Michigan State University Press

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Author(s): Stephanie Beswick
Source: *Northeast African Studies*, New Series, Vol. 8, No. 2, Special Issue: Dimensions of Gender in the Sudan (2001), pp. 35-61
Published by: Michigan State University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/41931292
Accessed: 12/06/2014 16:23

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"We Are Bought Like Clothes": The War over Polygyny and Levirate Marriage in South Sudan

Stephanie Beswick
Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana

In 1971, Kathleen Gough wrote that the Nilotic women of South Sudan considered themselves fully equal citizens. Rather than perceiving themselves as part of a corporate identity, their emotional feelings extended to a strong individual identity, or, as has been suggested, they realized the great singularity of their own self-identity.[1] Fifteen years later their perception evidently had not changed. Gathering around Pul Bur near eastern Nasir in South Sudan in 1986, Eastern Twic Dinka Ayuel Parmena Bul was listening to the radio with a group of people, including a Nuer woman. When a female, Makere Benjamin, took over as the broadcaster the Nuer lady was startled and remarked, "Is this woman so great that she can speak on the radio?" Ayuel said, "Women are presidents, for example, Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher." The Nuer responded, "Is this a republic of women alone?" Ayuel said:

> No, these women have reached a level of men in these societies. Through [Western] education and intelligence women can reach the level of men: a woman could even be a district commissioner.

The woman responded:

> If God can make me a district commissioner, on day *ONE,* I will sit in this chair and I will revenge all the nonsense you men have done to women. Then I will try to raise the woman more than the man.[2]

©*Northeast African Studies* (ISSN 0740-9133)
Vol. 8, No. 2 (New Series) 2001, pp. 35-62

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Field research among women in South Sudan today suggests that many no longer believe they are equal citizens within their own communities. They particularly resent certain key historical social practices endemic to their own cultures, specifically those that structure marriage. It has been argued that historical changes in production relations in a society give impetus to a fundamental restructuring of reproduction, followed by transformations in the nature of kinship and affinal networks.[3] I suggest that South Sudanese female discontent can be traced to this very phenomenon. The length and violence of the country's second civil war, which has ranged since 1983 and killed many men, has been particularly important in the restructuring of South Sudanese gender relations. Another factor, affecting both men and women, has been the introduction of new foreign cultures by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and Kenyan aid workers. These influences have entered both South Sudan itself and also Kakuma Refugee Camp in northwest Kenya, home to over 70,000 Dinka in 2001. These factors have led many women in South Sudan, particularly the Western Nilotes, to believe that two of their most enduring cultural practices, polygyny and levirate marriage, no longer serve them in a conjugal or even consanguineal setting.

The primary focus of this study is the pastoral Nilotic Dinka, the largest ethnic group in South Sudan; however, Azande (non-Nilotic) and Nuer evidence is also incorporated, along with some material from other ethnic groups. The study specifically addresses polygyny, levirate marriage, adultery, and divorce; other related topics, such as "women marriage," lie beyond its scope. A number of the women cited here gave their opinions on condition of anonymity; hence, their full or real names will not appear.

The Setting

Polygyny and Levirate Marriage: Definitions and Importance in Western Nilotic Society

Polygamy in any culture is marriage in which a spouse of either sex may possess a plurality of mates at the same time. Polygyny, the subject of this paper, is the practice of having more than one wife at one time. Here each wife and her children form an economic subunit with

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a separate kitchen, fields for food production, and cattle. Each extended family is embedded in a sociological structure characterized by networks of wider economic and political obligations based on kinship ties. Nonetheless, most households are self-sufficient economic units producing their own food, housing, and other necessities. Until recently, a large family was highly respected in many African communities.[4] Of importance here is that in many African societies today, including the Dinka, the term "wife" has two basic referents: a female married to a given male (or female) and a female married into a given compound or lineage.[5] Thus, this type of marital social organization is communal, rather than composed of nuclear family units.[6]

An extension of polygyny is the practice of levirate marriage, an ancient custom mentioned in the Bible.[7] According to this practice, should the husband die, the parents of the dead man select one of his brothers to continue procreating with the widow in the dead man's name. In Dinka society a prospective husband pays bridewealth in cattle, often via a bidding system controlled by the prospective father-in-law. The highest bidder usually acquires the woman, and the bridewealth is made in a series of payments over an extended period of time. Under the system of levirate marriage, if a man dies before having paid all the bridewealth, one of his brothers acquires the widow and continues making payments to the woman's family.[8] Thus, a woman's procreative capabilities are never "wasted," and she is never without a husband to care for her and her children.

Levirate marriage is not practiced by all polygynous African families today, and the usage has died out in many cultures, including a number in South Sudan. Among most of the Western Nilotes of this region, however, particularly the Dinka and Nuer, the practice continues to be observed, largely because the acquisition of many wives is important for the Dinka socioeconomic lifestyle.[9] Until recently, according to Ciec Dinka Cagai Matet Guem, the adage was that "many wives shall bring forth many daughters who shall be married with [in return for] great numbers of cattle." Yet these kinship systems do not merely exchange women; they also exchange sexual access, genealogical status, lineage names and ancestors, rights, and people. They bind men, women, and children into concrete networks of social relationships.[10] Historically,

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polygyny has been critical to the successful economic, political, and ethnic expansion of the Dinka within the southern Sudan region.

