THE DINKA AND NUER – AGRO-PASTORALISTS IN SOUTH SUDAN

by Stephen Blakeway, Vetwork UK in conjunction with Scotland Africa 97

1997

Original exhibition Cibachrome prints from Kodachrome slides
(sadly the original slides have been lost and the pictures below are scans of poor quality copies)

Cloud over cattle camp 1

Dusk, when people and cattle come together again at the end of the day, is the main time for social activity.

INTRODUCTION

This Exhibition of Photographs of Southern Sudan by Stephen Blakeway, Vetwork UK in conjunction with Scotland Africa 97 received funding from Christian Aid, Save the Children and Unicef.
It was shown initially at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Edinburgh, before spending four weeks at An Tuireann Arts Centre, Portree, Isle of Skye (from 16 June) and at the original An Lanntair Arts Centre, Stornaway, Isle of Lewis (from 14 July 1997).
Stephen visited and gave a talk at each venue.
The purpose of this activity was raising awareness and influencing British people to see positive aspects of other cultures.

These photographs show the everyday lives of Dinka and Nuer people of South Sudan. They also describe briefly how these lives are affected by the ongoing civil unrest in South Sudan.

Without conflict and under-development, life in South Sudan would be generally good. Even with poor access to medical services, education and conflict, many people continue to lead a rich traditional life.

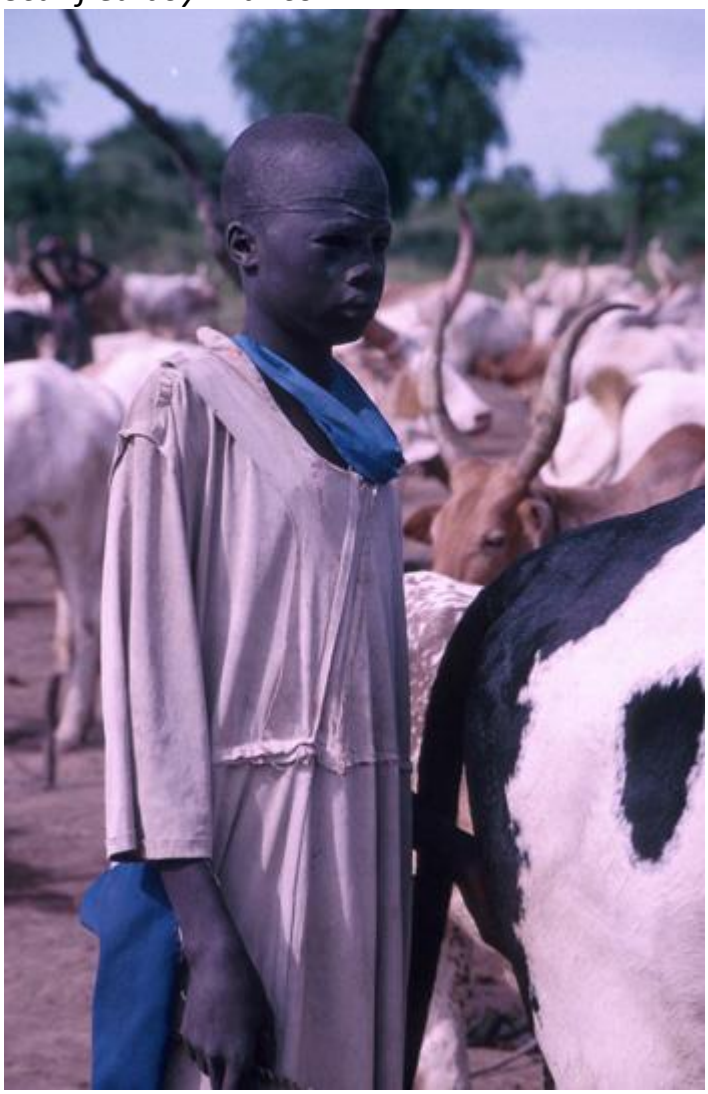
People are proud of their culture. Communities are close. Children play an important part in everyday activities, and learn the complex skills needed to survive in this difficult but rewarding environment.

Most people in South Sudan grow some crops during the wet season and keep livestock which they herd away from their villages during the dry season. This way of life is called trans-humant agro-pastoralism. The Dinka and Nuer are the largest agro-pastoral tribes in South Sudan. They are closely related tribes; it is thought the Nuer are descended originally from the Dinka. They are both dispersed, anarchic, mutually supportive societies.

People in South Sudan know about the outside world. They want to engage with it, but want to have some control over the way their society will change as a result. School education, to complement their traditional education, is valued as one way to achieve this.

These photographs were taken mostly at the start of the dry season, around several different locations where there are Community Based Animal Health projects were operating.

Scarified boy with cow



This young man is tending to his cow. His forehead bears scars from his initiation. The initiation ceremony marks the change from being considered a child to being considered an adult, and happens in early teens.

School class room by Pibor River

Village schools are spreading through South Sudan. Usually they are locally made classrooms, but sometimes pupils are taught under the shade of a large tree.

GEOGRAPHY & CLIMATE

Sudan is the largest country in Africa (about ten times the size of the UK) (NB since this exhibition, Sudan has split in two, into Sudan and South Sudan, so Sudan is no longer the largest country in Africa). The Dinka and Nuer live in an area about twice the size of the UK, in the band of country that stretches between Zaire in the West and Ethiopia in the East, from around the level where the White Nile is joined by the rivers Bar el Ghazal and Sobat, south to the rising land that borders Uganda and the Central African Republic. The population of South Sudan is about 11 million.

