

The Gospel Among the Dinka

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Submitted to:
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MH506 The Making of Global Christianity
Spring Quarter 2023
June 8, 2023

INTRODUCTION

The story of the people of South Sudan¹ is most known for the horrendous pain and suffering caused by sin, sinful people, and broken systems. Like so many peoples in Africa, South Sudanese were enslaved and were the victims of theft of “gold, ivory, ebony, cattle, hides and ostrich feathers” by powerful countries for many years.² The Khartoum-based government of what is now Sudan was abusive and controlling toward the people of what is now South Sudan from the time of independence from joint Egyptian and British rule in 1956,³ until South Sudan became a separate country in 2011.⁴ There were many atrocities done against the people of South Sudan.⁵ The civil wars in Sudan⁶ were at least partially caused by Arab Muslims attempting to force Arabization on the southern peoples.⁷ The story of South Sudan also shows God at work among them. South Sudanese Christians tell many stories of God’s protection and power that led them to gain independence.⁸

1. For simplicity, I will use “South Sudan” or “South Sudanese” throughout this paper to refer to the place and people in southern Sudan even before they became a separate country.

2. Jesse A. Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe in South Sudan* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2018), 19; Peter Dixon, *Divided by History* (Cheltenham and London: Cloudhill Press, 2019), 4-18.

3. This was called the Anglo-Egyptian Conventions “Condominium Agreement,” or “The Condominium.”

4. Roland Werner, William Anderson, and Andrew Wheeler, *Day of Devastation, Day of Contentment* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2010), 165.

5. Dixon, 63; Scott W. Sunquist, *The Unexpected Christian Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 78, 141.

6. South Sudan has struggled through three civil wars: 1) First Civil war in Sudan between northerners and southerners from 1955 to 1972; 2) Second civil war in Sudan between northerners and southerners from 1983 to 2005; and 3) after independence from Sudan in 2011, South Sudan went through civil war from 2013 to 2018.

7. Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 2009), 255.

8. Christopher Tounsel, *Chosen Peoples* (Durham: Duke University Press 2021), 2; Nathaniel Athian Deng Mayen, *Christian Faith Among the Jieeng* (Denver: Outskirts Press 2015), Kindle Location 391.

Just as Jesus became flesh and lived among us, so the Gospel must be translated to become flesh and live among people, to thrive in new cultural contexts.⁹ Andrew Walls says mission “is about the translation of Scripture into thought and action, as the word about Christ is brought to bear on the points of reference within each culture, the things by which people know themselves and recognize where they belong.”¹⁰

This essay focuses on the Dinka tribe, which is one of the more than 60 “cultural and linguistic groups” in South Sudan.¹¹ The purpose of this study is to gain understanding about what a contextually appropriate translation of the Gospel looks like among the Dinka. The thesis is that God used CMS missionaries to plant seeds of the Gospel among the Dinka from 1906 to 1964, but the most effective translation and communication of the Gospel has been done by Dinka pastors and evangelists from 1965 up to the present day. This study is important for anyone who plans to work with the Dinka and will also give an example for others to follow when seeking to translate the Gospel in other cultural contexts. First, the paper will examine some pertinent details of Dinka life and culture. Second, the study will show how CMS missionaries attempted to translate the Gospel among the Dinka. Third, the essay will focus on the Dinka’s translation of the Gospel for their own people. Then I will make some final reflections and pull together key points in the conclusion.

9. Steven Turley, “Incarnation and Translation” Lecture (MH506: Fuller Theological Seminary Week 1 2023).

10. Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1996), 84-86.

11. Jok Madut Jok, “Diversity, Unity, and Nation Building in South Sudan” (Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace 2011), 2.

IMPORTANT BACKGROUND ABOUT THE DINKA

The Dinka tribe call themselves “Jieeng” which means “the people” in their language.¹² The Dinka are the largest ethnic group in South Sudan.¹³ There are “25 different sub-groups of Dinka and at least four main and mutually intelligible dialects.” Cows are a very important aspect of Dinka life. The center of each Dinka community is the *wut* (cattle camp). “Dinka men composed songs, groomed cattle, prepared religious objects, and sacrificed animals, all practices at the center of Dinka society.”¹⁴

Traditionally Dinka had a belief in *Nhialic* (“the One Above”) “as the creator of all worldly things and a universal being capable of providing blessing and suffering” who has similar characteristics as the Christian God.¹⁵ For the Dinka, faith is “intimately connected to the land.” Storytelling and singing songs are also highly valued in Dinka culture.¹⁶ Traditional Dinka worship focuses on *jak* which are lower deities. Worship happens through mediums who help communicate with ancestors to seek answers, help, and protection from the *jak*.¹⁷ Dinka often followed prophets who claimed to have messages and directions from gods.¹⁸ The *Jieeng* made blood sacrifices to appease the gods and ancestors to protect themselves.¹⁹

12. Mayen, Kindle Location 168.

13. Jok, 10.

14. Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe*, 13-15.

