

*Aleu Garang Aleu*

## Introduction

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The Dinka are an acephalous nationality – a cultural federation of sub-nationalities. Each Dinka section is an autonomous political entity in itself. Dinka chiefs exercised authority by persuasion not through any known instruments of coercion and force. There are many sections of Dinka that include Rek, Ngok, Bor, Ciec, Aliab and Agar. Their cultures are similar, and there are also some slight cultural differences. Each Dinka section has a paramount chief. My discussion singles out Dinka Bor paramount chiefs as the study of my focus, being part of the culture myself. In this subject, I will try to narrate how a Dinka paramount chief chooses his wife-to-be and how he treats his wife/wives; I will also explain the hierarchy that exists among his wives, the nature of the relationship of chief's wives and the brothers-in-law (paramount chief's brothers) and how the cases of adultery are handled.

In Dinka Bor, the Paramount chief is the overall traditional leader - the head of all chiefs, sub-chiefs, herdsmen, elders and spiritual leaders. While the term is familiar to all cultures in south Sudan, the relations and institutions of traditional authority differ markedly among them and in different areas. During the period of colonial administration in 1920s, paramount chiefs were appointed by the council of elders and spiritual leaders with the supervision of a British commissioner.

The first paramount chief in Dinka Bor was Deng Malual Aler from Nyarweng sub section of Dinka Bor. When the British colonialists were establishing their administration in Southern Sudan by around 1920S elder, Lual Ajok, from Nyarweng subsection, was the spiritual leader. He was asked by the colonial administration to be the chief. He refused because he said he could not be both a spiritual leader and chief. He asked another influential elder, Deng-Akol to name a chief. Deng-Akol proposed Deng Malual Aler who eventually be-

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came paramount chief. Chieftdom in Dinka has never been dominated by any single family/subsection. It has been transferable from one subsection to another. By around 1945, when paramount Chief Deng Malual got ill, he handed over his powers/paramount chieftancy (alath/reth) to Ajang Duot who hailed from Twi subsection of Dinka Bor. Paramount chief, Ajang Duot reigned from 1945 until he was killed in 1968.

Today, Paramount chiefs are installed through democratic process, that is, through local election and confirmation by the state authorities, especially at the county level. Now, Manyok Ajak is the current paramount chief. He was elected by the council of chiefs. He comes from Twi subsection of Dinka Bor. Generally, the Dinka Bor paramount chief plays a role as mediator, arbitrator, and occasionally as leader in conflicts/wars. He can be found sitting under a tree as well as in court.

Besides his chieftdom duties, the paramount chief has the obligation to keep his lineage alive by marrying a wife or wives because in Dinka culture, procreation is one of the paramount goals of life for the paramount chief, and the only form of immortality universally valued. Like every other human beings, paramount chief fears death in that when you die without surviving children, you die completely. For his names to be remembered, for his legacy to be carried on and more generally in order to revitalize his influence in the society he leads, he must have children. For Paramount chief, the immortality sought is motivated in part by strong collective interests: without heirs, a man acquires no permanent position within the patrilineal chain of ancestors from which he emerged, even if one is a paramount chief. Both Deng Malual Aleer and Ajang Duot, who were the first generation of paramount chiefs, were not only polygamous but men who had demonstrated their ability to manage their wives well.

### ***How does paramount chief choose his wife-to-be?***

The paramount chief as a typical Dinka man also makes a thorough research about his wife-to-be. He looks for certain qualities expected of a good wife-to-be. According to Chief, Ayiik Bol, from Twi subsection, there are certain qualities a wife-to-be must possess to be considered for marriage by a paramount chief. They include; hard work gradually spotted in her domestic activities like cooking, fetching water and firewood and milking, oratory, respect for others, and most importantly she must be kind and generous in that she must host everyone in the family without hesitation. Dinka Bor community embraces extended families, and a wife-to-be must be able to serve her husband and all other family members diligently with kind heart.