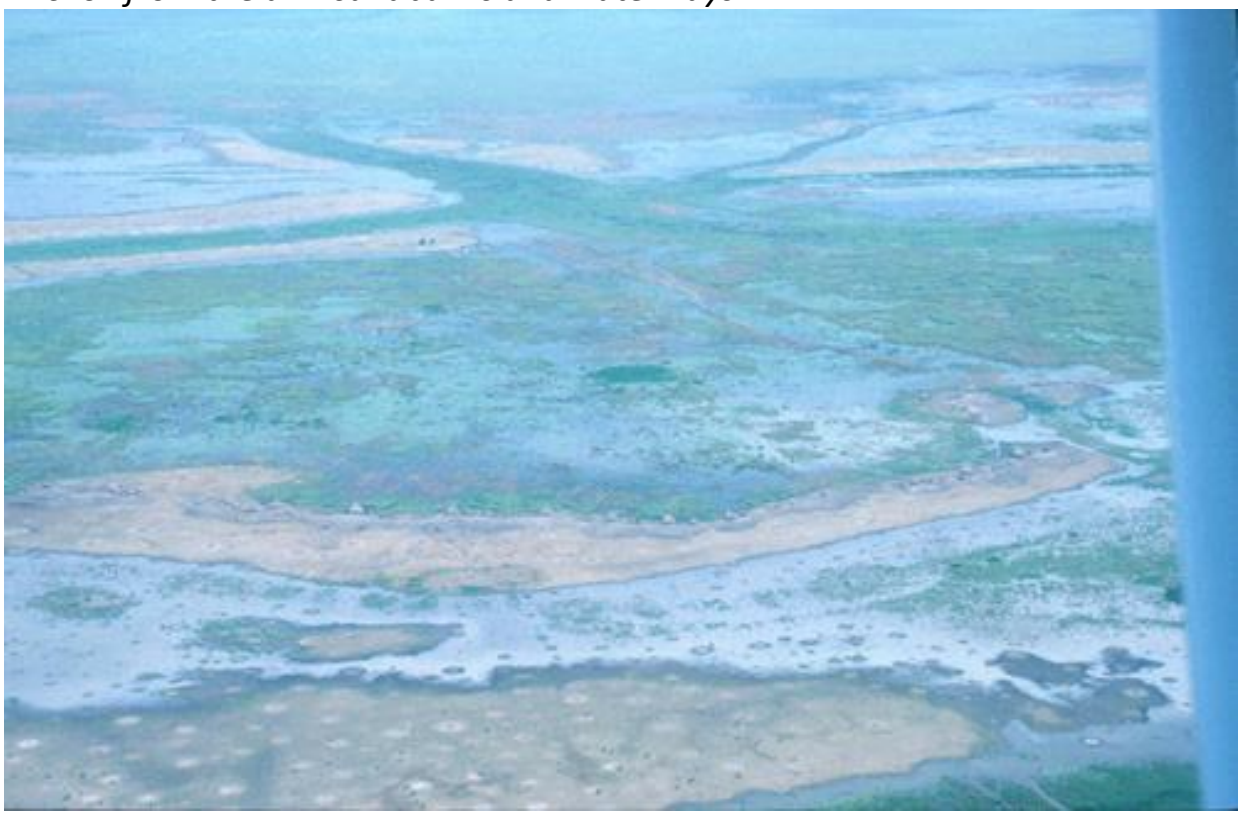
South Sudan is a land of swamps and open savannah. The swamps of South Sudan are the largest in the world and are formed when the waters of the White Nile and its tributaries flow down from the highlands of Ethiopia, Uganda and the Central African Republic into the low clay basin that forms much of South Sudan. The swamps swell with the torrential rain that inundates the area between May and September, then recede gradually during the dry season. From this vast reservoir, the White Nile moves sluggishly north on its long journey up towards Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, where it is joined by the Blue Nile, on into Egypt, and eventually to the Mediterranean Sea. The swamps of South Sudan abound with an enormous variety of birds. Indeed with its big views and huge skies, the whole area is unusually beautiful.

The temperature year round is between about 27-45oC. When the temperature drops below 30oC people start to feel cold and put on warm clothes! Because there is no industry in South Sudan and no cars, the air is clean and clear and smells sweet.

Nile swamps from air

The Nile is one of the world's great rivers. This picture is taken from an aeroplane flying over the swamps that for so long deterred outsiders from penetrating the area. Although we all learn that 'the Nile flows to the Mediterranean', most of the water that flows with the Nile and other rivers into south Sudan does not reach the sea at all, but evaporates, falls as rain on the highlands around, and flows back into south Sudan again; perpetually recycling locally.

Wichok from the air - sandbanks and waterways



Villagers built their houses ('*dwils*' or '*tukels*') and cattle byres ('*luacs*') on low 'islands' of sand that sit on the floor of the clay basin that makes up most of the area. Nowhere is this more obvious than around

the village of Wichok in Upper Nile Province. This photograph was taken at the end of the rainy season in 1997. Exceptional rains had spoiled the crops making for a very poor harvest. However people only live here now because it is relatively safe from the war. They know it is a difficult place to grow food.

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Beside the swamps are the open grassy savannahs, interspersed with patches of scrub forest. The unpredictable floods and rains make crop growing during the short wet season a precarious activity, so Dinka and Nuer life is based around livestock, particularly cattle, which they husband with great skill and care.

The Sobat River at dawn

The Sobat River flows down from the highlands of Ethiopia, and is a major tributary of the White Nile. Once it hits the flat land of Sudan, it becomes sluggish, and many little islands of vegetation float slowly along with it.

People crossing a watercourse

Villages are usually built on slightly raised sand banks which sit on the floor of the clay basin which makes up much of South Sudan. Particularly during the wet season, and particularly near to the main rivers, there are many watercourses or areas of swamp to be crossed when travelling around. Boats are only practical on larger stretches of water.

A TYPICAL YEAR: LIVESTOCK

With unpredictable floods and rains, crop growing during the short wet season is a precarious activity, so Dinka and Nuer life is based around livestock, particularly cattle.

Livestock are central to Dinka and Nuer culture. They provide subsistence food (milk, blood and meat), food reserves when crops fail (meat), and can be bartered for other comestibles (particularly grain); their needs determine human social structure; they are the cause of rights being wronged, and the means by which wrongs are righted; they represent savings; they are the currency of social contracts and the cement of social cohesion. Cattle are their most treasured livestock, but they also keep sheep and goats, some chickens, and in some places, donkeys. They also keep dogs for hunting, security and companionship. From a child's point of view, animals provide food, companionship, social and economic security, and cultural identity.

Like many other livestock keeping tribes in Africa, the Dinka and Nuer are 'trans-humant agro-pastoralists'. This means they have a regular, semi-nomadic lifestyle moving between their crop growing village areas in the wet season, and the *toic* (pronounced toych - the swamps and water-meadows), that provides grazing for their livestock during the dry season.
There is one rainy season each year, between May and September, during which time people live in permanent villages. For the rest of the year, most members of the family move with the animals following the new grass which grows on the receding water meadows.

The need to find water and grazing for their animals governs life for the Nuer and Dinka. Cattle need to be watered every 1-2 days, sheep and goats every 1-4 days.

A cattle camp from the air

Cattle are brought together at night into camps for social reasons and for protection against both enemies and biting insects. A cattle camp can have many thousand cattle, as well as smaller numbers of sheep and goats. The cattle are grouped around extended families, giving the effect of many joined circles.

Cloud over a cattle camp 2

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A cattle camp at dusk

In the foreground is a dried cow dung fire. In the morning, all the cow dung is collected and dried; and in the evening, the dried dung is lit to make smoky fires. The smoke drives away biting insects and allows the cattle to get some rest. The ash from the fires also repels insects; cows can be seen flicking it over themselves, dogs sleep in it, and people, particularly children, powder themselves with it. The smoke and smell of cow dung fires is a characteristic part of life in South Sudan.

