God**

It seems to me that a primary goal in evangelization of the Dinka is to address the issue of relationship with God. This will have implications for the question of origins as well eternal destiny. Insight into a Dinka understanding of relationship with God is seen in the following excerpt from Francis Deng,

The Dinka explain the ultimate source of illness and death through a myth mentioned earlier, in which God is conceived as having once been physically connected with this world. Life was then perfect. According to various versions, the connection with God was severed owing to the fault of a woman: Offended, God withdrew from man and willed that the world be immersed in suffering and misery. A recurrent theme in Dinka religion is the imploring of God to restore the world's erstwhile unity and goodness, the need for which becomes manifest when man suffers misfortunes of sickness and death." (Deng p. 126)

A foundation for presenting the Biblical story of creation and the fall and God's plan for redemption, seems evident after reading this account. Adam and Eve lived in the garden in perfect communion with God. When Eve ate of the fruit of the tree of good and evil, sin entered the world and relationship with God was broken. At this point the Biblical account varies greatly from Dinka tradition, for the Bible teaches that from the beginning God had a plan to redeem mankind to himself. He initiated his plan of salvation and he is imploring mankind to respond to His love and grace. God is inviting man to turn from sin and to come to Him. The responsibility of man for His estrangement from God and his responsibility to turn from sin must be emphasized.

## **4.2 Bridges to Understanding**

### **4.2a Substitutionary Atonement**

Joy Anderson wrote an article entitled “Behold! The Ox of God?” in which she presents what she perceives as a redemptive analogy in the Dinka culture. She states, “. . .the Dinka seek to restore their broken relationship with God through a system of sacrifice similar to that of the ancient Hebrews. They understand the concept of substitutionary atonement. “ (Anderson p.1) I agree with Ms. Anderson, that as we have looked at rituals of sacrifice within the Dinka culture, we have seen substitutionary atonement for sin, remission through the shedding of blood, and sprinkling of blood upon the community members seeking restoration and reconciliation. In such sacrifices, the parties usually later partake of the meat or body of the one who was sacrificed. However, it will be important for Dinka Christians to evaluate all aspects of these rituals, in order to identify that which may misrepresent or be in conflict with Christian teaching.

Once again, the question of relationship to God must be addressed. Although the substitutionary atonement takes place, it does not directly restore relationship with the Creator, but seems to be focused on the restoration of human relationships and the pacification of the ancestors. Thus, the question of world-view must be addressed. Is there a need for salvation, atonement for sin and restoration of relationship with God? What is the purpose of this relationship?

### **4.2b The Sovereignty of God**

Another important issue to resolve would be to understand the meaning of the sacrificial symbols. Are they symbols representing a spiritual/moral reality, or are they magical in that they cause this spiritual reality to take place. In other words, is mankind manipulating God in order to



control his world (Folk Religion), or is he representing a spiritual reality in a physical manner through symbol? It seems evident that there is some sense of control or even “magic” in the rituals and roles of the spear master in the Dinka sacrificial rituals. Therefore, although a redemptive analogy may be evident, the foundational spiritual relationship to God must be defined in a Christian world-view. It must be clear that man responds to a good and faithful God who initiates relationship and has extended grace to humans through the sacrifice of His Son.

Anderson also sees an opportunity to bridge the gap between Dinka traditional religion and Christianity by capitalizing on the Dinka understanding of God’s sovereignty. She states, “The idea of God’s sovereignty is seen clearly in the Dinka faith. They see lightning and other natural phenomena as coming from God. Deng observes that the Dinka consider God to be whimsical. Sometimes he appears to be harsh. He may appear not to answer them, or to judge them. When problems continue, they may feel that he has refused their sacrifices. But they do feel that somehow good will come for it. The evil and good aspects of experience are merged into a positive image.” (Anderson p.2)

Anderson parallels this Dinka understanding with Romans 8:28 which states that God does work good in all things for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

My concern is that Anderson’s approach is a bit too simplistic. The danger of paralleling a Dinka understanding of God’s sovereignty with a Christian understanding of God’s sovereignty is that the name Jehovah may replace Nhialic, but the image of Jehovah may be subsumed by the Dinka into the traditional Dinka cosmology. If Nhialic is described as distant and whimsical, the character of Jehovah must be clearly presented in contrast. Nhailic is seen as one who assists with the concerns of daily life. Jehovah’s sovereignty is evident in his working of His plan of redemption throughout human history. Although He is active and involved in the daily activities of life, His purposes are eternal. Once again, worldview must be addressed.