15. Tounsel, 33-34.

16. Colin Robert Godwin and Saphano Riak Chol, “God gave this land to us” (Brill Mission Studies 2013), 212-213. African traditional religion in general, is connected to the physical world where they live.

17. Mayen, Kindle Location 334-356.

18. Tounsel, 28.

19. Mayen, Kindle Location 391.

TRANSLATION BY CMS MISSIONARIES: Christianity is better than Islam

The first CMS/Anglican missionaries entered the Dinka area of South Sudan in 1906. The missionaries did not understand much about the Dinka and had a hard time communicating well with them. Missionaries chose to use the name *Nhialic* for the name of the Christian God.²⁰ One important figure in the early mission work among the Dinka was Archibald Shaw. He believed that missionaries should not attack the traditional beliefs of others, instead, the missionary “should present the truth of God as it is in the Bible and allow that to speak to the lives and situation of the Dinka. Jesus Himself is the Truth, and Dinka people would eventually find their way to faith in [H]im.”²¹ Shaw became quite proficient in the Dinka language and culture. He was given the name *Machuor*, after a special cow he owned, in the same way that Dinka men are named after their favorite cows.²² He planted the seeds of the Gospel among the *Jieeng* and prophesied that Dinka would come to faith in Christ through their children.²³

The Dinka were largely resistant to Christianity in the early years of the mission work. CMS put much energy into mission stations and towns, but the center of Dinka life continued to be in the cattle camps.²⁴ Education was a key part of Anglican missions. One requirement before someone could be baptized to mark conversion, was that he or she had to be able to read the Bible. This kept many from becoming Christians. The CMS’s reasoning for requiring literacy was that they wanted believers to be able to read the Bible themselves and deepen

20. Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe*, 33.

21. Werner, Anderson, and Wheeler, 190-194.

22. Mayen, Kindle Location 817.

23. Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe*, 180.

24. Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe*, 36.

their life with God without being dependent on others. Shaw helped translate stories from the Old Testament in Dinka by 1935 and the whole New Testament by 1940.²⁵ This enabled Sudanese to learn from God themselves and was essential in South Sudanese-led revivals later.

The missionaries wanted to educate South Sudanese leaders to help lead the churches and the government. According to Lea-Wilson “the school was founded in an effort to confront Islam.”²⁶ At the Nugent school in the village of Bari, there was even a “Crusade-like” tone to how some missionaries talked about Muslims. To spread Christianity in Africa, one missionary said, they wanted to prepare Christian men “who will carry the ideals of Christ wherever they go, & [sic] occupy posts some of which are at present filled by Moslems [sic].”²⁷ The British colonists (not missionaries) eventually helped to form the Equatorial Corps to prevent the Muslims from coming into southern Sudan. Missionaries taught some of the people who were involved in the Corps.²⁸ The government of Sudan in Khartoum expelled all missionaries in 1964, saying that missionaries imparted hatred and instigated violence.²⁹

The CMS missionaries preached “the conviction of sin, belief in the saving power of Jesus Christ, and hope of eternal life in heaven.”³⁰ Tragically, their message seemed to exclude much about life in Christ here on earth. The Anglican missionaries “demanded that Dinka entirely reject their existing social and religious order as well as practices such as polygamy,

25. Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe*, 29-32.

26. Tounsel, 29.

27. Tounsel, 28-30.

28. Tounsel, 66.

29. Werner, Anderson, and Wheeler, 295.

30. Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe*, 27.

alcohol consumption, and dancing.”³¹ To become a Christian, the Dinka were required to leave the cattle camps and Dinka society in general, and move into the towns where the mission stations were.³² Walls says bringing Christians to mission compounds was meant to help native believers to observe “consecrated” lives.³³ “The missionaries offered an Evangelical piety focused on individual conversion and eternal salvation, a contrast with the approach to religion in Dinka culture that was both communal and had little understanding of life after death.”³⁴

During the time of CMS missionaries, there was not much success in bringing Dinka into Christian faith. One exception to that happened in 1939. Zink points out several things that were different in that time of revival: it was led by South Sudanese evangelists; the normal “liturgical services and set prayers” were set aside as the Gospel was preached in areas around and in the cattle camps, and South Sudanese began writing Christian hymns in traditional Dinka form (though the missionaries critiqued the theology and form of the songs). But eventually the revival was squelched by the return of a “prerequisite of literacy” and missionary policies.³⁵

Zink highlights how missionaries often controlled and held back African Christians. He goes on to say, “[a]mong the Dinka, by contrast, there was little legacy of missionary paternalism to rebel against. During the civil war, no such suppression took place and Dinka leadership flourished.”³⁶

31. Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe*, 6

32. Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe*, 189.

