

DISPLACED TASTES

# Grains As Life

*The value of sorghum and millet amongst the Abyei Dinka*

BY DENG KUOL



The author, Deng Kuol.

Displaced Tastes is a research project run by the Rift Valley Institute in partnership with the Catholic University of South Sudan under the X-Border Local Research Network. The project examines the changing tastes for food in South Sudan in the context of the country's economic transition and place in the regional, cross-border economy of grain. In this piece, Deng Kuol explains the significance of grains for his pastoralist Ngok Dinka community—more commonly associated with cattle—in the borderland region of Abyei. To illustrate this, Deng describes the efforts made by his mother to preserve access to a socially valued variety of sorghum—*ruath*—by travelling into military occupied areas of Abyei while her family was displaced outside their home areas. The story illustrates how, for the Dinka community in South Sudan, grains are indeed 'life'.

There is a widely held belief that pastoralist communities in South Sudan—in the borderland and elsewhere—depend entirely on cattle for their food and livelihoods. Although pastoralists depend greatly on animal products such as meat and milk, grains, particularly sorghum and millet, also make up a big part of their diet. Among the members of my community, the Ngok Dinka of Abyei in the Sudan – South Sudan borderlands, *ruath* and *anyanjang* (different types of sorghum) and *awou* (millet) are favoured grains. These grains supplement meat and dairy products and they are often mixed with milk or butter to make meal, which is often serve to important guests.

Pastoralist groups, some of which cross the border between Sudan and South Sudan during seasonal migrations, often attach a high value to these grains. This is frequently demonstrated by the prominence they have in many rituals, as well as their importance as valued commodities that may be exchanged for livestock. People hold a strong moral attachment to these grains and in Dinka communities, grains are seen as synonymous with life itself, holding a high economic, social and religious value. The lives of people in my borderland community are closely attached to grains, which play an important role in the formation of relationships within and between families, both living and dead; and in connection to supernatural beings like *Nhialic* (God) and *Jok* (divinities).

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## Risking life for sorghum

Among Dinka people, sorghum, which is one of the oldest crops in north-east Africa, is a particularly favoured grain. Dinka people distinguish different sorghum varieties on the basis of colour, growing time, and the sweetness of the stalk.<sup>1</sup> For example, *ruath* is a long-maturing, brown grain with a long and tasteless stalk. It is palatable, nutritious and satisfying. *Anyanjang* is a short-maturing, cream coloured grain with a sweet and edible stalk. It helps people during hunger, before long-maturing seeds are ready. *Malual-achik* is red and has a medium, sweet stalk. *Athil* is creamy and has a sweet stalk, which is often used as a substitute for sugar cane. Among these different local varieties, *ruath* is the most favoured sorghum. Not only is its nutritional value believed to be higher than that of *anyangjang*, *malual-achik* and *athil*, it also plays a more important role in rituals and marriage ceremonies.

Because of their nutritional value, the Ngok Dinka of the Sudan – South Sudan borderlands place a high value on grains like *ruath*. During the 1983-2005 war, many women—including my mother—risked their lives to preserve their supplies of these grains. In 1994, when many Ngok Dinka people were displaced from their homes by the Sudan Armed Forces they left behind everything, including their favorite grains. My family fled to the recently re-classified Twic State that borders Abyei, now in South Sudan, for safety. We lived on the sorghum that we found there, which included ones we knew—*malual-achik*, *athil* and *anyanjang*—and those provided by humanitarian agencies. These varieties of sorghum were also eaten in Abyei, but they were not as favored as *ruath*.

Because of the strong attachment my mother had to *ruath*, she risked her life by sneaking back into Abyei with the aim of obtaining it. At that time, people were prevented by soldiers from travelling longer distances because of fear of the Sudan People Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) who were operating in the border areas. This restriction reduced the grains available to those produced by the few farmers still able to cultivate near their homesteads in the outskirts of garrison towns.

Because of the reduction in grain being produced, food became scarce in the area, forcing people to depend more on humanitarian supplies. This also resulted in the reduction of the amount of *ruath* being grown in the area. The reduction in farming activities in rural areas of Abyei, which led to a significant reduction in total grains produced, meant that people started leaving their villages and settled in the garrison town of Abyei. This increased the pressure on the grain stocks that were available and subsequently hunger started invading the area. Supplies of humanitarian food increased to fill the deficit.

In Abyei, my mother found it difficult to get *ruath*. After several failed attempts, she remembered that her old aunt might be able to help her find some of the grains. Her aunt, who at that time was in her late sixties, was born and grew up in Abyei. When she was young, her mother—who was also a farmer—taught her how to cultivate *ruath* and other grains such as *anyanjang*. Her mother was also known for being experienced in seed knowledge. She had huge lands inside Abyei, but military orders prevented people from going far from areas under its control. Luckily, these lands were situated near Abyei Town, so she was still able to cultivate them. Her aunt advised my mother to tie the grains she got from the farm into her cloth so that she wouldn't lose them. In this way, she succeeded in smuggling *ruath* out of Abyei to Twic State where we lived.

