

DISPLACED TASTES

Migrating with Seeds

Women, agricultural knowledge and displacement in South Sudan

BY ELIZABETH NYIBOL



The author, Elizabeth Nyibol, at a X-Border Local Research Network event.

Displaced Tastes is a research project run by the Rift Valley Institute in partnership with the Catholic University of South Sudan under the X-Border Local Research Network. The project examines the changing tastes for food in South Sudan in the context of the country's economic transition and place in the regional, cross-border economy of grain. In this piece, Elizabeth Nyibol describes the life-story of her aunt, Mary Ajok Wetkwoot, who throughout her life has demonstrated a commitment to growing the indigenous grains of her Dinka community—varieties of sorghum and millet—which she carried with her while living much of her life in displacement. The account shows how Mary, like many other Dinka women, deployed the social and material capital of seeds under her control to manage the wider transitions experienced during South Sudan's decades of war.

Mary Ajok Wetkwoot Malual was born in 1961 in Rumbek East County, Lakes State. She is the mother of five children—three sons and two daughters—and happens to be the sister of my mother. Mary left Rumbek in the early 1980s because of aerial bombardments during the Second Sudanese Civil War and, after settling in Wau for two years, she crossed into northern Sudan. She first tried to make a home in Khartoum, but finally settled down in Kassala. When she first was displaced from Rumbek, she travelled with a small black bag containing her favourite sorghum and millet seeds, which she planted in every location she was displaced to.

By the time I was born, Mary had already left her family home and I first met her in 2010 after she returned from Kassala to Rumbek. My grandmother had already planted images of Mary into my mind and spoke about her exceptional beauty and how she was the tallest amongst her daughters. I came to know her as a loving and kind-hearted person born into a family dominated by women. Even before meeting her, I felt a strong connection to Mary because I myself am also born into an all-female family.

Mary was renowned amongst my family as a knowledgeable and hard-working farmer. Mary's family had the reputation of being exceptional farmers and she is also considered to be a store of agricultural expertise, which is highly valued in her community. When I interviewed her, she had once again resettled from Rumbek and was living inside Giada, one of the military barracks in Juba, with her children and daughters-in-law. She had claimed a small corner of the barracks where she was growing indigenous varieties of sorghum and millet. Although she had carved out a space for her agricultural activities, she expressed a longing to return to her vast ancestral land in Rumbek, to farm in the soil that she grew up in.

Transferring seed knowledge across generations

Women in Mary's Dinka community, play an important role in seed selection and cultivation. Women hold knowledge about crops that work for different levels of rain and under different climatic conditions. They are also responsible for storing and keeping seeds for the next agricultural season. Women make choices between short and long-maturing seeds and know which seeds are drought-resistant. Women carry the social responsibility to teach their young daughters how to differentiate between different seed varieties and how to select and keep seeds. They are also involved in harvesting, threshing and storing grains for daily consumption. Women pass on this knowledge to their daughters to carry to their new homes when they marry into their husband's family.

The role that women play in managing seed storage and knowledge is an old one, which is part of their responsibility to ensure food security. Mary's life story shows how despite episodes of displacement and migration, she carried this responsibility and transplanted both actual and metaphorical seeds in different locations to the benefit of her family and community.

The gendered redistribution of seed knowledge

Gendered divisions of labour differ between communities in South Sudan, but there are also significant differences within the same social groups depending on the composition of families. Mary comes from a female-dominated family. In such families men generally do not hold the same knowledge about seed selection and storage as women. In Mary's family, the elderly women took up the role of organizing cultivation, which is usually assumed by men. This is different in families that are dominated by men. In Dinka communities, these families work harder to cultivate every year so that they generate more surplus harvest. This is then exchanged for animals such as cows, goats and other livestock. The exchange of grains for cattle is necessary for these sister-less families to acquire the dowry needed to marry a wife.

Generally, brothers depend on their sisters' dowries. In all-male families this dependence on female family members for bridewealth is covered or supplemented by agricultural productivity, which allows families to purchase the cattle they need to build the dowry they provide to the family of the bride. Thus, they become learned in the process of selecting, storing and preparing seeds for cultivation. In a male-dominated family, the grandmothers and mothers pass on this agricultural knowledge to their sons before this otherwise female task is taken over by the young brides who marry into this family. These young men are sometimes called *abuot-bai*, which means someone who stays at home and who is not familiar with cattle camps.

