

NOTES AND RECORDS

March 2022



THE ORIGINS, MIGRATION ROUTES AND SETTLEMENT OF THE ATUOT PEOPLE

Ater Yuot Riak Amogpai (Ph.D)

THE ORIGINS, MIGRATION ROUTES AND SETTLEMENT OF THE ATUOT PEOPLE

ATER YUOT RIAK AMOGPAI (PH.D)

Ater Yuot Riak Amogpai, the author, has a Doctoral Degree in Electrical Engineering from the Aalto University, Finland, Master Degree in Electrical Engineering, Helsinki University of Technology, Finland and Bachelor Degree of Electrical Engineering, Sudan University of Science and Technology Sudan. Dr. Amogpai is the Assistant Professor at the Department of Electrical Engineering University, University of Juba. Dr. Amogpai has recently developed interest in the anthropology of Atuot people of Yirol West. He is the author of the articles: Challenges of Oil and Gas Industry in South Sudan, Electricity Service?

He can be reached via his email contact: ater.amogpai@gmail.com.

I do not claim to be an anthropologist, however, as an Atuot (Apak) native, I am interesting and eager to share the uniqueness of Atuot people as many are confused how come they are Dinka and they speak language very similar to Nuer? What is their origin and where did they come from? How they combined Dinka and Nuer ethnicities? I feel curious and would love to attempt answering the above questions on the following paragraphs about Atuot people of Western Yirol.

An American scholar John W. Burton (1952-2013) conducted anthropological fieldwork among the Atuot people as they narrated to him in 1970s. John was graciously helped by renowned South Sudanese ambassador, diplomat and scholar, Dr. Francis Mading Deng. His study was one of the best anthropology biographies done on Atuot people but need more elaboration from Atuot people themselves.

A number of Nilelotes elder people said that all the people-Dinka, Nuer and Atuot-came from a place called adekdit, a Dinka term with a most interesting meaning. In colloquial usage it refers to a body of water so vast a bird would be unable to cross its expanse without dying. Adekdit for Nilelotes could referred to Mediterranean Sea or Red Sea. They claimed have had come from where the Sun shines and from the north. When Arabs and Muslims invaded northern Sudan through Red Sea and Egypt at around 700s, the Nilelotes were pushed back to the South of Khartoum. At around 1500s, the Funj kingdom conquered much of Sudan and indeed the Dinka, Shilluk, Nuer and Azande lands were also affected. After collapsed of Funj kingdom, the Nilelotes have officially separated for the Funj kingdom but again Sudan is conquered by Turkish, Egypt and British between 1821 and 1955.

After they have lived in Adekdit long time ago around creation, the Nilelotes stayed in a camp called Akorthaar or Akorlil. As usual traditions of the more pastoral South Sudanese Nilelotes, the initial cause of dispute which led to separation occurred in relations to cattle. After some time of harmony, the Nilelotes separated and it was not cleared when the separation occurred? Most of the Nilelotes people count back their ancestors down to seven or eight. Assume the average age of each ancestor is 60 years then the separation should have occurred around 1537. However, this assumption need more research and elaboration from Nilelotes anthropologists.

The literal translation of the name Akorthaar is 'under the tree called akor'. Akorlil can be glossed as 'at the tree called akor in the type of pasture called lil' or 'the place of the fight in lil. The Adok and Nuong peoples of western Nuerland refer to the same camp as Tharjath, 'under the tree'.

John W. Burton traced the origin of Atuotland in his writings that the present area of Atuot settlement used to share the boundaries with the Shilluk kingdom. He further added that the original place of the Luo was south of Yirol in what is now Atuotland. At the time the Atuot started invading the land and hard fighting ensued, under Dimo's grandson Ajak the Jo Luo left the land of their birth for good. It was estimated that Nuer and Atuot have resided the area west of Shambe (harbor at White Nile river east of Yirol) and to the north and west, the Shilluk at around 1650s.

‘WHO ARE THE PEOPLE CALLED ATUOT?’