The Importance of Polygyny in South Sudan's Ethnic and Political History

The Dinka provide eloquent confirmation of Sandra E. Greene's thesis that when considering precolonial Africa, gender studies and ethnicity cannot be understood in isolation from each other.[11] Historically, the Dinka were not indigenous to South Sudan; rather they migrated into their present homelands centuries ago from what is now northern Sudan.[12] Rapid Dinka ethnic expansion into the south took place within a few centuries, largely because the bridewealth of these Nilotes was higher than that of their surrounding neighbors. Thus, expensive Nilotic wives were accessible primarily to other Nilotes, who, however, could also more easily afford to acquire additional non-Nilotic wives. Over time, the Dinka expanded ethnically at the expense of many of their surrounding neighbors, and in so doing they decreased the pool of marriageable non-Dinka women on their periphery. Within a few centuries the Dinka had become the largest ethnic group in South Sudan, and indeed in the twentieth-century Sudan nation as a whole.[13] Thus, the age-old Dinka polygynous marriage customs were always critical to the community's later political, military, and economic power in the region. With the coming of British colonial control to South Sudan in the early twentieth century, however, marriage patterns everywhere saw changes. Among some ethnic groups the changes were drastic, while in other cases the effect of the colonial regime on gender relations was more limited.

The Colonial and Post-Colonial Era Up to 1983

Throughout Africa European colonial rule tended to bring about the physical separation of African men from their families, to lower the age of first marriage for men, and to delay the onset of polygynous marriage. The length of time between acquisition of the first and second wives increased. But South Sudan was not a settler colony, a mining colony, a large plantation colony within reach of large cities, or one of peasant agriculture.

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Rather, in scholarly terms it was a "Cinderella" colony held primarily for strategic purposes, where little development or urbanization occurred.[14] Access to the legal system became easier for most women in South Sudan during this era. British administrators, however, often enjoyed considerable discretion within their own districts. Thus, each South Sudanese ethnic group had a unique colonial experience.

Nowhere in South Sudan during the British colonial period were society and gender relations more affected than among the non-Nilotic Azande, who reside in the southwest. British views of sexual morality and marital relations thrust on these folk aided in the eventual social breakdown of their nation. At the beginning of the colonial period British administrators perceived that Azande women had no legal rights. Adultery was dealt with sternly; for example, they noted that if the oracle told a husband his wife had deceived him he would flog her without qualm, even if she was pregnant, in order to ascertain the name of her lover. A wife might claim divorce if excessive ill treatment occurred; however, prior to the twentieth century legal recourse was open primarily to men and only rarely to women. Hence, it was virtually impossible for a woman to obtain a divorce. Within this society a broken marriage was regarded as a shameful thing.[15]

Early in his career, British administrator P. M. Larken determined to take steps that would lead to the emancipation of Azande women. Thus, he implemented his "Women's Charter," which he believed would reduce the "appalling amount of adultery," improve the lot of women, and make them happier in married life. The Women's Charter went into effect in 1915. It restricted child marriage, forced marriages, and the temporary exchange of wives. It also introduced the idea of paying money for bridewealth instead of spears. Marriages within the ruling clans were prohibited, and women could no longer be used to pay damages. Lastly, Larken changed the nature of punishment for adultery from mutilation or death to imprisonment and fines.[16]

On the face of it these new rulings were positive, and the effect of the administrative restrictions and changes in marital laws appear to have made the court system more accessible to women. In the long run, however, the British interference in Azande marriage customs was disastrous. The substitution of money for spears as bridewealth caused breakdown

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of marital stability; over time women became concerned that their marriages were not legitimate, as money lacked the religious symbolism of spears. The ultimate result of all the changes was not what Larken had hoped for—adultery increased rapidly and divorce, which in the past had been rare, now became common. As women were in demand due to a shortage of nubile females, it became easy for them to contract another marriage. In time the region saw the spread of syphilis and other venereal diseases and ultimately the massive depopulation of the people. Since the Sudan became independent the Azande population has decreased by 75 percent, largely due to disease.[17] In the meantime, cultural factors remained that impeded the real emancipation of Azande women, including continuing violence, unfair division of labor between husbands and wives, and continuing precolonial sexual and religious norms. These factors all clashed with the women's newfound "liberation."

The British also implemented changes affecting gender relations in other parts of South Sudan. Of the few ethnic groups to have been studied in depth, the Nuer have commanded the most interest.[18] According to Sharon Hutchinson, rural divorce rates surged among the Western Nuer between 1936 and 1983 because of changes introduced into the Nuer social structure. No comparative in-depth study exists for their close but far less studied Nilotic neighbors, the Dinka. Thus, for now, one must rely entirely on the memories and perceptions of the Dinka themselves.[19]

According to elderly Dinka females, the British had less impact on their society than on that of the Nuer and Azande. For example, a 65-year-old female Bor-Gok Dinka, Akec Mayom Mac, states:

> Divorce was different in the British period. Today it is now easier. In the British period you went into your house once and for all. Adultery was not rampant. Today, this generation comes with different ideas. Now there is more adultery.

Further, many Dinka claim that radical changes within their society only came with the onset of the second civil war in 1983. A Pakam Dinka medical doctor, Stephen Anyaak Col, remembers that prior to the second civil war adultery was much rarer because cultural deterrents

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among the Dinka were still powerful. For example, when a married female slept with two men and became pregnant, the midwife and other older women bullied the offending woman during labor, threatening, "If you sleep with more than one man you will die with your child; better to say the name of the person/s now." Further, prior to the second civil war Dinka women who deserted their husbands were considered prostitutes even if they did not commit adultery. If they visited other people, the community would burn their footsteps leading up to their houses because they believed it brought bad luck.[20] Thus, throughout the British colonial and the post-colonial period on up to 1983, Dinka social checks were still a powerful force, and society as a whole controlled women's sexuality. Since 1983 and the beginning of the second civil war Dinka gender relations have undergone great upheaval. I suggest that part of the answer to this phenomenon can actually be traced to the first civil war (1955–1972) in South Sudan.

The Rise of Individualism, Class, and the Forced Independence of Women

By the time much of Africa acquired its independence in the 1960s, the South Sudanese were in the process of a long civil war against the northern Sudanese Islamic government. The issue on the southern side pertained to autonomy from northern colonial aggression dating back centuries. The fighting lasted 17 years and ended with the Addis Ababa peace agreement of 1972.