A tassle horned song bull

Young bulls, particularly those with well patterned coats, are often selected at an early age to be ‘song bulls’. They are usually castrated (so they are really ‘song bullocks’), and their horns are pared away just above the base so that the left one grows forwards, and the right one grows backwards. When they get older, a tassle is hung through holes in the tips of its horns for decoration. Dinka in particular select cattle for the size of their horns. Song bulls are highly valued and very well treated. Their owners groom them, sing songs to them, and develop a close and special relationship with them. ‘Horn surgery’, as the shaping of cow horns is known, is recorded in the hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt, so has obviously been practiced along the Nile for thousands of years.

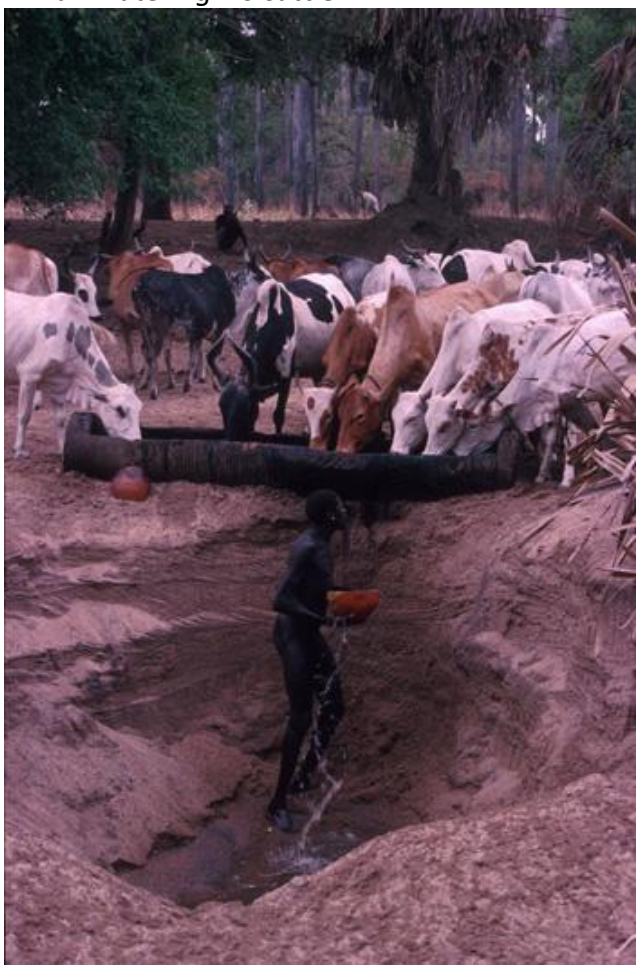
Cattle resting under Dum Palms

Cattle with interesting coat patterns are much admired, and the bull in the foreground is a particularly beautiful animal. There are different names for all the different coat patterns (in the same way that eskimoes are said to have many different names for different types of snow), and these are the names traditionally given to boys, in memory of bulls that their fathers have grown up with.

Sheep and goats resting in a cattle camp

Although of lesser status than cattle, sheep and goats are a vital part of the livelihoods of pastoralists the world over. They breed quickly so their numbers grow more quickly than with cattle; their milk, meat and hides are all used, and they are readily sold, given, bartered or exchanged. In many ways they are the 'cash' in the economy, while cattle are the 'savings accounts'. They are often the responsibility of women (and children) and so are of particular importance to female headed households. In war areas, when cattle have been raided or people displaced, sheep and goats can provide a way back into the pastoral economy.

A man watering his cattle



This picture is taken in the far south of Sudan, south of the clay basin, in the higher, more forested areas. Here seasonal rivers flow in sandy water courses. When the dry season comes, the herders dig down into the river beds until they get to the water table, and then uplift water for their animals, into troughs made from dug out palm trunks.

A dog by a water trough

After the cattle, sheep and goats have been watered, a dog looks to see if there is any water left for him. Dogs are kept to help with hunting and security, as well as for companionship.

Calves awaiting the return of their mothers in the late afternoon

The light is fading, the dung fires have been lit, and the cows will soon return from their day's grazing. The young calves, which stay in the camp all day while their mothers go to graze, will then be able to get some milk to drink. In many villages, particularly where biting insects are bad, most of the animals (all the young stock) sleep in *luacs* (Nuer) or under shelters (Dinka), together with young men and boys, who all benefit from the protection of the fires. Women sleep in their own *dwils*. In the migratory cattle camps, people sleep around fires or under mosquito nets if they have them.

Dung fire and cattle

The smoke and smell of dung fires is a characteristic part of life in South Sudan. The smoke repels the biting flies and mosquitoes that irritate and spread disease. When biting flies are particularly bad, cows will voluntarily return from grazing to stand in the comfort of a dung fire's smoke. The ash from dung fires also repels insects and is antiseptic so is used as a wound dressing.

Cock ticking

Chickens are kept round permanent villages for eggs, meat and exchange. They also help the other animals by picking ticks and other insects off their coats. Chicken are looked after by women, so like sheep and goats, are particularly important for female headed households. For displaced people, they are often the first animals purchased when the family tries to return to a pastoral life.

Boy dusting bullock

In the UK, cattle are lucky to live beyond 5-6 years old before they are sent to slaughter. In South Sudan, they are given much greater care and attention and will live beyond 15 years if war or famine do not interfere. There is a great bond between people and there animals, and young men in particular will spend much time caring for their favourites including singing to them. This boy is dusting his bullock with ash from a cow dung fire to deter insects.

A boy trying to lead a reluctant cow

Children help with all the daily tasks from an early age, particularly with herding of sheep, goats and young animals, and with other camp tasks. Caring for the animals helps them realise the extent of their mutual dependence on each other, and develop respect. From a children's point of view, animals provide food, companionship, social and economic security, and cultural identity.

Woman milking

Livestock are not routinely killed for food; they are primarily dairy animals. When times are hard, they are also bled. The blood is then usually mixed with milk or grain. This is similar to what used to done in Britain particularly in the times of cattle drovers.

A boy drinking from a goat

Children often have responsibility for herding the sheep, goats and calves; and may take the opportunity for a quick drink of milk.

Boy collecting urine

Urine is sterile and antiseptic. In a country with no easily accessible sterile water, and little firewood to use for boiling water, cow urine is used for washing and is sometimes mixed with milk for drinking.

A woman licking her lips after a good drink of milk

Women and children do the milking, and women are responsible for dealing with, and distributing, milk and milk products. Animals are milked into gourds. Some of the milk is soured for storing, some is drunk fresh, and some, if there is plenty, is transferred to special gourds in which it is churned to make butter.

Gourd bowls

Gourds are the most common containers, and are kept very carefully. Often they are richly decorated. They come from plants in the same family as cucumbers and pumpkins and are grown specially for the hard gourd they produce.