Agricultural surplus has always been an important strategy for people to become more cattle-wealthy. Stephanie Beswick shows that cattle, which come into the ownership of families through the exchange of agricultural surplus (as opposed to dowries), are perceived as a 'more stable form of property'.¹ This is reflected by the names that are given to cows acquired in this way. For example, the names *nyankech*, which means the daughter of sorghum, and *riel pou*, meaning strong-hearted (reflecting the hard labour that went into creating the surplus), are often used. They remind the owner of the particular grains that were used to purchase the cow in question.

More recently, cattle that are bought by educated people through the salaries they earn from official employment are referred to as *nyangalam* (the daughter of the pen), symbolizing the value of education—a different trajectory through which people may acquire cattle-wealth. Sharon Hutchinson's work on sister-less families in Nuer areas bears out this observation. She argues that in the 1980s a distinction between the cattle of money and the cattle of girls emerged. In other words, a difference had become apparent between the use of cattle as dowry to procure girls as wives, and the use of cattle as a means of exchange for services and goods (cattle as money).²

Secrecy, seeds and displacement

Traditionally, Dinka people stored grain in calabashes. These calabashes bear the name *apuor-koth*, or the calabash which holds the seeds for cultivation. These calabashes contained short-maturing seeds which helped people to settle quickly after displacement, as well as some long-maturing seeds to which people hold a strong moral attachment because they are used in different rituals.

New fashion styles, which began to emerge in the 1920s, allowed for new techniques of seed storage. During the British colonial period, Arab merchants brought black cloth (*alenth-chol*) to Dinka areas. Black cloth was one of the first things that Dinka people bought because black is considered to be secretive or inconspicuous. Traditionally, married Dinka women wore bark or leather skirts, or loincloths, and unmarried Dinka girls wore no clothes. In the old days, mothers sent daughters to the forest during their periods so that they would not be seen bleeding. Girls and women began to use this black cloth during periods to allow them to stay around the home and work normally instead of going to the forest and hiding from the public places where their domestic chores were performed.

Black cloth became intimately linked to agriculture when people began to store their valuable seeds in small pouches, strung with a cord, made from this imported black cloth.³ Calabashes did not entirely disappear from the landscape of seed storage, but people used the two methods of storage together. The *këëth-chol* (black bags) were kept inside the calabashes, but when people were forced to leave their homes they would only grab the black bags and leave the calabashes behind. Calabashes are fragile and can break easily and cloths were considered to better preserve seeds (especially rare and favoured seeds). The black cloth also allowed people to carry seeds in a less conspicuous and visible way.

Sorghum and cattle-keeping

Sorghum is one of the oldest crops in north-east Africa. It was once collected as a wild crop, and was probably domesticated around 10,000 years ago, by people speaking languages related to the Nilotic ones of today. Sorghum cultivation probably helped in the development of the agro-pastoralist system—it was the highly successful mix of cattle-keeping and cultivation that likely helped ancient peoples expand food production and population size.⁴

Botanists divide up different varieties of sorghum into different ‘races’—something bigger than a strain, and smaller than a subspecies. The distribution of these races tells us a lot about the migration of seeds and of people in the history of the region. Two of the basic races of sorghum are *Sorghum bicolor bicolor* and *Sorghum bicolor caudatum*. *Sorghum bicolor bicolor*, a sweet-stalk variety, has the widest geographical distribution, which suggests it is the oldest variety.

South Sudanese strains of these sorghum races have not been classified, and the words used to describe them come from many languages. Travelling with seeds is a very old story. What we do not yet know is whether it was women who were in the past responsible for carrying seeds, or what techniques of storage and transportation were used. But there is some evidence that South Sudanese cultures link sorghum cultivation to women. For example, a proverb of the Nilotic-speaking Jie people says: ‘Sorghum is the cattle of women.’⁵

Sorghum and Dinka rituals

Despite their perceived preoccupation with cattle, grain continues to hold a central position in Dinka pastoralist communities. One of the most favoured sorghums grown by the Dinka is known as *kech* and is unique to the groupings living in the former Lakes State. *Kech* is a nutritious, flavourful, satisfying sorghum and not only has an important caloric value and is consumed daily, but also figures significantly in rituals, involving both raw and cooked preparations. *Kech* is grown as part of the cattle economy and wherever Dinka people live the two cannot be separated because they are an integral part of their lived history. *Kech* is used

to make *wal wal*—a parboiled or parfried sorghum cous-cous—which can be eaten or cooked easily far from home, for example in cattle camps.

Kech also plays an important role in Dinka ceremonies connected with marriage and the birth of children. *Aweir-piu* is a ritual that is performed to officially introduce the bridegroom to the family of the bride and allow him to eat in her house. Raw *kech*, *awuou* and other seeds are put in milk and placed in the mouth of the bridegroom. *Kech* flour is used to cook *cuin*, a thick porridge, and is eaten with milk or any other sauce.