In Twic, at a place called Wunrock, my mother was given a piece of land to cultivate by the local Rek Dinka community. She built two huts and a byre—a *luak* in the Dinka language—for keeping cows and goats, and used the other part for cultivation. By that time, my mother was living with us because my father had joined the liberation movement. All of us were young and could not help her to cultivate. My elder brother, who was old enough to help her in farming, was the one taking care of the cattle. This shortage of a workforce made it difficult for her to cultivate a big portion of land. She planted the few grains that she had smuggled out from Abyei near the house. A year later she managed to harvest enough seeds to plant in the following year.

When we first arrived to Twic, the area was controlled by the SPLM/A. This situation of relative peace changed drastically in 1994 when Kerbino Kuanyin Bol, who defected from the SPLM/A in late 1992, attacked

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SPLM/A positions in Bahr el-Ghazal with support of the Sudanese Armed Forces. My mother and siblings were displaced to the Greater Aweil area and I was forcibly conscripted by Kerbino Kuanyin's forces before I found my way out and was reunited with my mother. In 1997, my mother and younger brothers and sisters decided to move northwards to Khartoum, while my younger brother and I went into the SPLA-controlled areas in Western Equatoria.

Since our second displacement from Wunrock, my mother had given up growing *ruath* until she returned to Abyei from Khartoum after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005. Since her return, she has experienced many other episodes of conflict and displacement and her agricultural work has been disrupted several times. In her old age, she has continued to farm a small plot of land around her homestead and during the last agricultural season she harvested a small crop of *ruath*. She keeps what she needs for herself; gives some away to other family members; and sells the surplus in the market in Agok, near Abyei town.

## Grains and conflict

While *ruath* is particularly important in Dinka society, other sorghum varieties, such as *athil*, *anyanjang* and *malual-achik*, also have a high status. Luka Biong Deng, who studied food security in Abyei during the 1983-2005 civil war, found that people classified sorghum varieties around planting and harvest times, which corresponded to patterns and timings of violence. Short-maturing sorghums, like *ngai*, were planted in April or May, when government-aligned militias drawn from Arabic-speaking pastoralist groups often began their military campaigns. *Ruath* is a long-maturing sorghum that is harvested in October, when these militias were out of the area. *Ruath* then provides a ratoon crop—a second harvest sprouting from the first-harvest root—and farmers began to focus on this, which allowed them to harvest during a dip in seasonal violence.<sup>2</sup>

New grains appeared during war. People were living on humanitarian food, often called *raapnyan* America or *raap* UN. *Raap* means food and *NyanAmerica* means American girl. This name refers to the white, female humanitarian aid workers who were involved in the distribution of these humanitarian grains, all of whom were generalized to be American. Humanitarian food helped people in the time of displacement and during hunger. However, people believed that it did not provide them with the same nutrients or energy they got from eating local grains. Not only did these dried grains come without the sweet stalk people coveted from their local variants, but also were said to have no *riel* or strength.

These feelings were often expressed in the way people named certain humanitarian foods. For example, one of the humanitarian grains eaten by people was called *arec goon*. It was a type of sorghum, red in color and hard to digest. Sometimes people got stomach problems when they ate it. *Arec* means to refuse and *goon* means vulture. Therefore, *arec goon* means that even vultures would refuse this grain. Vultures in Dinka folktales are portrayed as greedy birds that eat anything they find on their way and their alleged refusal to eat the humanitarian grains is a strong judgment on its quality. People only ate it because there was no other alternative for them. They believed that *arec goon* lacked nutrients and people might become weaker and weaker after eating it.

## The ritual importance of grain

Grains play vital roles in the lives of the people of South Sudan: not just in everyday food preparation and consumption, but for rituals too. Pastoralist communities are more commonly known for conducting rituals using cows, goats or sheep. However, in the Dinka community in Abyei and elsewhere, grains are also at the center of many rituals. Dinka religious rites are of two categories: *yai* (feast) and *amoc-piny* (libation). *Amoc* means offering and *piny*, when placed after *amoc*, means ground, earth, down or land. *Amoc-piny* is therefore a libation ritual involving an offering given to the earth. The substance for the rite of *amoc-piny* is always *mou*, which is the generic name for fermented drinks in Dinka language. Dura, maize and millet make a traditional beer which is white in colour and is called *muon-her*.