Atuot is divided into two main sections: Reel and Apak, Reel is classified to Luac, Jilek, Akot, Rorkec and Kuek. The Apak are an exception to this classification in a number of ways. Their language can correctly be called ‘Dinka’. They are the largest Atuot section and the least ethnically homogenous.

The texts presented below are representative of a great many others collected by John W. Burton in response to the question ‘where did the Atuot first come from?’

An elder chief of the Kuek Atuot, Barnaba Madeo Bol Angui, replied,

There is always a certain amount of envy and enmity between brothers. The words we hear from the old people when we were children say we were part of Nuer. They were brothers, Reel and Nuer, and had a quarrel over the bead called tik yang. Reel could not find the bead once and accused Nuer that his cow had swallowed it. Reel said the cow would have to be killed so the bead could be retrieved. This was done, but they found that the cow had not eaten it. Then they fought, but later settled by making an oath. They said if we stay together we will always go on killing each other, so Reel left. Reel left a bull (tut) tethered in the camp then rounded up the families to move by night. When Nuer later returned to the camp and heard the bull crying, he thought Reel was still about. He stayed for one day but then realized that Reel had left and was already too far away to follow. Reel went until the people came to this place and lived in the cattle camp called Panther (a Dinka term meaning the ancient home).

A second variant, collected among the Luac Atuot, also suggests the initial dispute which led to separation involved cattle,

At one time the father of Nuer and Reel became very old and he told his sons to come early in the morning to his bedside so he could divide his cow and calf between them. They left together but Nuer went off on his own a short while later because he had arranged to meet a woman. Reel came very early the next morning and took the calf, while Nuer appeared much later in the day because he had been with his woman. He found that only the old cow remained. Then the father died. Nuer later accused Reel of stealing the calf but Reel retorted that if Nuer did not know where it was he had better remain quiet. They killed and ate the old cow and then departed. Because they had eaten together they vowed never to fight each other. A third variant, collected from the Akot Atuot elder told me,

Long ago we were Nuer. One of the sons was killed and the others left Akorlil and crossed through the Ceic Dinka area. When they came to Panther they found Luac and Kuek already there. Luac gave them a daughter to marry and they became in-laws.

The last variant, number of additional texts were collected from chiefs of the Nuong and Adok Nuer, peoples with whom some sections of Atuot share inland dry-season pastures. They can be summarized as follows:

One time a cow of Jagei (Nuer) swallowed a bead belonging to Tuot (Atuot). The cow had been tethered in the camp and left behind when the other cows were released for grazing because it was calving. Tuot claimed that since the cow of Jagei had swallowed the bead, it would have to be cut open to bring it out. This was done but the bead was not found. At the time no one had seen a kite swoop down and make off with the bead, tik yang. Jagei became very angry with Tuot because the cow was to have given birth but was now dead. He demanded to fight with Tuot, who refused, and suggested instead that he would replace the dead animal with three healthy cows of his own. Jagei refused and once more demanded to fight. Tuot persisted for a settlement but to no avail. Tuot then decided to leave the camp secretly to avoid a fight. He tethered a bull in the camp to deceive Jagei into thinking he had not left. The next day Tuot was already far away, leaving behind him his father Reel and his younger brother Thiang. Thiang later refused to stay with his brother Jagei when he learned how he had mistreated Tuot. Thiang crossed the Bahr-el-Jebel. The father Reel stayed with Jagei and died in western Nuerland. Tuot later became known as Atuot and went to live where Atuot now stay. The Nuer used to be called Reel because their father was Reel.

From the above the texts, it was cleared that Reel was the younger son without a wife, eager to increase his number, since he makes off with the cow calf, a symbol for the potential growth of a family and herd. The texts shown clearly that it was Atuot who left the Nuerland and common sense would attest to this since the Nuer are ten to twelve times as numerous as the Atuot. It is curious however, that in the Atuot language the term nuer means 'human being' while in Dinka and Nuer the term raan (human being) is employed.