Cheek meth is a naming ceremony of a new-born child in which *cuin amok hoong*, or thick porridge cooked with ghee is preferred. *Cheek diet* is a special celebration organized after the birth of twins. Long-maturing white *kech*—*laywaya*—is put in the mouth of the gathered elders and family. People are asked to spit it out and distribute it around the compound for birds to eat. This is based on the belief that twins are the cousins of birds because birds, unlike people, usually lay two eggs.

All the varieties of *kech* under grey (*lou*), or white (*mabor*), coloured grains are used for *muoot ajoon*, or the first shaving of the hair of the baby, which happens three months after birth. The family of the newborn baby invites all the family members, relatives, friends and neighbours to attend this ceremony and the older women take the lead. They come to the home of the newborn and prepare the white beverages. Younger women are asked to prepare *kech* flour. The older women will do the shaving. They are believed to be pure, lucky and expert in shaving off the hair from the newborn baby, and also blessing him or her to start a new life and be a successful child. *Laywaya* grains are used to ask God or smaller divinities for forgiveness in a storm. When there is heavy rain, old women throw white grains into the storm to calm it down.

There are interesting parallels in the role of *kech* during displacement—a different kind of storm in the lives of many South Sudanese people. Mary, my aunt, learned how to travel with her favourite seeds and was able to continue to grow these indigenous grains and use them to continue to perform these significant rituals in exile.



Sorghum for sale in a market in Juba.

Migrating with seeds

When the civil war with Khartoum began in 1983, and Dinka areas were subjected to aerial bombardments, people migrated from their homes and sometimes took grains in their *këëth-chol*—the little black cloth bags—with them. Mary fled from Rumbek to Wau with *kech*, or sorghum and *awuou*, millet. She had a strong moral

attachment to these old grains because they had formed the staple food in her diet, but also because her community used them in rituals and they hold important spiritual, cultural and moral meanings.

Mary ended up in Kassala in northeastern Sudan and became a cook for someone with a big commercial farm. There were many Dinka agricultural workers living on northern commercial farms, who were often oppressed and lived under slave-like conditions. However, Mary was able to build a strong relationship with a wealthy Arab farmer so she could get a small piece of land to grow her favoured *kech* and *awuou* with which she migrated with from Rumbek.

Mary would eat the *kech* she'd grow with her family and mix it with the more readily available Sudanese sorghum varieties, keeping some apart for special celebrations and rituals. Many Dinka and other South Sudanese families in Kassala used Mary's grains for rituals. For example, if somebody wanted to do *cheek dieth*, a naming ceremony for twins, they would come to Mary to ask for *kech* grains. If the quantity needed was small, Mary would provide these for free. If the family needed larger quantities, she might exchange it for other food items like sugar and maize flour, which she would then use to prepare *mhou*, a locally brewed beer made of sorghum, sugar and yeast.

Sorghum and survival

In the course of her eventful life, Mary moved from a communal to a commercial system of agriculture. She tried hard to preserve the tastes and networks of the old system in the new one. By travelling with seeds, often across borders, Mary allowed people living in displacement in Kassala to keep their grain traditions alive. She has been fulfilling a similar role in Juba, where she has negotiated access to a small piece of fertile land inside one of the military barracks to continue to grow *kech*. She has not only made a name for herself in Rumbek, Kassala and Juba as a *kech* farmer, she also plays an important role in the preparation of this grain for community celebrations and takes the lead in cooking. Over the past decades, Mary has continued to transmit this farming and cooking knowledge to her daughters, cousins and grandchildren, and with the harvest of the *kech* seeds with which she first departed from Rumbek in the 1980s, she has built a reputation that spans the Sudans.

Notes

- 1 Stephanie Beswick, *Sudan's Blood Memory: the legacy of war, ethnicity and slavery in early South Sudan*, Rochester: Rochester University Press, 2004, 94.
- 2 Sharon Hutchinson, , *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War and the State*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, 56-102.
- 3 This black cloth was also used to make local beer from white sorghum and helped to separate the grain residue from the fluid. When the black cloth is used for this practical purpose, it is referred to as *dhiem*.
- 4 Christopher Ehret, *The Civilizations of Africa*, Oxford: James Currey, 2002, 66,67, 98.
- 5 A. B. L. Stemler, J. R. Harlan and J. M. J. Dewet, 'Caudatum Sorghums and Speakers of Chari-Nile Languages in Africa', *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (1975): 171.



Credits

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