During this first conflict, a few women broke with their cultural tradition by entering, for the first time in the twentieth century, the front lines of the military. Using modern weapons, some achieved the rank of officer; the best known was an Agar Dinka, Ager Gum, who soon distinguished herself as the most prominent military female in South Sudan.[21] According to her close friend, Agar Dinka Mary Acuoth Dhel:

> Many women entered the military in the 1960s and got killed. Ager Gum . . . was one of the few to survive. She is six foot tall and "big." It began when she lost three children, leaving one alive. In Dinka

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> culture this is bad . . . and her husband divorced her. So her husband gave back all the cows. She remained only with her son called Col. Her babies died because of the lack of medicine and no vaccinations. She then said, "I will do something great so my husband will see that he has not made me miserable." She did not know what do with her life and she never wanted to marry again. So she decided to join the men in the bush. She was then about 27 years.[22]

It has been suggested that during and after the Nicaraguan civil war, where the Somoza regime was overthrown by the Sandinistas, women gained more through the revolutionary process than their male counterparts, politically, socially, and economically.[23] By all accounts South Sudanese women's experiences paralleled those of Nicaraguan women. Ager Gum, for example, acquired the right to remain unmarried, for being in the military differentiated her from other women by making her an honorary male. Thus, this era marked the beginning of South Sudanese women breaking away from a life limited only to marriage in a rural environment.[24] By the end of the first civil war, some military women found they had new options beyond the home, both in politics and in a heretofore nonexistent job market.

The Peaceful Decade of the 1970s: Women in the Labor Force, Politics, and Individualism

The 1972 Addis Ababa peace agreement between Northern and Southern Sudan contained many Western-oriented proposals for Southern folk, including the principle that all citizens should have equal rights and duties before the law without discrimination based on race, national origin, birth, language, sex, or economic and social status. For the first time a number of Southern Sudanese women entered the formal job market and earned salaries. Former military recruit Ager Gum, for example, served as chief warden of the prisons in Rumbek.[25] A Madi woman, Anne Itto Leonardo, who now holds a Ph.D., attended the University of Khartoum in the 1970s; after graduating she went to South Sudan and acquired a job in the Regional Ministry of Agriculture. Later she joined the University of Juba. Her perceptions of life at that time

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were that "I worked myself out of this femaleness. . . . I also saw myself as [being as] strong as a man."[26]

The introduction of a Western political system also opened the gates for women's political leadership. Approximately 20 female government officials were elected democratically to the Southern parliament, including Mary Sireesio, Deborah Agok Deng, Angelina Bol, Yar Arol, Alma Jereas, medical doctor Frasquila Nyang, and Mary Bassiouni.[27]

These changes in politics and economics or "production" gave way for the first time to a restructuring of marriage systems and a decline in the observance of large kinship networks among the new white collar strata. Arranged marriages declined as personal choices among young men and women increased. A number of Dinka began to perceive themselves as a class above their fellow cattle pastoralists and tended toward an individual rather than corporate lifestyle. Often they married across ethnic lines against the wishes of their elders. For example, a Dinka man who became a white-collar worker fell in love with a Western-educated Bari woman. From the beginning, class, the woman's advanced schooling, the values of rural versus urban peoples, and the woman's salary were in dispute within the larger family networks. She recounted:

> I met my husband at the Malakiya in Juba in 1978. My parents said, "Do not marry a Dinka," but I insisted. Traditionally there are a lot of things about the Dinka that differ from our people. . . . We see the Dinka as uncultured cattle keepers, not cultivators [such as the Bari]. They live in the forests and cattle camps. They have these extended families. This is hated by our people. . . . They pay less for us than for Dinka women . . . they get us very cheaply. So my parents refused my marriage to this Dinka man. . . . My father said, "Continue with school." But I had no interest because the language of instruction was Arabic . . . so I went to work as a telephone operator. . . . I had another boy from my village who wanted me for a wife. I said no. In the end my father gave up and demanded my prospective Dinka husband pay him money and four cows as bridewealth. . . . Today my children are fully Dinka. The family of my husband did not approve of me and wanted their son to get a second wife to stay in the village with them and cultivate and look

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> after the animals. They said to him, "You marry a woman for the community: you have married a town lady just for yourself. This is bad." In the Dinka village . . . women have no voice. My income in the town came straight to me and not to my husband's family."[28]

The Bari woman and Dinka man however, had a very happy marriage and weathered the storm within their larger extended families until the second civil war.

The Second Civil War: Increased Violence, the Loss of Numerous Men, and Flight to Kakuma Refugee Camp

By the beginning of the second civil war (1983), a number of South Sudanese women were already exercising their newfound options in life thanks to the relatively affluent and peaceful 1970s and the emergence of a nascent, if small, white collar class of bureaucrats and business people. In this era the founding of the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) to fight the northern Sudanese government forces saw women's military participation increase considerably over that of the first civil war. Many trained as combatants and later as administrators, thus acquiring Western education along with an enhanced self-image.[29] As one female stated, "I was free to join the movement because I was a girl and able to do what men were doing. I was a platoon sergeant up to the time I got married."[30]

For rural Dinka folk, life at the dawning of the second civil war remained calm. Soon, however, the settled routine was permanently disrupted, for there arose a level of violence far exceeding that of the first civil war. A Malwal woman, Rebecca Abuk Deng, recounted the terror of attacks on her Dinka village in the late 1980s by their hostile northern neighbors, the Islamic Baggara. The latter had formed into militias who were intermittently supported by the Northern Sudanese government:

> I stayed in the village and never saw the town. . . . The daughter of my aunt was taken by the Murahaleen [Baggara militias who seize young women and sell them into slavery in the north]. Then they took my brother who was 25 years old by force to put in the

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> Khartoum army. My sister was killed after chasing after her stolen child. They killed my husband also. I was left with the five children and ran to Itang.[31] My son died in that place. . . . [T]hen I delivered a daughter but had to run back into [South Sudan] Punyudu and then up to Pochalla.[32] . . . When I arrived in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya my daughter died. . . . She had been sick a long time.