As noted, Atuot share in common this quasi-historical account of their migration from Nuerland. However, there is considerable disparity in the more numerous tales which explain the origin of each section and clans within sections. These convey the impression that there was a greater amount of movement across 'tribal boundaries' than has commonly been accepted. For example, the Apak section includes clans which claim hereditary descent from the ancestor Reel, from peoples who migrated into Apak territory from Bor Dinkaland on the east bank of the Nile as well as others who initially came from equatorial areas, to the south.

In broad perspective the more general process of migration and eventual re-settlement would seem to have entailed similar events. The initial Atuot immigrants exploited the resources of the riverine pastures which extend from Atuotland into western Nuerland en route south. Having established some number of cattle camps in what is now Atuotland, indigenous blacksmiths and trappers 'became' Atuot through inter-marriage.

Linguistic authorities classified Atuot language as a 'dialect cluster' of the Nuer language, but a little difficulty is realized between western Nuer and Atuot dialect. The Atuot then was a section of the Nuer who are today separated from them by Dinka tribes.

Atuot people do not call themselves with this name but they go by Reel and Apak. However, there are many stories about the origin term of Atuot. In the Nuer language ngut atuot refers to a 'bull kept for service; not to be castrated' and gatut, 'aristocrat, the most noble of the tribe' this translates the compound word gatatuot as 'sons of chiefs or bulls'. Among the western Dinka, atuot can refer to a type of cow with especially wide-spreading horns, thought to originate in Atuotland. In the Atuot, Nuer and Dinka languages the noun tuot refers to the spur-winged goose.

The scholar John W. Burton added in his research regarding the origin of Atuot name, he said, Dowait was mentioned as the name of the man who remained in the home land at the head of a group of Luo, while the rest emigrated. The homeland, according to general Luo custom, was probably PaDowait, place of Dowaat', a name which was then or later became the designation of the whole group which remained behind. Possibly or mainly under Dinka influence, the name underwent a gradual change: Pa- Dowait became Pa-Dowaat and Pa-Dwot; then (P) Aduot and Atwot.

It has come to my attention and from the anthropology study done by John W. Burton that Atuot people went through many ethnical and linguistic changes but their Reel language still very much sound like Nuer language. This clearly proved their uniqueness, they speak Reel and face no difficulties to speak Dinka. Therefore, it's well accepted that Reel is a clan within Atuot people, but the question is who are Reel within Atuot people? This question needs more research and if any of Atuot's sections narrated it's original and last to Reel that could be the Reel within Atuot.

The current Atuot people area were inhabitants by hunters and blacksmiths who also become part of Atuot people ancestors. It was not mentioned what was the ethnicity and language of those hunters and blacksmiths. However, it seems they have come from nearby areas of Dinka Ciec, Dinka Bor, Equatoria (Mundari and Moro) and Dinka Agar. In this regard, the current Atuot people is a combination of several ethnicity groups, Nuong and Adok Nuer, Dinka and Equatoria people.

No question, Atuot ethnicity has merged into Dinka from long time ago and thus their songs, proverbs and poets are all in Dinka language. Their cattle are not kept in Luaks as Nuer people are doing, their food, their homes and other social activities are the same with other Lakes people. Atuot cultural activities is completely dominated by Dinka who's their origin if not all from Nuer of Nuong and Adok.

Atuot people with their uniqueness has transformed throughout history and become Dinka of Yirol West as they are now. During British administration in Sudan, Atuot administration has been relocated several times to Upper Nile (Bor district), Equatoria as they looks similar to Mundari tribe and lastly to Bahr el Ghzal Yirol West. Atuot then has become known as the administration name of Yirol West with its six sections, Apaak, Kuek, Rorkec, Akot, Jilek and Luac.

SOURCE:

John W. Burton. Atuot Ethnicity: An Aspect of Nilotic Ethnology, *Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (1981), pp. 496-507, Cambridge University Press.



© 2022 CSPS. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from CSPS, except in the case of brief quotations in news articles, critical articles, or reviews. Please direct inquiries to: CSPS

P.O. BOX 619, Hai Jebrona, Adjacent to Martyrs School,
Opposite Simba Playground, Juba, South Sudan.
Tel: +211 (0) 920 310 415 | +211 (0) 915 652 847
<https://cspss.org.ss>