A TYPICAL YEAR: CROPS

When the rains begin around May to June, the people start to come home from the toic to their permanent cattle camps, villages and farming areas. Planting, weeding, and harvesting sorghum, ground nuts, sesame and many other crops are the major activities during the rains. The whole family is occupied in these activities. Just before the harvest, children are kept busy 'bird scaring' from special platforms put up amongst the eight to ten foot high ripe sorghum plants. Otherwise flocks of thousands of little seed eating birds can fly in and decimate the families food supplies. The end of the harvest is a time of celebrations. The cows are giving lots of milk and the people are becoming fat; the harvest is in and there is not so much work to do. This is the time when people build or repair their houses and the byres for their livestock, arrange marriages and brew beer from the new grain. The Dinka and Nuer are great singers, making up songs as they go along, often singing to their favourite bulls and cows, and at this time of year there are plenty of reasons to sing and dance.

A village view at dusk with sorghum stalk fence

Villages are often a long line of huts for people and byres for the livestock (*dwils* and *luacs*) built along the spines of the sand islands that rise up above the flood waters. This remote village is in a treeless, wet area in which the 'islands' are obvious; some places are dryer and more wooded, and the villages are more closely grouped. The thatched roofs of the *dwils* and *luacs* are often very fine, with different styles of decoration in different places.

A typical Nuer homestead

This is a typical Nuer homestead at the end of the wet season. Sorghum is drying, grain is being ground by the old lady under the tree, and a three stone cooking hearth can be seen in the foreground. Women generally rise before day break to start the day's tasks which include: fetching water, sweeping the compound, preparing breakfast, watching over the children, looking after sheep, goats and young stock, collecting wild foods, cultivating, and many other tasks which vary with the seasons.

A homestead with growing sorghum and bird scaring platforms

After the ground has been prepared and the seeds planted, the whole family is involved with caring for the growing crops until they are harvested. Sorghum, maize, ground nuts, cow peas, sesame and many other minor crops are grown. Weeding is most important while the crops are getting established, then just before the harvest, children are kept busy 'bird scaring' from special platforms put up amongst the eight to ten foot high ripe sorghum plants. Otherwise flocks of thousands of little seed eating birds can fly in and decimate the families food supplies.

Two Nuer men in front of ripening sorghum

Sorghum is the most commonly grown cereal crop, and is the staple grain food. It is dried in the sun, pounded, and made into a porridge. Both these men are well over six feet tall; the sorghum can grow to ten feet.

Harvested sorghum drying on frames

After the sorghum has been harvested it is dried, either on platforms like this or on the ground, before being put in storage jars ('*tweis*').

Sorghum drying and dog

After the sorghum has been harvested it is dried either on the ground like this or on platforms, before being put in storage jars ('*tweis*'). The different coloured heads are different strains. Local strain diversity is maintained because it ensures that, whatever the rainfall pattern, there will be a reasonable harvest. Some strains grow quickly when there is little rain; some strains grow slowly, and are tolerant of sodden soils; others have different characteristics again. Some seeds from each of the different types are kept for sowing the following year.
Dogs are kept to help with hunting and security, as well as for companionship.

Different strains of sorghum drying

The different strains of sorghum have different coloured heads. Local strain diversity is maintained because it ensures that, whatever the rainfall pattern, there will be a reasonable harvest. Some strains

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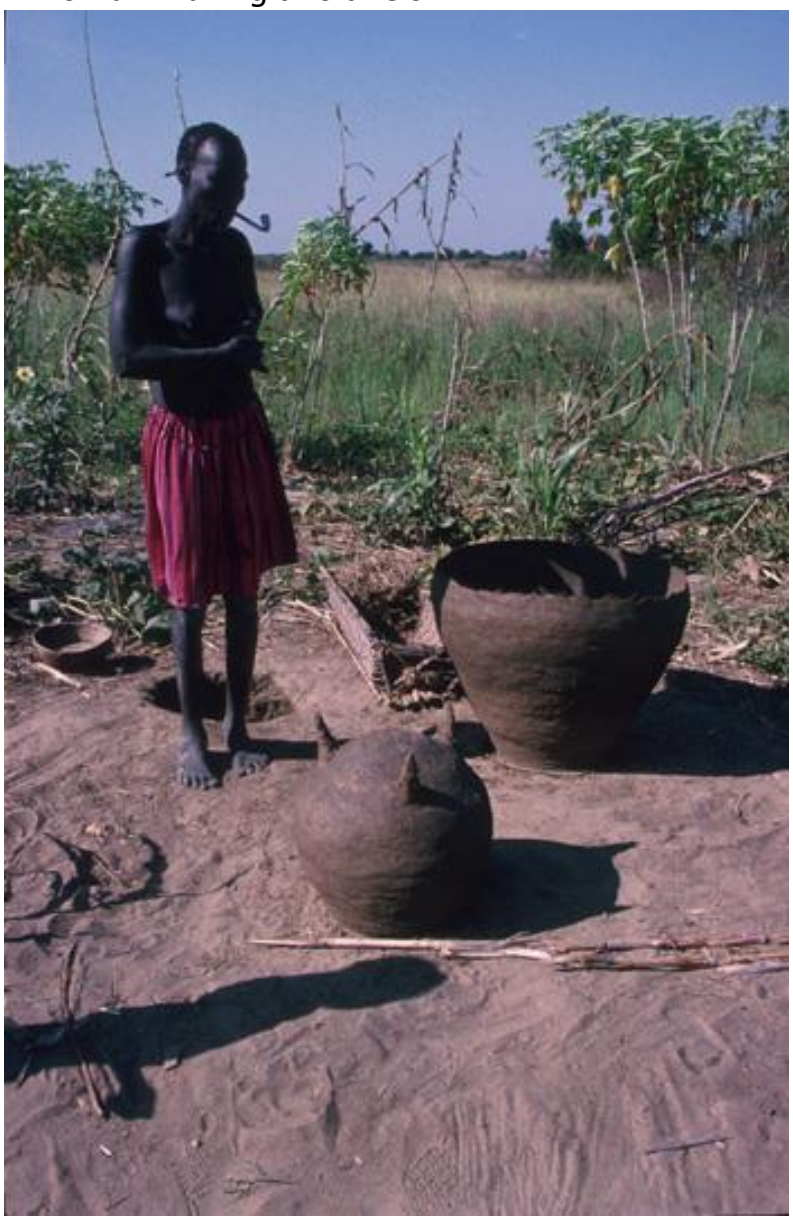
A woman making two tweis



A *twei* is a container for storing the sorghum grain after threshing; it is made from clay and grass. Women make most of the household containers and utensils; men make ropes for cattle and weapons for hunting and for fighting. Behind this woman to the right is a *dieny*, (carrying basket) and to the left is a gourd pot.