In general sense, when a Dinka lady is seen to possess those values, she is always competed for by many men proposing to marry her. In the past,

when the paramount chief officially proposed a girl to marry, he would always have competitive advantage by the virtue of the fact that he is highly revered and considered wealthy. There were also certain privileges a woman would enjoy for being a wife to the paramount chief. So, it was impossible to turn down a marriage proposal by the paramount chief. Unlike today, because of the urbanization of the Dinka culture brought about by education, girls are empowered to the extent that they reject the marriage proposal of a man contrary to the advice of their parents.

A paramount chief identifies a wife-to-be in community meetings, during traditional dances, in marriage ceremonies, and also in distant places visited by him. If he admires a lady by her beauty, he takes time to observe other values in her and gather recommendations from those who know her before making a decision to marry.

Today, the Dinka cultural values generally, in relation to women, are being eroded by the foreign cultures. For instance, foreign cultures bring women and men at equal level. Today, ladies go to school; they also go for white collar job; and have the right to object to a choice of their parent for a man to marry.

***How does paramount chief treat his wife or wives?***

The Dinka Paramount chief treats his wives well to ensure that there is peace and harmony in his family, and also as a leader to set good example to the rest of the families. Even if some of his wives cook food better than others, the paramount chief does not pick favorites on that basis, being conscious of the fact that it would result in unnecessary competition that could at certain point result in conflict between wives. According to Aler Kon Deng Malual, the grandson of paramount chief, Deng Malual, family issues were raised when his grandfather’s wives all attended the latest marriage, but smaller problems were settled with a quiet chat in a mud hut. The Paramount chief would always make sure that he offered recipe for peace. When a wife gets angry, he does not fight or quarrel with her but consoles and shows love for her just like he does to other wives. The Paramount Chief treats his wives equally.

There is this common narrative among the Dinka Bor, “tik e ya ke de dhien”, meaning a woman is for every member of the clan. The woman has the obligation under customs to serve everyone equally with kind heart. If your wife is strong, you become strong as a husband, and the whole family becomes strong too.

The paramount chief, as the custodian of Dinka Bor culture, accords his wives a special treatment because they are the main family drivers in

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terms of care, and all the responsibilities of her household(s). Dinka Bor paramount chief is always mindful of the fact that family affairs would not settle without a proper woman behind it.

Generally, in Dinka Bor culture, a wife enjoys certain rights under Dinka customary practices and those rights are as follow:

- Right to membership of the family she is married to
- Right to express her opinions in a family/community/group meetings
- Right to freely associate with her parents and relatives
- Right to good decent life including clothing and self decoration
- Right to procreation-reproduction of children
- And any other right within the traditional settings

A wife of the paramount chief, under the Dinka Bor customary laws, has the right to fair share of a bride price from her husband's daughter in terms of cattle. She has the right to own land and house. Generally, Dinka women are regarded highly and are also respected. Although, the Dinka system of naming is patrilineal, some women by the virtue of their influence usually have a clan or subsection named with their names. Paramount chief, Deng Malual, of Nyarweng subsection of Dinka Bor had Thirty-seven (37) wives with more than a hundred children, that is according to Elijah Mocnom Wuor, who had been Duk County commissioner for four years. He categorized his family into three under his three most influential wives, namely: pan Ayen, pan Nyakuen and pan Awak; Ayen, Nyakuen and Awak were the first three wives of paramount chief, Deng Malual Aleer. The rest of the wives married afterward felt in either of three categories. Ayen by being the first was the supervisor of all other wives of the paramount chief. The meat of a slaughtered cow/bull in a marriage ceremony of a daughter was shared using certain formula derived from a family category. For example, a certain part of slaughtered cow would be given to pan Ayen; another part given to pan Nyakuen and so on. The formula of sharing remains for generations.

Reech Malual (2015) in his dissertation entitled, "women in Twic East" wrote "Women are highly respected in Dinka community and are definitely responsible for households affairs and on top of that clans have head women or a head woman for the whole Section known as "Bany e Diar ke Wut". Each clan in Dinka community has a Head woman responsible for all women in the clan named or called "Bany e Diar" and another one following her: "Banye Diar Thii" responsible for young women in the clan and she is subjected to supervision by "Bany e Diar". Women are also free in Dinka community to express themselves in women fora as well as fora that bring both women and men together.