Such nightmarish experiences of other Malwal women include that of Martha Nyedier Akok, who was also forced to flee because of Baggara attacks. Throughout her ordeal she also experienced strikes by Ethiopian soldiers with the fall of their leader Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991, as well as attacks by the northern Sudanese air force. Her account also underscores a little understood phenomenon of the second civil war—virulent intra-Southern ethnic strife, much of which is perpetuated against females:

> We fled to Ethiopia [from northwest Dinkaland] by foot. It took three months with six children. My husband came too. We carried *dhurra* [grain]. When the food was finished we ate groundnuts and grass in the road like animals. We ate the leaves of the trees and people died. But we kept going. Lions came up to us; we had no power to run or protect ourselves so the lions ate us. People slept under the trees and died. . . . When my child died in my arms I had to throw it away. When we reached Ethiopia [the refugee camp Itang, across the Sudanese border] we had many problems. Four thousand people left my home town but only about 2,000 made it. . . . In Itang there was no food from the beginning. We ate the grass and snakes. When women made alcohol we ate the remains of what was left. . . .
>
> Then when Mengistu ran we were forced to flee again because now the Ethiopians wanted to kill us. . . . When we reached the river Gila we stayed on the river banks but the water was running very quickly because it was the rainy season. Then Ethiopian guerillas came and pushed the Sudanese refugees into the water. No one knew how to swim. Small children were thrown into the river along with ladies with small children. Many died. . . . Then

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they began shooting at us. I was carrying my children. . . . After that we grabbed hold of ropes falling from trees to stop falling down the river bank. As we recrossed the border [into Sudan] the Nuer and Anyuak would beg from us. If we said no, they killed us and took our luggage. At this point I gave birth to twins on the road; there was no midwife. . . . I had one girl and one boy. There were big problems on the road. My [elder] children were carrying other people's luggage. I did not know what to do with the twins. I put them in a box the Nuer had given to me after I sold them all my clothes and went naked. . . . Then the airplanes came and the Khartoum government dropped bombs on us as we came near to [a small Anyuak town] Pochalla on the Gila River coming out of Ethiopia. We were caught between the Khartoum government . . . the Ethiopian guerillas and the Nuer and Murle. Many died in the water; many pregnant women aborted their babies and went into shock. We ran among the enemies like animals being chased.

We reached Pochalla but there was no food. We were alone and collected the bones of animals which had been dead a long time and tried to cook a soup with the leaves of trees. Many people died. Those who had clothes sold them to the Anyuak for sorghum or maize. Two days later the airplanes came and again bombed the people in the town, about two to three times a day. Many died from hunger and the bombs. Then Pochalla was captured by the SPLA.[33] After three weeks the United Nations came, bringing 13 sacks of sorghum. It was hardly enough food because thousands of people had flooded into Pochalla. Then big airdrops arrived with more food. But then the Khartoum government and the Nuer guerillas came and began to shoot us. It was now 1992 so we escaped again. There were many difficulties because we had no medicine, no food, and no water. We traveled for two months, and when we reached a small town north of Kapoeta . . . [t]he United Nations gave us medicine and food, but the Toposa attacked and shot us, killing four children. We then reached Kapoeta in the far Southern Sudan. . . . Now we got food, but after one week the airplanes [northern Sudanese government] came again and every day they bombed us. When we tried to go to the water pump they shot at us. After one

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> month they came with the army. . . . Some ran to the Ugandan border and others to the Kenyan border. I fled to Narus [near the Kenyan border] for one month. Then the Arabs [northern Sudanese army] followed and we left for Kenya. . . . Now I remain with five children [in Kakuma]. I do not know where my mother and sister are.[34]

The above account parallels that of thousands of Dinka women who were forced to flee out of Sudan under horrific, unimaginable conditions into the large refugee camp in northwest Kenya, Kakuma, which borders Sudan. They have often become detached from their close kin. When other Southerners attack them they ultimately question what the war is all about. As one Nuer widow said in disgust, "The major fighting is between the Nuer and the Dinka and the Arabs are just sleeping!" Unlike Martha above, most women have lost their husbands in the present conflict and have found themselves totally abandoned.

The Loss of Husbands and Abandonment by Extended Family

With the loss of so many men in the second civil war, many Dinka women have discovered that the age-old societal safety net, levirate marriage, has been abandoned. For example, one woman, Martha, claimed her husband was killed in 1986 in Kurmuk, yet her husband's family had never communicated with her. Thus, she had remained in Kakuma Refugee Camp alone with her children, eking out an existence on United Nations food rations. In the meantime, she acknowledged, she has become too old to be "inherited" by any of her brothers-in-law:

> If your daughter is married you have to stop [having sex]. I have to take care of my daughter's children. With our people a woman of my age cannot be married because my brother-in-law does not want the burden of my children.

As of the latter 1990s, three-quarters of the women in Kakuma were widows with no extended family support and totally dependent on the United Nations food supplies (the World Food Program [WFP] and the

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United Nations High Commission for Refugees [UNHCR]). According to one anonymous Dinka woman:

> When I got to Kakuma I had to pay men to build my hut. Two hundred Kenyan shillings for the roof, 500 shillings for the walls, and 300 shillings for the door. Those [widows] that arrive with no money sell their clothes.

Another woman claimed, "The camp does not give extra help to women with no male relatives. The rations are the same for everyone." Yet another woman stated flatly her belief that men generally didn't care about women anymore:

> In the old days the parents solved the problems of brothers-in-laws and forced them to take responsibility. But now they do not. It is chaos. The system is not benefiting us. . . . Men do not give a care about the women. The situation in Kakuma and South Sudan is all the same.