She, like most older people in South Sudan, is smoking a pipe of tobacco. Pipes are the normal way in which tobacco is smoked in South Sudan. Each family grows a few tobacco plants in the garden.

Two young girls grinding grain

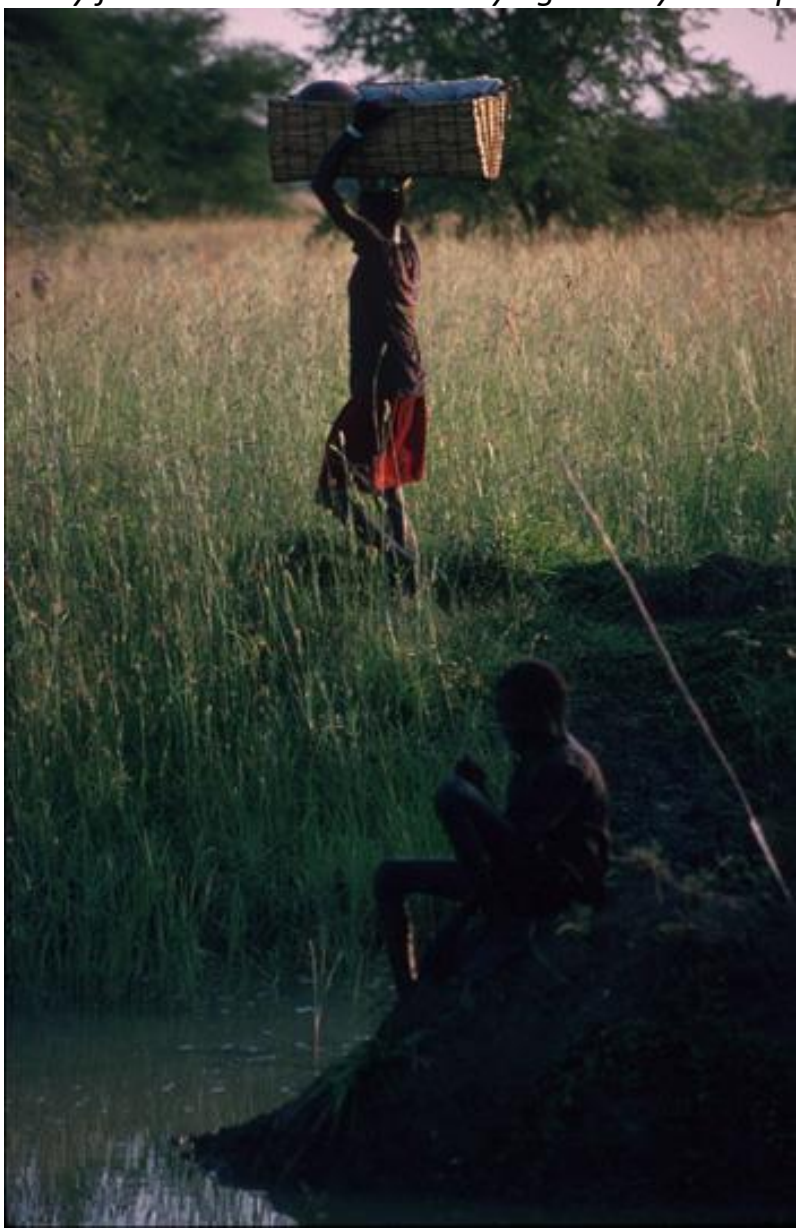
Children take on responsibilities at an early age. Girls are less likely to attend school than boys. They are kept busy at home. Young boys have fewer responsibilities than their sisters.

A Nuer boy and his baby brother outside their house

A TYPICAL YEAR: FISHING & OTHER ACTIVITIES

By October the rains have finished, the harvesting is done, and the long dry season begins. By November or December, the grazing and water around the villages starts to dry up, and the people begin to start thinking about the toic again. The cattle are moved away, following the receding waters. They are herded and looked after by some members of the family, while others, including the elderly and infirm, stay at home in the village. Grass is burned in December to allow fresh grass to come up. By February most of the people are in the toic. During this time, fish form an increasing part of the diet. The fish become trapped in pools as the swollen, flooded rivers recede, and can be caught quite easily either with spears, or even by hand. The swamp waters dry up rapidly under the blazing dry season skies and the grass withers and fades. By April the grazing and water are again in short supply and the cows and people are hungry. Fishing continues on the rivers, and wild fruits supplement the remaining grain supplies. This is traditionally a time of hunger. However, all being well, the rains return in May and June and the move home commences again.

A boy fishes while a woman carrying a dieny walks past along the dyke



This dyke ran for several miles, keeping the flood waters away from a village. The flood waters are full of fish. The woman is moving between villages. A dieny is an all purpose basket, and is often used for carrying little babies, as well as fish, grain or other produce for bartering at the local market.

Dried fish, Pibor river

Fish provide an important part of the diet, particularly in the dry season. Everyone fishes locally, but those who live by the main rivers fish more, dry their surplus and trade it for livestock and crop products.

A blacksmith at work

Any spare metal is used to make utensils ranging from spears to hoes to spoons. The goat skin bellows blow air into the little semi-circular furnace. Blacksmithing is a relatively new skill amongst the Dinka and Nuer, who traditionally would have traded for any metal implements.
Blacksmiths' work is mainly a dry season activity, particularly the preparation of implements of cultivation, which need to be ready when the rains start. The blacksmith will be paid in cash or in kind (tobacco, labour on his farm, grain) depending on the local situation.