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Grain such as *ruath* is considered as an important item in rituals. People use it for making beer or local brews, which they drink when there are special occasions. When there is enough grain, people consider this as God's blessing, that is why beer from these grains is prepared as thanksgiving. This practice is a way of thanking God for the harvest. It is believed that the first part of harvest is offered to God and failure to do so may have serious consequences.

One of the grains used for rituals by some Dinka sections is *luwaya*, which is a sorghum that is white in colour and used in the preparation of important dishes. When someone is blessed with twins, two bowls of *luwaya* are brought to the house where they were born. Every visitor who comes to the house picks grains from each bowl and throws them back and forth as a kind of blessing to the newborns. The ritual of *mioc-wer* is conducted to purify twins. *Mioc-wer* means river offering so that God protects the twins. This is done by placing a few fresh grains with their stalks into the river. This is a symbol of thanking God for the gift of twins.

Apart from its use in rituals, grain has a variety of important uses in Dinka society, which differ from Dinka section to section and speaks to a great diversity of cultural practices. For example, grains are used for making different types of food such as thick porridge (*kuin* in Dinka language, *asida* in South Sudanese Arabic or *posho* in a Swahili loan-word widely used in South Sudan) and beer (*mou*), which is drunk at weddings or other important occasions. Among the Agar Dinka of Rumbek, grains are used in the traditional wedding to introduce the bridegroom to the family of the bride. The bridegroom is not supposed to eat in the bride's house until certain cultural activities are performed. This is a sign of respect to the bride's family. Special grains called *kech* and *diil* are mixed with cow butter (*miok*) when a bridegroom is officially asked to come to the bride's house accompanied by his relatives. After eating this food, he becomes a member of his bride's family and can eat anything in the house. This process is called *alukthok*.

For the Agar Dinka, *kech* and *diil* are considered as special grains. *Kech* and *diil* grains are converted into livestock and this is then used to settle dowry payment as bride wealth. Red in colour, *diil* is medicinal and nutritious. When a child is sick, the husk of this grain is soaked in warm water. After that, the liquid part is separated from the cover and then given to a child to drink.

While many non-Dinka people believe that young Dinka men are completely occupied by the world of cows, grain also plays an important role as part of the contribution that young Dinka make towards bridewealth. Before proposing marriage to a young woman, young men are expected to contribute towards their marriage. To do this, they generally must cultivate enough land to produce the grains which they can then exchange for cows and goats. These animals are then used as bride wealth. Grain is used as a stable commodity whose value can be stored by converting it into livestock or more recently money—often put towards the purchase of livestock. Livestock acquired from such grains are valued more than any other cattle acquired through other means. As a result, these cows and bulls cannot be given out easily and often are at the centre of bridewealth.

Cows are vital to participation in social life. Bridewealth is central to marriage customs, and blood compensation after homicide—when the life of a dead person is equated with a socially agreed upon number of cows that are exchanged between the family of the murderer and the murdered person to prevent further escalation. Blood compensation represents a kind of social security for all members of community and young men support this system through the cultivation of grains in order to acquire livestock. Grain cultivation is thus an important part of Dinka culture.

## Grains and life

Indigenous grains are of fundamental importance to the Abyei Dinka and other Dinka sections in South Sudan. The story of my mother, who risked her life crossing borders during the 1983-2005 to retrieve favoured *ruath* seeds from occupied Abyei, demonstrates this. These grains, which were planted in Twic state, where many Abyei Dinka were displaced, made it possible for her and our neighbours to continue to use *ruath* in rituals and social celebrations which are very important to our community.

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In light of this, two persistent stereotypes about South Sudan need to be reconsidered. First, my mother’s courage illustrates the agency women display during episodes of active conflict and the role they play in continuing cultural practices under intense duress. Secondly, agriculture plays an essential role in the lives of Dinka communities despite the fact that they are usually portrayed as pastoralists. Indigenous grains like sorghum and millet, which have been grown and eaten for centuries by the Dinka community, are indeed life.

## Notes

1 There are many words in Dinka and other South Sudanese languages to describe local varieties of sorghum, but little work has been done to classify these sorghums in accordance with international botanical classifications. Cultivated sorghum is usually referred to as *Sorghum bicolor*, and it is classified into five smaller sub-groups, or basic races. Two of these—the sweet stalk *Sorghum bicolor bicolor*, and the hardy, drought and flood resistant *Sorghum bicolor caudatum*—are widely distributed in South Sudan. In fact, the distribution of *Sorghum bicolor caudatum* correlates closely with the distribution of Sudanic languages—the language family that Nilotic languages like Dinka and Nuer belong to.

2 Luka Biong Deng. ‘Livelihood diversification and civil war: Dinka communities in Sudan’s civil war’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 4/3 (2010) page 390.



## Credits

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