But another factor affecting many widows, particularly among the Dinka, is the refusal of first wives to accept others into what recently has become a more nuclear family. Those women with a degree of Western education or whose families previously were very wealthy perceive themselves to be a cut above their uneducated and poorer sisters and have begun to demand monogamous, companionate marriage, with fewer children and more privacy from other relatives.[35] According to one Bor-Gok Dinka woman now living in Kakuma with her children:

> In 1993 I alerted my brother-in-law that I had lost my husband. He sent me to Kakuma saying, "I will come after you!" Then he never showed his face. . . . [Today] wives do not want their husbands to acquire another wife. So many women today are totally alone.

From the perspective of an enraged first wife [Eastern Twic Dinka] whose husband had recently acquired a new young wife against her wishes:

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> Women hate husbands to get another wife. The class system is there. If you want to marry, never marry a lower class person as he will take many wives; women in the upper classes would not accept this. It is difficult to divide our love equally. Today educated girls do not accept polygyny.

Although she admonished her husband for acquiring a second wife, he refused to listen to her prior to the second marriage.

The problem of "widow abandonment" is not limited to Kakuma Refugee Camp; even within South Sudan marital customs have begun to fall apart. One Rek Dinka widow recounted:

> This new brother-in-law was not taking care of me and my children because he had his own wife. I have to build my own house; my husband's family does nothing. The system is breaking down. I am working as a cook [for an NGO]. . . . In the rainy season I will cultivate as best as I can. . . . My parents refuse to look after me and my children. Life for women was good before the war.

Another Agar Dinka woman in Akot refused to be married to any brother-in-law because she believed that even if she bore more children her extended family would not help her. Rather, she perceived that her income-generating employment with a resident NGO, however small, was more reliable. She also farmed to support her children:

> I am cultivating to stay alive. . . . Only the relatives of your husband are obligated to help you and so you are attached to your husband's family as a lifeline. But the relatives of my husband do not give support. . . . No brother-in-law has claimed me. But even if I accept him I will have more children and none of the family will take care of me anyway. [Therefore] I have refused to be married because of the budget.

The Dinka male perception is completely different. With the death of so many extended male members of their families, men have come to believe that the only security they can create both for themselves and

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their extended families lies in marrying as many wives as possible to acquire many more children. According to one Eastern Twic Dinka man, "Men marry to have children. If a man can get ten children out of one woman it is excellent." The catch here is that, as one male put it, "A woman who is not a virgin is a 'second class woman' and is worth less; the people that you marry can affect the clan's honor." Thus, men prefer to marry young virgins and not widows.

Marriage has become difficult for men who no longer possess cattle, however, as they cannot pay bridewealth. For example, many men in South Sudan, particularly the Eastern Twic and Bor Dinka, lost all or most of their cattle in 1991 in a war with the Nuer.[36] Nor are those who do possess cattle able to maintain their herds in Kakuma Camp. Thus, a practice called "credit marriage" has emerged.

"We are being devalued": The Problem of Credit Marriages

In Kakuma Refugee Camp a new system of marital bridewealth payments has come into being; it also existed in the troubled nineteenth century, but only for a limited period. Known as "credit marriage," this system is applied when a man possesses no cattle with which to marry. He goes to an elder, who documents the man's "loan" with the understanding that when the war is over and he is able to reacquire cattle, he will pay a specified amount of bridewealth to his father-in-law. These documents are sent to the chief of their districts in South Sudan.[37] According to Eastern Twic Dinka Philip Aguer Panyang, "Today you are given a girl for free and her family hopes that later payment will be made." According to Eastern Twic Dinka Ajith Bul, "A girl can be compelled against her will [to marry]; each family has to decide. She is married on credit. But if you have bad credit even marriage is a problem."

The practice is controversial, however, among both men and women. For example, the Malwal elder Kawac Makuei Mayar stated, "If you pay less for your wife she is considered cheap and she may go with someone else . . . or people will think they can take any wife away from me."[38] From the female point of view, credit marriages devalue women. The cattle exchanged for a woman in marriage directly establish her position within the corporate family and indeed correlate to

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her very value as a human being. One woman interviewed echoed the words of many:

> Dinka customs are dangerous because marriage is expensive and society does not want to change . . . but they are using girls as property. . . . Women are used as commodities.

Further, many women, both Dinka and Nuer, are concerned about the actual legality of their marriage transactions. Some women have refused to be married under the credit system (with encouragement from their mothers), only to be carried away against their will, kicking and screaming, by male relatives to the compounds of their new husbands.

Ultimately, credit marriages have led to an increase in adultery. One Nuer women observed:

> Now marriages are not well organized in the camp [Kakuma]. . . . [A] woman can easily leave a man. The Nuer and Dinka system is the same today.

Because women are now so easily acquired in marriage many Dinka and Nuer men, particularly those of high military rank (commanders), both in South Sudan and in Kakuma "are marrying so many women they are leaving their wives very unsatisfied."[39] Female informants claim that some wives do not see their husbands for eight to ten years and that adultery therefore has increased tenfold. The problem in recent years has become compounded, for if the man is killed in the war, his wives are left with no recourse. One Pakam Dinka man from a group closely allied with their close neighbors, the Nuer, had just married his twentieth wife when he was suddenly killed. His wives were both Nuer and Dinka women, which was problematic because these groups had been fighting each other within the larger North/South civil war. Hence, presently there is much animosity between his widows, who include three Dinka wives in Pibor and ten in the Nuer area. One wife subsequently moved to the United States, another to Nairobi, and one is living in Kakuma Refugee Camp. The problem was that the man concerned, who was very prominent in the war, was the only male in his

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family and his father had died at a young age. Thus, there were no extended male members to take care of the numerous widows he left at his death.