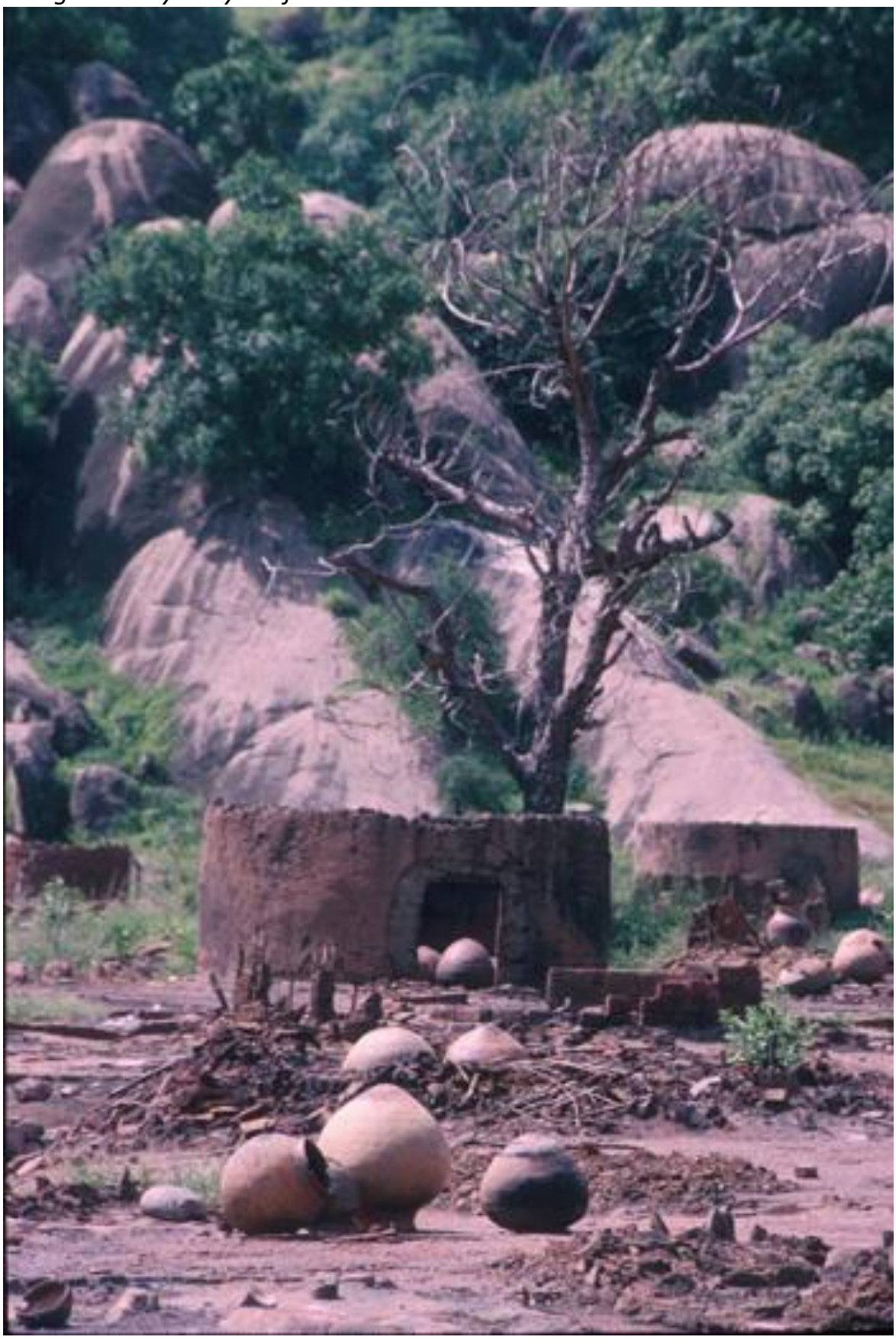
HISTORY & WAR

The long civil war within South Sudan ended in 2005. Sudan, like many countries in Africa, was newly created this century. Many different tribes with age old differences in beliefs, customs and ways of life were put together as one of the largest countries in the world. Suddenly the people were expected to get along and work together - a difficult challenge.
Modern weapons have made traditional disputes very destructive.
War and the ongoing conflict in South Sudan stops people from cultivating as much land and growing as much food as they could. Military activity tends to take place during the dry season as it is easier for soldiers and their equipment to move around when the ground isn't muddy, so displacing people at the time when they are already short of food. Militias will deliberately disrupt civilian community life at the time when people ought to be planting crops just to create instability. People choose to live in remote places because they are safe from conflict, even if they are known to be not so productive.
The people driven from their homes and villages become 'displaced' and have no alternative than to move to distant areas of safety and throw themselves on the mercy of relatives, friends or even complete strangers. The custom in South Sudan is to share food with visitors. Even if everyone is anticipating a difficult dry season, they use their food reserves to help the displaced, so leaving themselves short as the dry season progresses.
It must be stressed that there is no absolute shortage of food in South Sudan (or in the world). Famines generally result from political manipulation and greed.

AK47 and rucksac

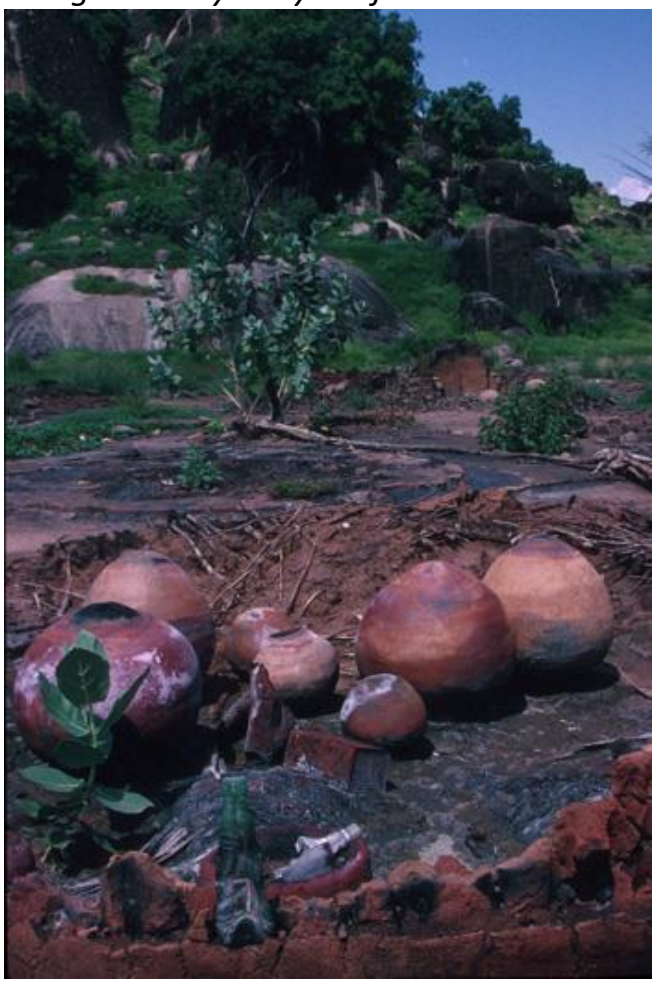
Automatic weapons are a part of everyday life in many parts of the world. Conflict in South Sudan has numerous effects on normal life. It drains people, particularly men, from their communities, greatly increasing the proportion of 'female headed households'. This is a particular problem in a place where everyone in the family has particular work to do to ensure survival on a day to day basis. Leaving aside customary gender division of labour - human society can be very flexible - it is just not possible to herd adult cattle and look after children and small stock around the home. Insecurity makes it difficult to plan ahead. Warfare also disrupts traditional education. Many young people are no longer properly equipped with the skills and knowledge of local ecology to survive in this demanding but rewarding environment.

Village destroyed by conflict 1



This village was destroyed during the civil war one night as a lesson to a minority tribe who were considered not supportive enough to the local rebel faction. Anti tank mortars were fired into the huts as people slept. Those who survived fled to the surrounding bush and became ‘displaced’. Months later they returned to rebuild the village.

