

# Homeward bound: The Dinka tribe in Sudan

by [Ashley Makar](#) in the [November 28, 2006](#) issue

In Dinka Bor tradition, long ebony shafts serve as walking sticks for the elderly, as scepters for newly married women and as weapons for initiates into manhood. Wooden spears are vital to Dinka cattle herders moving through alien territory. Hardwood branches, carved by Christian evangelists into crosses, are still implements of worship. The old poles of *jak* (animist spirits), which used to mark stationary shrines, are now carried in migration and shaken in church processions. Episcopal missionary Marc Nikkel called them focal points of “spiritual victory, and the hope of imminent salvation.”

Yet there is no imminent salvation for the Dinka, the dominant tribe in southern Sudan. Civil war scattered the peoples of the White Nile long before the Darfur atrocities made international headlines. Then, after peace accords officially ended the southern Sudanese civil war in January 2005, 4 million displaced people began returning home. Today refugees are still on the way home—walking and riding buses to Sudan from Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia and Congo. Others, who were displaced within Sudan, are moving home too, many crossing the Nile for the first time since war closed the river to all but goods and soldiers.

Among those headed home are the Dinka Bor, a predominantly Christian people whose hero is John Garang. A war orphan, Garang was raised in Anglican mission schools in the Dinka territory north of Equatoria. As a young man, he rose through the ranks in the Sudanese military and studied in the United States (agricultural economics at Iowa State University and infantry training at Fort Benning, Georgia).

Garang led an officers’ mutiny in the Dinka heartland of Bor in 1983, then joined the Sudan People’s Liberation Army, a nascent rebel movement against military rule and government imposition of Islamic law. The SPLA split into rival factions—Garang’s Dinka-dominated core versus the SPLA-Nasir/United faction led by Commander Reik Machar and defectors from the Nuer tribe. The latter group is blamed for a 1991

massacre in Bor that sent a quarter of a million Dinka running to Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda and East and West Equatoria.

Gabriel Kuol, a Dinka who is seeking asylum in Cairo, Egypt, remembers Garang bringing UN food planes to the refugee boys' camp where he stayed in Uganda. "Garang is like Jesus for us," Kuol told me of the hero he calls Uncle. Many Dinka Bor believe that God sent Garang to save them.

After 21 years of hard fighting, Garang helped negotiate the January 2005 Comprehensive Peace Accords, which promise a "New Sudan." The agreement embodies Garang's vision of a secular, democratic state of power- and wealth-sharing between north and south. Garang was sworn in as the first southern and the first Christian vice president of Sudan, but he died only a month later in a helicopter crash.

Garang's face haunts Juba, the postwar capital of southern Sudan, in signs depicting his political feats and in a litany of honorifics: Comrade Commander Peacemaker Martyr John Garang de Mabior. But Garang's spirit is down the Nile in Bor, and his people are praying for a New Sudan in his image.

The UN Mission in Sudan is working to protect and provide for internally displaced persons (IDPs). The UN refugee agency (UNHCR) has embarked on this mission with Lologo Camp, a way station for Dinka returning to Bor. Until this year, UNHCR worked exclusively with refugees who fled to other countries, and IDPs fell through the interagency cracks. UN tarps and leaflets cover the camp, providing temporary residents with minimal shelter and reams of illustrated information about landmines, worms, water sanitation and disease. The flyers are part of the effort to provide the Dinka Bor with "a dignified return," says the UNHCR mass information officer in Juba. The dignified return will also include a ferry to carry them home instead of the commercial barges—"not suitable for passengers"—that from 300 to 500 IDPs crowd onto every week.

Islamic Relief Worldwide is also in Sudan, providing health, sanitation, AIDS awareness and education programs. A Sudanese program officer named Alamein, sent from Darfur for the Lologo project to aid IDPs, reports that Islamic Relief has changed the poor reputation that Islamic organizations used to have in southern Sudan: its sustained programs are convincing people that the organization is committed to helping them.

But Manasseh Mac, an indigenous Dinka Bor community leader, gives a different report on Islamic Relief. He describes a misunderstanding that happened at Lologo while he was away. Islamic Relief had donated four bulls to the camp for Eid al Adha, the Muslim feast of sacrifice to honor Abraham. A portion of sacrificed animal meat is always distributed to the poor. But the Dinka Bor did not receive the Muslim charity graciously: "These are the people who displaced us, and now they are donating bulls?" some Dinka Bor said. They suspected that the meat might be poisoned and refused it until Manasseh returned and mediated. "Now is the time for reconciliation," he explained to his people, and they ate the meat.

Despite the people's suspicions, neither Islamic Relief (a nongovernmental organization) nor the Islamist Sudanese government is directly responsible for the Dinka Bor massacre of 1991. The massacre, an act of retribution against John Garang, was carried out by a rival SPLA faction using government-supplied arms. But the convolutions of the southern Sudanese civil war have polarized peoples and places into black-and-white—African and Arab, Christian and Muslim, rebel and state.

When Manasseh reports on the Dinka Bor return project, he tells of tribal clashes that broke out in West Equatoria, where Dinka cattle trampled the host community's crops last fall. International agencies intervened and PACT, an agency of nongovernmental organizations, sponsored negotiations that precipitated the mass return of Dinka Bor to their home territory. This effort could become a model for conflict resolution throughout Sudan.

The International Office of Migration began an emergency operation in late 2006 to bring 4,000 Dinka Bor to Juba. The "vulnerable people" (the UN classification for women, children and elders) would go on to Bor by ferry. The men, escorted by the Sudan People's Liberation Army for their protection, would travel on foot with the cattle to the east bank of the Nile, then north through the bush. Hundreds made the 180-mile walk to Bor, Manasseh reported, with "one tragic incident": a man died when Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) fighters raided one of the cattle camps.

The LRA, a Ugandan rebel group that ransacks the east bank of the Nile for grain, cattle and young soldiers, is notorious for training children to kill and is one of the main security threats to postwar southern Sudan. (Juba is now mediating in precarious negotiations between the Ugandan government and the rebels.) "War is not over on this side of the world," says Father Charles, a Catholic priest who worries

about the LRA fighters lurking in the bush bordering his parish.

Manasseh blames Sudanese army officers for letting the LRA move along the Nile. He says the government evacuation of the southern garrison towns is long overdue, according to the timetable of the peace. What's worse, the Khartoum government is not honoring a major provision of the accords: sharing half of Sudan's oil revenues with southern Sudan. Manasseh thinks most southerners will vote for independence in the referendum that is scheduled for 2011. But if the south votes to secede, he expects that the Sudanese government will ignore the vote, and likely reappear to enforce its domination of the south.

Last spring, international agencies suspended the ferry trips to Bor due to "health insecurity" (cholera and dysentery), but then completed the first phase of the Dinka Bor return operation. This fall they are waiting for Sudan's dry season (November to May), along with over 1,000 internally displaced people who are beleaguered by months of hard rain and protected only by tarp-and-pole shelters at Lologo.

The rains have been so heavy that a UN aircraft on a flood assessment mission couldn't land in Bor. The Dinka Zion is a swampy homeland covered with landmines and crocodiles, and occupied by more ailing, hungry people than the humanitarian agencies can relieve given the wet conditions. Cut off from the world, those Dinka who have returned home have little food and no clean water, hospitals or schools.

Now the Dinka and millions of others suffering in Sudan have lost the help and protection of UN oversight. In October, when envoy Jan Pronk reported that the national army was flagging in the Darfur struggle, the Sudanese government expelled him. With the chief of the UN Mission in Sudan displaced by the Khartoum regime, no power is accountable for peace. War and misery will continue for the Sudanese.