#### **4.2c The Trinity**

Anderson also points out that Nhialic is a multiplicity of Gods, yet one God. The Dinka speak of one they call wet Nhialic, which means the “Word of Divinity.” Therefore, she sees opportunities to present the Godhead and Jesus Christ as the living Word of God. Once again, although a bridge for evangelization may be found, the differing worldviews must be addressed. The Christian God is not a multiplicity of gods who may work in opposition to one another, but one God in three persons. An in depth study of wet-Nhialic would also be very important before presenting such an analogy.

#### **4.2d The Analogy of the Bride of Christ**

In my opinion, the analogy of bride price, which Anderson presents, is the most straightforward analogy to use in evangelization of Dinka. Believers are called the bride of Christ. They have been bought with a price, the precious blood of the lamb of God. They are valuable to God, and he paid a great price for them. They have made a covenant with him in the presence of many witnesses, of their faithfulness and union to Him.

Issues that are not addressed in Dinka traditional religion are salvation (reconciliation with God) and eternal life. The sacrifices of atonement and reconciliation in Dinka culture can be opportunities to teach of the perfect and complete sacrifice for our sins, completed on the cross by Jesus Christ.

### **V. Cultural Practices**

How can Dinka, who have accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Savior, uniquely celebrate and reflect their relationship with God within their cultural context? This is a

question that the Dinka church must wrestle with. As believers study the Scriptures and grow in truth and discernment, they must evaluate their cultural practices in the light of Scripture. Following we will examine the symbols presented by Lienhardt and evaluate a potential Christian response to each of them.

### **5.1 Seeking God's Blessing and Favor for a Hunt**

The first scenario presented by Lienhardt was that of tying grass around an object to slow down the response of another. The example was given of a spear-master tying grass around a rock, which represented a lion. This was supposed to help slow the lion down and aid the hunters as they sought to kill the lion. On the surface, this appears to be a simple question of symbolic superstition. It seems parallel to the person who avoids stepping on a crack on the sidewalk for bad luck, or who wears a "lucky" shirt to do well in the job interview. Christians should show through their lives and testimonies that their hope is only in God and his faithfulness. Thus, we should avoid superstitions and anything that detracts us from our trust in God. There are Christians who practice some forms of superstition in America, and it is tolerated, but seen as immaturity in the faith.

However, if it is a spear-master who ties the grass around the rock, there is another question that must be addressed. Should a Christian participate in a ceremony or ritual led by a spear master? The Dinka Christians that I have met would not do so. To do so would be to put confidence in one who is seeking to control the world around him and practice folk religion, rather than coming in relationship to the Living God.

If Dinka Christians do not participate in some of the traditional Dinka rituals, they must have distinctly Christian rituals to take their place. For example, before the lion hunt they could

have an elder offer a prayer of dedication and plea for favor and protection before the hunt. It may be possible to have a physical symbol of the petition, as long as it would not be confused with a magical symbol, which can influence events through its very existence.

## **5.2 Cleansing from Sin and Repentance**

The Dinka ritual for cleansing from incest provides an opportunity for Christians to address the issue in a way that could convey Biblical truth and symbolically represent the work of Christ on our behalf. What was missing from the Dinka ceremony was an overt repentance of sin against God. Although it was implied in the cleaning and sacrifice, God asks us to confess our sins and to turn from them, so that we may be forgiven. He is looking for change at the heart level. A Christian ritual should somehow sensitively offer the opportunity for repentance to the Lord and to the one offended, a true heart response. After confession is expressed, water could be used symbolically to represent God's grace in cleansing us from our sins. A recounting of the sacrifice of the Lamb of God for our sins could be done in place of the sacrifice of a cow, for Jesus is the perfect sacrifice, and no other sacrifice is needed. Communion could then be served, representing the body and blood of Jesus Christ given for our sins. The church would need to determine how to proceed in dealing with Christian maturity and growth, and the ceremony should only be a symbol of the work of Christ done on our behalf. It seems that it would be important that some family or community members share in the ceremony, as in Dinka culture (and in the body of Christ) sin is a corporate offense. The goal would not be to appease the spirits, but to restore communion with God, and as much as possible, with one another. Sincere reconciliation requires a mutual commitment to honor God and to rebuild trust with one another.