Village destroyed by conflict 2

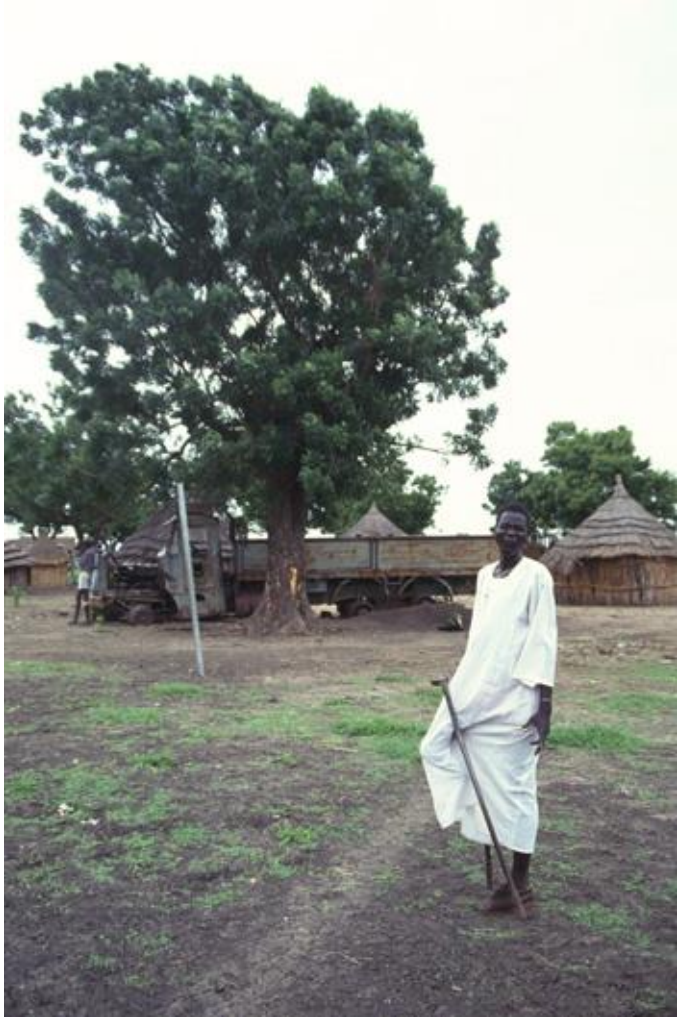


Water and grain storage pots are valuable possessions. People clearing up after the attack have collected the family pots together in the shells of the burnt out huts, ready for when the survivors return.

Village destroyed by conflict 3

This Schweppes soda bottle was flattened by the heat of the blast when the mortar hit the hut; the little lump of metal beside it is the remains of an aluminium cooking pot.

Amputee

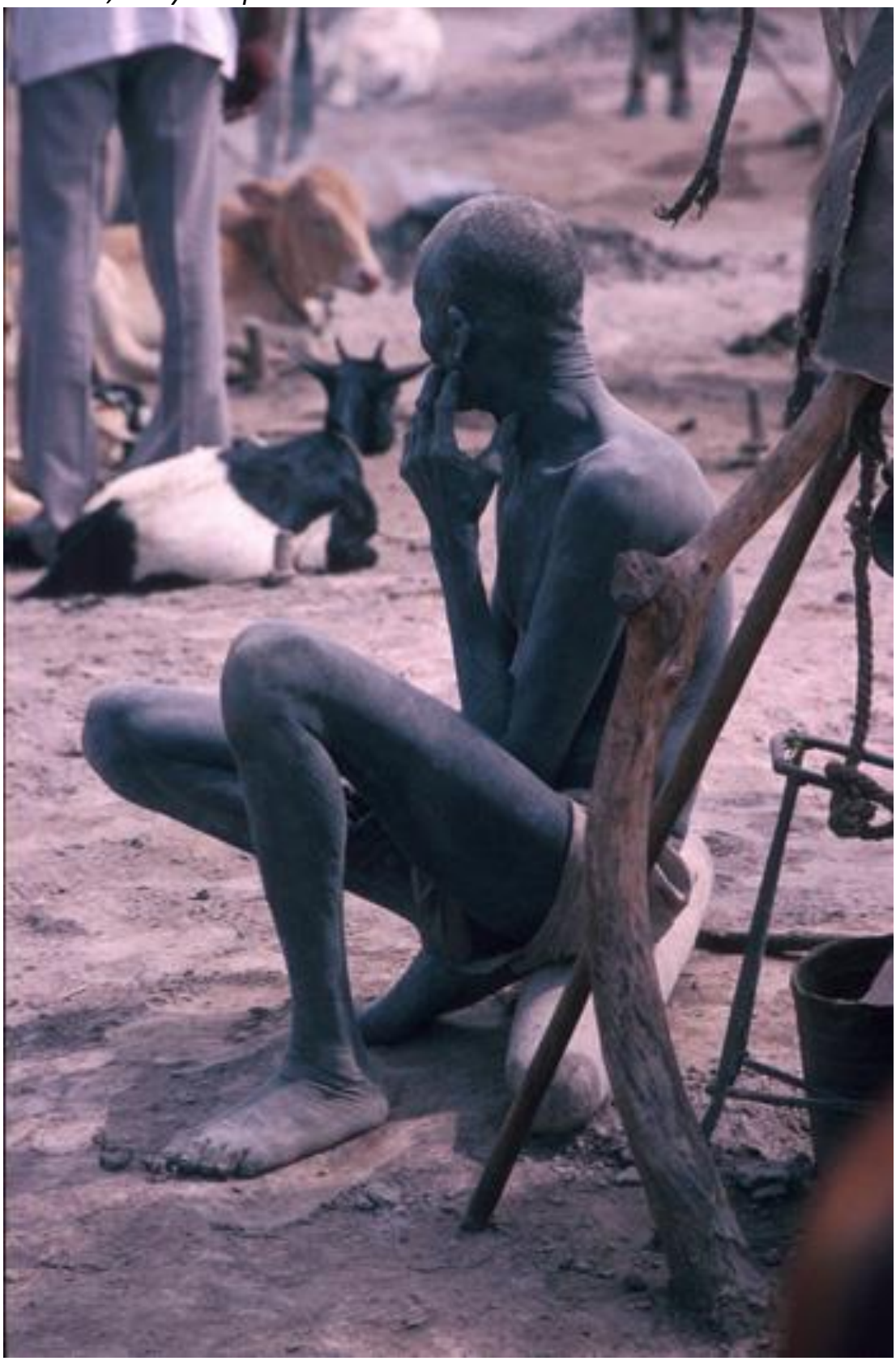


Warfare leaves behind obvious physical trauma and not so obvious mental trauma. People affected are not always able to undertake the many tasks needed to survive.