Nor are these women at liberty to remarry, as by custom Dinka and Nuer widows are barred from marrying outside the extended family. According to one of the man's widows:

> You cannot divorce in our culture. We all live with difficulties. If I meet another man he would be killed. We are bought like clothes so you stay like that without any [male] friend.... If your husband dies you go to another male relative. The woman does not choose but is informed. Women are often forced to be with their brothers-in-law. Ladies get beaten if they are disobedient because bridewealth has been paid for you.

Before the second civil war, customary courting procedure required six months for a man to get to know a woman. Now, according to informants, the time is much shorter because men and women meet without formal chaperones and parents are not present to control the actions of young family members. According to Chief Dut Malual Arop in Akot, South Sudan, "There is a breakdown in morals. Today, most of the court cases I judge concern adultery." Clan tensions in Kakuma Refugee Camp have also intensified. According to the chairman of all of the Dinka in Kakuma, Deng Dau Deng:

> Here there are no cows and now adultery has become a big deal. People make a big fuss about it, whereas in Southern Sudan people sort out the problem between families. Here it turns into clan tensions.

Women who married across ethnic lines in the 1970s have also become heavily stressed, but for diametrically different reasons. A number were horrified to discover that levirate marriage, long dead in their own cultures, was very much alive within the cultures into which they had married. Here, sex was thrust on them "by strangers" (their brothers-in-law) when their husbands were killed in the second civil war.

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The Clash of Cultures in South Sudan

In one of the few cases where a Dinka man did not abandon his dead brother's wife, it was seen by the woman, a non-Dinka, as extremely offensive. She chafed bitterly that she was now prohibited from acquiring another husband, as her Dinka children would suffer, and that in essence she was being continually raped:

> I am forced to give sexual service to the brother of my dead husband. The wife [widow] has no say in the matter. The family decides she has to comply and the man presses himself on the woman. Some [non-Dinka/Nuer] women really object violently but can do nothing. There is no support from anywhere. . . . In our culture we do not have this. I learned later about this custom after I was married. It is not possible to deny sex to my brother-in-law—my children would suffer.

With all the economic, ethnic, and political tensions of the war, Dinka men want certain aspects of society to remain the same while they have already begun to make changes in other areas. Women desperately want change to acquire security, not presently forthcoming for many widows. Western education appears to be the major point over which men and women disagree.

The War over Western Education

According to foreign observers, there is a tendency among Dinka and Nuer men to believe that only males who are educated and speak English have any significant knowledge or worth. They are considered to occupy a higher class than those with no Western education. On the other hand, many Dinka and Nuer men are strongly opposed to their women becoming educated. This belief is universal both in Kakuma and in South Sudan. According to one Twic Dinka male:

> Many Dinka men still have a low opinion of educated girls. They worry that she will be culturally changed and will not be easily

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> controlled and will marry someone with no cows; that she will learn about women's rights and human rights and get out of control.

Another Eastern Twic Dinka male stated: "If men see a woman in school . . . she will find it difficult to marry." Thus, according to a Malwal woman, Martha Nyedier Akok, "most women attend school two or three years and then get married." Further, fathers worry that education will devalue their daughters. One Bor-Gok Dinka woman recounted, "Our father used to think that if we went to school we may not be married with cows. He was afraid we may marry anyone from the Southern community." Another Agar Dinka woman from Akot, South Sudan, stated: "In Dinkaland I was a lady and the first born, so my father would not let me go to school in case I made my choice of husband against his desires and then I would be worth less cows." In this instance, as in other African countries, the rearticulation of an older cultural belief system has become a tool for the curtailment of women's choices and ambitions.[40]

Yet, according to Eastern Twic Dinka Ayuel Parmena Bul, men's attitudes toward women's education were not always negative. During the brief decade of peace in the 1970s that saw the rise of a nascent class of bureaucrats and government workers, there was actually a rush among white-collar males for educated girls. However, with the beginning of the second civil war attitudes reversed once more. For many Dinka women, the realization that they have been denied opportunities in life, coupled with a smoldering sense of outrage at being abandoned, has been the lynchpin for a strong desire for change. As one widow wistfully stated, "Now I feel bad because if I were educated I could do something for myself."

Southern Women's Resistance: Fighting Back

In Kakuma Refugee Camp and in a limited number of South Sudan's regions many women have begun to make lifestyle changes secretly, and at other times openly, without male consent. European and American NGOs and missionaries have begun to introduce elementary Western education for both sexes, and women have begun to take advantage of

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these opportunities. One Nilotic Atwot woman, who receives a small salary as headmistress at a kindergarten in Kakuma, stated:

> We want education for our female children, and mothers should have education also because it is very important. We have adult education for men and women now, and I want my children to be [Western] educated. This is the best way. In Sudan no one wanted women to get educated but it is very important for us.

Many mothers are developing a defiant attitude towards acquiring Western education for their daughters. An Agar Dinka from South Sudan said regarding men's overall denial of Western education for women, "The advice I am going to give to my daughter is to get educated and get a future for yourself." Another Dinka mother remarked:

> The Europeans know the usefulness of [Western] education. What I can do for my parents is bigger and better than owning [being worth] cows which [at marriage] my father can get from my husband. But because our people are primitive they think dowry is the biggest thing they can get out of us. You can be married with a hundred cows but in the end, education yields more fruit.

Another Malwal Dinka woman who is studying English in school declared proudly that although she had just started her lessons she was later "going to study geography and history." Yet another female in Kakuma observed, "Illiterate women want men for protection. If you are a woman of the world, you are not so vulnerable."

Most obvious among Western educated Southern Sudanese women is an enhanced sense of self-esteem and career ambition. According to one woman, "now it is better because I get incentive [a very small salary] for teaching." One female Bor-Gok Dinka teacher in Kakuma stated that she wanted to become a secretary and graduate from teaching primary school.

