ASPECTS OF CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS CHANGE AMONG THE DINKA

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‘Nhialic aguar abik; lath, yen aci dung’
—Dinka Proverb

‘God is grinding fine flour; what remains is the sifting.’ This traditional proverb is applied to periods of famine or unbearable suffering when it appears that the hand of Nhialic—‘the One above’, who brings blessing as well as hardship—is brutally crushing his people. Then, even then, the wisdom of God is at work, grinding the excellent fine flour which is beyond human capacity or expectation. God knows his methods and ultimate purposes for good. What remains for human beings is the lighter work of putting life in order, the sifting of the flour. Such is the assertion of a Dinka Catholic priest who observed emaciated survivors arriving from Sudan at Itang refugee camp in 1988. As has been done for generations, such proverbs are adapted, reinterpreted and used to fortify the spirit of a people for survival. While most observers are appalled by the present period of social and religious disintegration, some Dinka suggest that God’s grinding involves a spiritual transformation which synthesizes affirmation of Christian belief with the tenacity, pragmatism and natural spiritual sensitivity innate in Dinka tradition.

Both Catholic and Protestant missionaries have found Dinkaland exceedingly poor soil for planting European forms of Christianity. The Dinka, having experienced the predatory incursions of the ivory and slave traders and later of the Mahdiyya, were resistant toward all alien influences, including the emissaries of foreign religion. Heilige Kreuz, one of two pioneer missions of the Austrian Catholics on the Upper Nile, was founded among the Ciec Dinka in 1853 and deserted after ten gruelling years. In 1905
the Anglican Church Missionary Society [CMS] founded its first station among the Bor Dinka at Malek, just fourteen miles up river, but for six decades experienced an extremely slow and disappointing response. Under the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium the strong association between European missions and yet another alien government precluded receptivity among the Dinka.

Today, however, residents of Bor area affirm, *Kene ke thada; Nhialic aci wo tiit ne tha. Nhialic aci ben woyic emaath, ku kucku rot.* ‘This is our time; God has kept us for this time. God has come among us slowly and we did not know it.’ In the midst of famine, civil war, and displacement, rural populations are shifting their spiritual allegiances in unprecedented numbers, nowhere more so than in the vicinity of those early mission stations. In the Episcopal Church’s Diocese of Bor, where perhaps 18 churches existed eight years ago, confined to population centres on main roads, there are today 120 churches and innumerable ‘preaching centres’ extending to the most remote areas. These are served by 73 pastors, most ordained since 1984, assisted by 47 lay evangelists and numerous women’s workers. Where traditional Dinka have usually perceived Christianity as the religion of *miith abuan*, school children of the missionaries, and of educated town dwellers, it is now embraced by mature people, men and women alike. As entire families and clans have declared their belief in Christ, they have, remarkably, been accompanied by several of the venerable priests of traditional cults. *Baany jok*, keepers of the spiritual ‘powers’, Lirpiou, Garang and Deng, have renounced their *jak* (sing. *jok*), been baptized and now join Christian worship. In this paper we shall explore some of the motivations and dynamics behind present religious change with particular interest in the manner in which Dinka Christians interpret their experience.

Material for this paper, though drawn largely from Bor area, is representative of contemporary patterns throughout the former sphere of the CMS among Dinka in Upper Nile and Bahr el Ghazal. It bears little resemblance, however, with patterns in the former Roman Catholic sphere. Two characteristics of the Episcopal Church in Sudan should be noted. First, it has given substantial freedom to, and frequently been maintained and propagated by, indigenous lay leadership. It is not uncommon to find lay Christians serving actively as evangelists, preachers, teachers and administrators of the Church. These individuals, women and