Displaced people

Those not killed or wounded often have to move away from their land and from the places they know and understand. They become ‘displaced’, moving with their possessions in search of security.

Old man, dairy camp



These changes are occurring fast, and leave people disorientated. The normal flow of information between generations is disrupted.

AID

When people are starving to death, clearly there is a humanitarian need to provide assistance. Unfortunately it is not always easy to provide this assistance sensitively. Aid itself can become a weapon. There is no simple answer to the question of how to provide assistance to communities without further destroying those communities in the process.
Nevertheless, many organisations are now trying to deal with 'relief' and 'development' together, as part of the same process, and recognise that there is useful work to be done in conflict resolution and in the management of trauma. They are aware of the danger of aid undermining surviving local markets; and try to support local institutions as far as is practical. Local participation (of ordinary women and men, even children, as well as community leaders) is seen as one way to move ahead constructively.
The following photos show different aspects of relief and development work in South Sudan.

Unloading a Buffalo aircraft

For political and physical reasons, most aid into South Sudan has to travel by plane, making the aid programmes very expensive.

Buffalo aircraft tail

Emergency food aid: Sharing a biscuit

Food camps, though they get much publicity at times of extreme stress, are but a small part of the work that is being done by non-governmental agencies in South Sudan. Nevertheless, for victims of war, they are a lifesaver.

Livestock programme: Rinderpest vaccination 1

Livestock programmes in South Sudan can be successful and popular. Local people are extremely knowledgeable about their animals and know that keeping them alive is the way to keep their families and communities alive. The livestock programme described here primarily trained local community animal health workers to vaccinate the animals of their own communities against Rinderpest. Rinderpest was the world's worst disease of cattle. A severe outbreak of Rinderpest could kill 90% of a herd within a few days. The community animal health workers are also trained to use some other vaccines and drugs, to complement their existing local treatments, knowledge and skills.

This slide shows a cow being vaccinated against Rinderpest, and having its ear marked to show that it has been vaccinated. The Rinderpest vaccination campaign in South Sudan, carried out under extremely challenging conditions, was successful. The disease was eradicated from here and the rest of the world in 2011. Rinderpest was one of the most feared veterinary diseases worldwide, including Europe in earlier times. It is the first animal disease virus to be eliminated from the world.

Livestock programme: Rinderpest vaccination 2

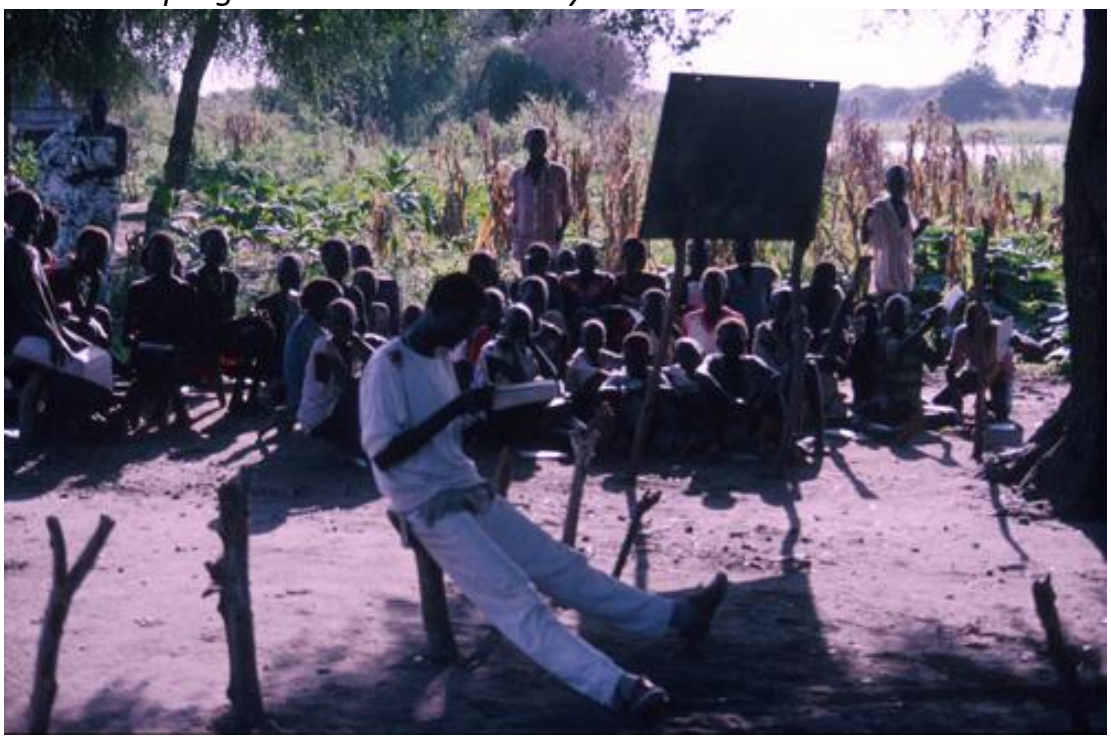
Water programme: A village water pump

Water programmes help to construct wells and boreholes from which people can get clean drinking water year round. This is important for human health as dirty water can carry diseases and parasites. In some places, water programmes also train local people in pump maintenance so that they can then look after the boreholes themselves.

Health programme: Morning light and mosquito nets at a village hospital

Human health programmes tend to concentrate on teaching primary health care. An example of this is the use of oral re-hydration salts for children with diarrhoea.

Education programme: School class by river



Education is very popular as people recognise it as a hope for the future. The challenge is to make it appropriate to the local way of life.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Despite the misery of ongoing conflict in South Sudan, there is still hope for the future. What is surprising about South Sudan is that most people have not become overwhelmed by circumstances. There is tremendous human potential. People are community minded, work hard, and want to move on. People still take an active interest in the outside world, children still play, people make music and dance, and there are a lot of bright little children looking for an opportunity to progress.

Dancing

Playing football

Piper

Boys in wheelbarrow

Little boy

A little Dinka boy with stick

Ash covered to repel insects, this little boy plays with a stick.

What will the future be like for this little boy? The under development and conflict in South Sudan remains a tragedy. Nevertheless, Nuer and Dinka culture is strong, and people remain proud of their way of life and of the skills they need to live in this harsh but rewarding country. People remain hopeful that the conflict will eventually abate and that when it does, they will have more control over their future. Education and access to impartial information are valued and seen as a way by which communities will eventually be able to take a more active role in the wider world.

Bird on a wire

This is a ‘Red Bishop’ (‘*kec kec*‘ in Nuer). While large mammals remain only in isolated pockets, victims of war, easy prey to easily available modern weapons, birds, each a symbol of freedom and hope, are stunning and abundant in South Sudan.