### *Is having more children an asset?*

Having more children is an asset, especially to the paramount chief, it was very much an asset and that is one of the reasons Dinka Bor embrace po-

lygamy. For example, a girl child was valued for expected benefits in form of bride in future. There is this narrative in Dinka that “Nya a ye cam”, which literally means a girl is eaten. This phrase was culturally coined to guard against devaluing of girls and to encourage families to take care of their daughters well and give them good feeding to grow healthy and beautiful, with the hope that they will onetime benefit from the dowry of their daughter.

The reason why paramount chiefs usually have more wives is mainly economical. The more daughters you have, the more brideprice you fetch, and the wealthier you become. Dinka Bor are a proud society; if one falls in love with a daughter of paramount chief, he pays a lot to win her, and a man becomes proud for acquiring a wife from a chieftaincy family. Furthermore, chief’s daughters fetch more cattle in the same way chief’s son is expected to pay more cattle for his wife.

On another note, Jok Madut wrote in his piece entitled “Sudan’s Prolonged Civil War and the Shifting Value(s) of Children” that, with regard to boys, in Dinka culture, a father, for example, will not publicly announce “I have a son” until such time as the boy has begun to fish and hunt, returning home with generous gifts of food for his family. Boys are very much valued because they are seen as heir apparent in that they inherit the responsibility of taking care of the family when they grow up, and they carry on with the survival of clan’s name. They are also seen as provider of security to the family, lineage or clan. according to Chief Atem Kuek, from Twi subsection “it is important to have more wives because they produce more boys and girls. In case of a threat or attack, your sons would be defending you. Also, if you have more daughters, you would have more wealth from the bride price if a daughter is married off”. These assertions provide us with a clear justification that children are assets, and they are never a liability. The Dinka paramount chiefs are often wealthy because most of their wealth comes from the bride price of their daughters. Marrying a paramount chief’s daughter was regarded a prestige to the extent that people would travel long distances from distant clan or tribe to marry a daughter of paramount chief.

### ***What is the nature of the relationship between paramount chief’s wives and their brothers-in-law?***

A wife of the paramount chiefs respects her brother-in-law as much as she respects her husband. Once a brothers-in- law comes to visit, he is always welcome by the wives. To signify respect, they cook special food for him. Paramount chief’s wives value their brothers-in-law because they are the immediate person to turn for care and procreative assistance when their husband dies.

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Marriage in Dinka Bor community does not end with the death of the husband. On the contrary, a widow is expected to continue to bear heirs to her late husband's name with the procreative assistance of a brother-in-law or step-son. This institution is known as "leviratic marriage." Responsibility for the continued material well-being of the widow and her children rests squarely on the brothers and other close patrilineal relatives of the deceased husband. A brother-in-law is almost an equivalence of the husband culturally. When a husband dies with surviving step-sons, it is easy to console a bereaved widow.

### *How is adultery case handled?*

In case of adultery, in the past, Dinka Bor paramount chiefs rarely divorced when a wife committed adultery. An adulterous woman was always isolated and talked ill of. In the past, cases of adultery were rare. Women were very faithful because they were alive to customary practices, and breaking a taboo was regarded an abomination that could attract severe punishment including curse. An act of adultery was a serious crime, and it was and is always punishable under customary laws. In the Dinka customs, it is always the man involved in the act of adultery that is regarded an offender and never a woman whatsoever the case may be. The Adulterer [man] pays "Aruok" of six cows to the husband of the woman he committed adultery with. "Aruok" in Dinka language means fine levied against men who have committed adultery.

In conclusion, the paramount chief as a typical Dinka man also makes a thorough research about his wife-to-be. He looks for certain qualities expected of a good wife-to-be such as respect, hard work, and kindness and oratory skill among others. The paramount chief, as the custodian of Dinka Bor culture also accords his wives a special treatment because they are the main family drivers in terms of care, and all the responsibilities of her household. Children were and are generally viewed as an asset. Girls are a source of wealth in form of bride price.



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