For women in Kakuma and South Sudan, the prospect of becoming a wage-earner by working for one of the foreign NGOs, even with very meager salaries, has introduced the possibility of an independent

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(albeit very limited) lifestyle. Thinking as "town persons" rather than as "village persons," many are defying the marital rules laid out by their own societies. Many are finding young male "partners" of their own choosing and forming a nuclear family relationship with them. For example, one widow noted that in the last few years revolutionary changes have begun both within Dinka and Nuer culture: "[Today] things have changed. There used to be a lot of consensual agreement among all family members. Now there are more unions between two people." Single mothers are now making revolutionary decisions concerning marriage for their daughters; one Bor-Gok Dinka woman in Kakuma stated:

> If my daughter meets a man and he has no money and if I sense she may leave me or commit suicide I will not demand any bridewealth when she gets married. If Western education will change the present system of marriage, that is good.

Even those women who are married or have not been abandoned by their brothers-in-law have concluded that the older Dinka marriage obligations no longer stand. Particularly in Kakuma, and to a lesser degree in South Sudan, many females no longer consider it their responsibility to bear numerous children for the extended family. Instead, they quietly are opting to use contraceptives, including birth control pills, available from NGOs and pharmacies. According to one female informant: "Officially, we have no family planning. . . . But in the camp we can get it . . . but we have to take it secretly. If it becomes publicly known, you will be in big trouble."[41]

Men have noticed the change in women, blaming it on the presence of more Western-oriented Kenyan female aid workers as well as the nongovernmental aid agencies in Kenya and to a lesser degree in South Sudan. One male angrily complained:

> Now because people are interacting with other societies and they are becoming educated, such things [troubles] come up. If a lady has a house now and she likes a man she can be with him.[42]

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Because Dinka women have come to realize that they have a right to more choices in their personal lives, they have begun appealing to the Kenyan authorities and police in Kakuma Refugee Camp and the UNHCR to intervene on their behalf against their extended families. In one case, for example, a Dinka widow in Kakuma refused to move permanently into the compound of her brother-in-law. Instead, she declared she wanted a formal divorce from him and the extended family. Her in-laws, also present in the camp, declared: "No, married is married!" The woman, however, began a relationship with another man. A Dinka court fined her 8,000 shillings for adultery, to be paid to her previous in-laws, and decreed she was to return to her previous family immediately. When the chairman of all of the Dinka in Kakuma supported this decision, the woman appealed to the UNHCR for support. She was given passage to another camp on the borders of Somalia. Eventually she pleaded her case to the UNHCR again and was granted resettlement in the United States, taking her one child from her original husband and leaving two others fathered by her brother-in-law.

Conclusion

In recent years, research among women in South Sudan, particularly among the Dinka, has shown that many have come to believe that they are unequal citizens within their own societies. A number of important issues have encouraged this change in outlook, including, as argued above, that changes in any society's production encourage concomitant changes in its reproduction. In the case of South Sudan, moreover, the loss of many men in the war and the unwillingness of their extended male kin to take responsibility for widows and older women have brought about radical social changes. One is an increasingly negative outlook by many females toward their own culture, particularly toward marriage customs. This attitude has been exacerbated by the extreme violence and length of the country's second civil war from 1983 to 2004.

Added to this, changing class and generational values, the rise of Western education, and the emergence of nascent capitalist values also have greatly affected Dinka society. Women's entrance into the military

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has imbued them with a sense of individual self-confidence that has challenged their former, more docile rural cultural behaviors. This change of outlook has led many women to begin a campaign of subtle—and not so subtle—resistance to much of their indigenous socioeconomic culture, particularly that pertaining to marriage. Because so many women have been abandoned by their extended families, many in South Sudan as well as Kakuma Refugee Camp have built new agendas for themselves, carving out nuclear family units that have veered away from their former corporate culture.

The reintroduction of credit marriages because of the lack of cattle in Kakuma and in South Sudan has left many women feeling they "represent nothing more than commodities" and has also fed a growing resentment. More and more women have started taking sole responsibility for their children, acquiring Western education, and earning small sums of money working for NGOs. They have come to realize that they are able to make choices for themselves that do not involve the wider networks of their kinfolk, particularly the men. Hitherto, in corporate communities such as the Dinka, women did not make individual decisions about their lives and children. But the very length of the war, indeed its sense of permanence, has taught many Dinka and other Southern women that permanent cultural, socioeconomic, and political changes are now necessary in order to survive.

Notes

Research for this paper was conducted in Kakuma Refugee Camp, northwest Kenya (bordering South Sudan), and South Sudan in 1996 and in the United States from 1992 to 1997.

1. Kathleen Gough, "Nuer Kinship: A Re-Examination," in *The Translation of Culture,* ed. T. O. Beidelman (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971), 118.
2. Ayuel Parmena Bul (Eastern Twic Dinka), interview by author, Kakuma, Kenya, 1996.
3. Eleanor Leacock, "Women, Power and Authority," in *Visibility and Power,* ed. Leela Dube, Eleanor Leacock, and Shirley Ardener (London: Oxford University Press, 1986); Georges Balandier, "Traditional Social Structure and Economic Change," in *French Perspectives in African Studies* (London:

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Oxford University Press, 1973), 121–34. See also Meredeth Turshen and Clotilde Twagiramariya, eds., *What Women Do in Wartime: Gender and Conflict in Africa* (London: Zed Books, 1998).