### **5.3 Forgiveness and Reconciliation Between Offended Parties**

In the case of reconciliation after a killing, a ceremony should not take place until true repentance and forgiveness have taken place in the hearts of those involved. This goes far beyond ritual and ceremony. A judicial settlement, such as payment of cattle and a commitment not to seek further retribution can take place, but Christian reconciliation is much more than that. Although Jesus can take away our guilt as the perfect sacrifice for our sins, we are called to repentance and to humility. The commitment shown in the biting of the spear could be represented in another fashion, such as an exchange of crosses, or putting a mark or a nail into a cross of reconciliation in the church. A recounting of the sacrifice of Christ, a time to seek his comfort and communion could be part of the ceremony. Once again, the ceremony would only be a symbol, and would not be necessary nor appropriate in all circumstances. It would not have the goal of appeasing the spirits or controlling behavior socially, but of expressing repentance and grace before God and the community, and restoring relationship with God and with one another. This may or may not be appropriate to celebrate publicly. Of course, human dynamics cannot be determined through ritual, and both parties must be ready to publicly address the issue before the witnesses and before God before such a ritual could be effective. Christians would have to learn to live with the process of sanctification and the complexities of the human heart, and let go of their ability to “resolve” situations immediately through overt rituals and sacrifices.

### **5.4 Christian Mortuary Rites**

The mortuary rites of the Dinka would require additional evaluation. A preliminary analysis would be that a Christian funeral could have many of the characteristics of the Dinka funeral rites. That the man is buried without his earthly adornments reminds us as Christians that

we take nothing from this world, for it is not our home. We all are equal before our God and will stand before Him. The posture of sleeping can represent that we will “sleep” for a time, and then the dead in Christ will arise. The small grave and skins to cover the base of the grave and the ear seem to be customs that have no deep spiritual significance, although this may need to be examined more in depth. That mourners do not face the grave as they fill it with dirt also seems at first glance to be a spiritually neutral point, and more of a cultural preference. The symbolism of transferring their pain onto the bleating kid could be the forerunner to teaching of casting our cares upon the Lord, the one who took up our sorrows. Teaching of the Holy Spirit as the comforter could also take place at this time. A Christian understanding of death, grief and eternal hope could be presented. Christian symbols and rites could be developed to remember Christ’s atonement for our sins and provision for eternal life. These rites could replace the traditional Dinka animal sacrifices.

## **VI. Conclusion**

### **6.1 The Missionary Challenge**

The challenge for Christian missionaries among the Dinka tribe of Sudan is to assist the Dinka to recognize God as being involved in every aspect of our daily lives, and finding ways to help the Dinka remember and celebrate or acknowledge this reality. Uniquely Christian blessings for the hunt, rites of passage, practices for resolving conflicts within the tribe, and public celebrations of spiritual realities must be developed so that they can see God as the one who meets all of their needs. We must help the Dinka to leave behind the “two-tier” Christianity that trust in the Christian God for eternal hope, and in the ancestors and spirit

masters for help in their daily lives and activities. We must present the reality that the gospel permeates every aspect of our lives and relationships.

## **6.2 A Contemporary Example: Addressing Dinka Traditional Religious Practices**

On a trip to Sudan four years ago, I had the opportunity to participate in a training seminar for church leaders. One of the speakers asked the leaders what challenges they faced as they sought to shepherd their churches. Several of them said that the Christians were still going to the spear masters for help in their daily lives. It seemed that some of the pastors had even gone to the spear masters on certain occasions. A tendency seemed to be to label the spear master as “bad” or “evil”, rather than one who also needed to know the hope in Christ. Some Christians were celebrating that the house of one spear master had caught on fire and burned down. I am concerned that the church must learn to pray for those who do not know Christ, and not see those who are trapped in traditional practices and beliefs as “evil”, but ones for whom Christ came to set free. We must teach the compassion of Jesus.

At the end of the conference the American pastor who had been teaching was presented with a gift to bring back to his church from the Sudanese brothers and sisters. It was the spear of a spear master, with a Bible over it, symbolizing leaving the ways of the spear master behind and trusting in the Word of God. The Sudanese pastors had made their own symbol for the Supremacy of the Word of God, and their transition to come to completely trust in it alone. The process of contextualization is beginning to take place within the Dinka Christian culture from an emic perspective. Only as this takes place will the church begin to critically evaluate the culture around them in light of the Scriptures, and learn to confront false worldviews.

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