33. Walls, 108.

34. Zink, “An Exilic Church,” 278.

35. Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe*, 31-32.

36. Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe*, 178.

TRANSLATION BY DINKA CHRISTIANS: God is more powerful than Dinka gods

What we see in the story of South Sudan affirms what Sanneh noted, that Christianity “rooted in the vernacular” empowers people. As David Livingstone learned, “African instruments” are more effective ministering among their people than foreign missionaries.³⁷ After many years with the Dinka, Archibald Shaw said, “Christianizing among the Dinka must be done by Dinka missionaries.”³⁸ Since missionaries were expelled in 1964, the Anglican Church among Dinka has become an indigenous church that is led by South Sudanese in every way.³⁹

The church in South Sudan appears to have continued the “crusade-like” tone in relation to the Gospel. Some used the Biblical language, saying that the Muslim northerners were like Goliath and the Christian southerners were like David. The two key independence groups likened their leader to “Moses’ and they believed that Isaiah’s prophecy concerning Cush foretold of southern independence from Sudan.⁴⁰ It is interesting to notice similarities between South Sudan’s story and the history of black Americans. J. Deotis Roberts’ explanation of the exodus story of Israel “as a good starting point for a Black Theology” resonates with South Sudan’s understanding about their fight for liberation from the Arab north.⁴¹ While I have a hard time with the “crusade-like” theology of the missionaries, it seems more understandable to consider the South Sudanese as the oppressed, working toward their own liberation.

37. Sanneh, 144-152.

38. Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe*, 25.

39. Abraham Yel Nhial, “The Episcopal Church of Sudan” (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. 2013), 2.

40. Tounsel, 89-90.

41. J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press 2005), 10.

After South Sudan gained independence from Sudan there was a South Sudanese civil war, primarily led by the two majority tribes, the Dinka, and the Nuer which began in 2013. Bishop Tombe, in speaking about the ethnic conflicts between tribes who identify as Christian, said, “[t]he blood of the tribe has become thicker than the blood of the Christ.”⁴² Often ethnic citizenship is highlighted instead of national citizenship.⁴³ Bishop Tombe says that the politicians call themselves Christians, but are not led by Christian values.⁴⁴ Nhial says that the Church in Sudan is called to work to reconcile the many conflicts so justice and peace reign.⁴⁵

During the first civil war in Sudan (1955-72), many Dinka who moved away from their homes to live in cities, towns, or refugee camps became Christians.⁴⁶ In the second civil war (1983-2005), many Dinka rejected their traditional “religious beliefs in favor of Christian narratives. Older pieties were no longer seen as providing a secure basis for the new world in which Dinka found themselves.”⁴⁷ Christianity became a popular movement among the Dinka during that war. One factor that caused this was that under South Sudanese church leaders, there were not so many requirements for baptism and being church members. Also, as people fled into the bush for safety, they began sharing the Gospel in the cattle camps. Christianity was no longer only in the cities and among educated.⁴⁸ *Jieeng* believers began expressing their faith

42. Tounsel, 132.

43. Jok, 1.

44. Tounsel, 127.

45. Nhial, 3.

46. Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe*, 46-47.

47. Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe*, 9.

48. Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe*, 80.

with traditional *Jieeng* culture: drums and dancing in worship and carrying wooden crosses in worship services.⁴⁹ This shows the fruit of the missionaries' emphasis on vernacular translations of the Bible and enabled "the recovery by Africans of the cultural identity of their tribe."⁵⁰

Power is a key aspect of the Gospel as translated by the Dinka Anglican church. The cross was a symbol of protection from the *jak*, and people thought of it like a gun, used to kill *jak*. One song in South Sudan says: "*We will carry the Cross, we will carry the Cross, and the Cross is the gun for evil jak. Let us chase the evil jak with the Cross.*"⁵¹ In his research and interviews, Jesse Zink, found that most people did not mention "eternal life" or fighting Islam as their reasons for converting to Christianity. They were motivated by things in this life and having power over the *jak*.⁵² This is confirmed by Mayen, who says the emphasis on "the destruction of local deities, *jak*, by God's mouthpieces [prophets] such as Paul Kon Ajith and Adit Duot Alaak, and the final conversion and subsequent expression of Christian faith in songs, drum beating, the Cross, and the Bible" were essential in the conversion of the Dinka.⁵³

The Dinka have a long history of prophets who spoke for the spirits. The Christian church as contextualized by South Sudanese continues the role of prophets. They say that Archibald Shaw prophesied that "their children will one day preach the gospel," which happened in the second civil war.⁵⁴ Another important prophet during the second civil war was Kon Ajith. He

49. Mayen, Kindle Location 537.

50. Sanneh, 225.

51. Mayen, Kindle Location 537-550.

52. Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe*, 90-91.

53. Mayen, Kindle Location 705.

54. Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe*, 179-182.

gave messages to South Sudan resistance leaders, telling them that if they do not renounce the *jak*, destroy all related religious items related to them, and become Christians, that the Muslim army would come and destroy their towns. The first leaders rejected his predictions and soon after the Muslims came and destroyed those villages.⁵⁵ During the civil war of Sudan there was also fighting between South Sudanese tribes. On September 7, 1997, the Nuer were near a Dinka soldiers' headquarters and were preparing to attack. A prophetess named, Adit Duot, told the Dinka leaders that God would fight for them. She gave instructions on what to do and they obeyed, then God sent a big thunder and lightning storm that caused the Nuer to turn back. After God's intervention, the Dinka and Nuer reconciled, and many became Christians.⁵⁶

The CMS missionaries demanded literacy as part of becoming a Christian, but South Sudanese leaders began using oral communication strategies to proclaim the Gospel through songs and other methods.⁵⁷ Anglican missionaries were skeptical of songs that were written in the traditional Dinka form, but many inspired Dinka Christians, began writing songs that became like a catechism for believers.⁵⁸ Prayer also became an essential aspect of the church as they prayed for protection and healing. God healed many people through their prayers.⁵⁹

Walls says many in Africa took the Gospel the missionaries brought and made it their own.⁶⁰

This has clearly been seen in the Anglican church among the Dinka in South Sudan.

55. Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe*, 192.

56. Mayen, Kindle Location 1964-1999.

57. Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe*, 148, 172.

58. Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe*, 144-52.

59. Zink, *Christianity and Catastrophe*, 142-144.

60. Walls, 100.

REFLECTION and CONCLUSION

The CMS missionaries who worked in South Sudan gave themselves for the good of the Dinka and other peoples in the country. I was thankful to see that the missionaries who worked among the Dinka recognized their limitations as foreigners. Their work in Bible translation must be one of their greatest gifts to the Dinka that has had an exponential impact. I praise God for their sacrifice and their faithfulness to the Lord and people that He loves.

The CMS missionaries brought a Gospel message that was translated primarily for cultures of the Enlightenment.⁶¹ Sanneh says “[t]he rational refinement of the gospel reduced it to a cognitive system of a small minority of the elite who excelled in juggling its obtuse parts.”⁶² It was a spiritual message that ignored much about life here and now and emphasized forgiveness of sins with a promise of eternal life in heaven. The Dinka were much more concerned with life now, on this earth, for wisdom, protection, healing, victory and more. The requirements of leaving one’s community to move to where the missionaries live, to be literate, and reject all customs and practices of their own people were unfortunate extremes. Jesus certainly called people to come to Himself, but He also went to find them where they were. While literacy is helpful to be able to read and study the Bible, it is certainly not a requirement for salvation. There are Dinka customs and practices that were not tied to worship or fear of *jak*, but missionaries called Dinka to reject them all. It is concerning that the CMS missionaries shaped the ministry out of fear of the Muslims with a defensive and militaristic tone.

61. Steven Turley, “European Enlightenment” Lecture (MH506: Fuller Theological Seminary Week 8 – 2023).

62. Sanneh, 92.

The Dinka pastors, evangelists, and prophets have done a great job at translating the Gospel into their cultural context. They have highlighted the power and presence of God in their midst. Dinka leaders have emphasized Christianity as a fulfillment of their traditional beliefs.⁶³ They have emphasized God as protector and healer. God has been free to move in and through people through spiritual gifts that answer peoples' questions and problems. Giving prophets a place in the church has been an important part of the translation of the Gospel for the Dinka. These are all things that are visible throughout the Bible but are often ignored in Western, Evangelical churches. I am troubled by a Gospel message that includes a nationalistic, militaristic tone. This is not how Jesus lived or calls us to live as believers. And it seems like that led to some of the fighting and killing in South Sudan.

As I reflect on the translation of the Gospel into the Dinka context, I agree with what Dr. Turley said, that it is "not my place to decide what is right for Africans."⁶⁴ Any group that partners with the Dinka in ministry, needs to understand the Dinka translation of the Gospel. Outside groups should serve under the leadership and wisdom of Dinka church leaders to ensure that a vibrant translation of the Gospel continues.⁶⁵ South Sudan still struggles with ethnic conflicts and fight for power. Further work is needed toward God's Kingdom coming and His will being done in relation to ethnicity, forgiveness, and interethnic communities.

63. Godwin and Chol, 212.

64. Steven Turley, "Christianity is African" Lecture (MH506: Fuller Theological Seminary Week 6 – 2023).

65. Steven Turley, "Black Christianity in the US" Lecture (MH506: Fuller Theological Seminary Week 9 – 2023). In this lecture, Dr. Turley referenced a similar idea from Michael Emerson regarding white people interacting with the Black church in the U.S.

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