4. Jeanne K. Henn, "Women in the Rural Economy: Past, Present, and Future," in *African Women South of the Sahara,* ed. Margaret Jean Hay and Sharon Stichter (New York: Longman, 1984), 1–18; Patricia Stamp, "Kikuyu Women's Self-Help Groups: Toward an Understanding of the Relation between Sex-Gender System and Mode of Production in Africa," in *Women and Class in Africa,* ed. Claire Robertson and Iris Berger (London: Africana Publishing Company, 1986), 27–46; Filomina Chioma Steady, "The Black Woman Cross-Culturally: An Overview," in *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally,* ed. F. S. Steady (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1981), 7–40; William Josiah Goode, *World Revolution and Family Patterns* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963).
5. Niara Sudarkasa, "The Status of Women in Indigenous African Societies," in *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora,* ed. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Sharon Harley, and Andrea Benton Rushing (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1987), 25–41.
6. Ibid.
7. See Deut. 25:5–10, Genesis 38:26, and Ruth 4:6.
8. Dut Malual Arop (Agar Dinka) Akot, interview by author, South Sudan, 1996.
9. Francis M. Deng, "The Family and the Law of Torts in African Customary Law," *Houston Law Review* 4, no. 1 [n.d.]: 1–50.
10. Cagai Matet Guem, "Position of the Girl among the Dinka" (unpublished); Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women,* ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157–210.
11. Sandra E. Greene, *Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Change on the Upper Slave Coast: A History of the Anlo-Ewe* (Portmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1996), 1.
12. For a detailed explanation of Dinka ethnohistory and expansion by marriage in South Sudan, see Stephanie Beswick, *Sudan's Bloodmemory: The Legacy of War, Ethnicity, and Slavery in South Sudan* (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2004); and Beswick, "Violence, Ethnicity, and Political Consolidation in South Sudan: A History of the Dinka and Their Relations with Their Neighbors (1200–1994)" (Ph.D. diss., Michigan State University, 1998).
13. Ibid.
14. These economic descriptions are derived from the teaching notes of Jay Spaulding, Kean University, New Jersey. On the other hand, northern Sudan was administered differently, fitting more into the model of the "large plantation colony."

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15. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937); Evans-Pritchard, "The Zande Corporation of Witch-Doctors," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 52 (1932): 410; Evans-Pritchard, *Man and Woman among the Azande* (New York: Free Press, 1974); C. R. Lagae, "Les Azande sont'ils animistes?" *Sudan Notes and Records* 9 (1926): 6, 47; P. M. Larken, "An Account of the Zande," *Sudan Notes and Records* 9 (1926): 5.
16. Larken arrived in 1911, retired in 1932, and was succeeded by District Commissioner J. W. G. (Tiger) Wyld, who remained until shortly before independence; Conrad C. Reining, *The Zande Scheme* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 53–54.
17. Reining, *The Zande Scheme,* 57–63; Larken, "An Account of the Zande," 13; Stephanie Beswick, "Restructuring Marital Relations among the Azande of the Southern Sudan during the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (1898–1956)" (unpublished).
18. This includes the multiple works of E. E. Evans-Pritchard and many others.
19. A more thorough scholarly study of divorce rates, however, must follow in order to support the Dinka perception of the British colonial period. Sharon Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War, and the State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 357.
20. Dut Malual Arop interview.
21. Lueth Akec (Luo), interview by author, Ames, Ia.; Lazarus Leek Mawut (Nyarruweng Dinka), interview by author, London, England; Damazo Dut Majak (Malwal Dinka/Luo), interview by author, Los Angeles, Calif.; Atem Garang Deng and Deng Kuek Atem (Eastern Twic Dinka), interview by author, Kakuma, Kenya; Simon Malual Deng (Yibel), Mary Acuoth Dhel, and Fatna Kok Macok (Agar Dinka), interview by author; Rebecca Nyar Acien (Gok Dinka) and Ager Gum's cousin, interview by author, Nairobi, Kenya; Julia A. Duany, interview by author, Bloomington, Ind. See also S. Beswick, "Women, War and Leadership in South Sudan (1700–1990)," in *White Nile, Black Blood: War, Leadership and Ethnicity from Khartoum to Kampala,* ed. Jay Spaulding and Stephanie Beswick (Lawrenceville, N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1999), 93–111.
22. Mary Acuoth Dhel interview.
23. Harvey Williams, *Women and Revolution: Women's Changing Role in Nicaragua* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1986), no. 133.
24. For details concerning women in the military in South Sudan during both civil wars, see Beswick, "Women, War and Leadership in South Sudan (1700–1990)."
25. *Addis Ababa Agreement,* Appendix (A), 2(i); Mary Acuoth Dhel, Fatna Kok Macok, Rebecca Nyar Acien, and Julia Benjamin Duany interviews.

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26. Anne Itto Leonardo interview.
27. Mom Kou Nhial Arou (Bor-Atoc Dinka) and Deng Malwal Mabur Mahboub (Ghol Dinka), interview by author; see also Beswick, "Women, War and Leadership in South Sudan, (1700–1990)."
28. Anonymous female Bari informat, Kakuma, 1996. One of the most important developments in South Sudan during the British colonial period associated with the emerging cash economy were multi-ethnic communities called "Malakiyas," which came into existence behind shops in every southern town and continue to the present. Sudan Archives, Durham 212/13/29–35; *Sudan Monthly Intelligence Report,* nos. 306, 317, 318, February 1921.
29. Damazo Dut Majak interview; Ayuel Parmena Bul interview; John Lueth Ukec, interview by author; Lual Deng (Eastern Twic Dinka), interview by author, Fairfax, Va.; *Newsudan,* October 1986, 16.
30. Anonymous informant.
31. A camp across the Ethiopian border hundreds of miles to the east.
32. When Ethiopia's leader Mengistu Haile Mariam was forced out of power in 1991.
33. The Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army, a primarily Dinka-run organization.
34. Martha Nyedier Akok, interview by author, Kakuma, 1996.
35. This also happened in Kenya; see Luise White, "Women in the Changing African Family," in *African Women South of the Sahara,* 53–58.
36. See Stephanie Beswick, "The Dinka as 'Northern Sudanese,' the Nuer as 'Luo' and the Genesis of Intra-Southern Sudanese Conflict," in *Sudan: Dilemmas and Prospects,* ed. Mohamed Mahmoud (Red Sea Press), forthcoming.
37. Adut Ciengan (Atwot), interview by author, Kakuma, 1996.
38. Kawac Makuei Mayar (Malwal Dinka), interview by author, Nairobi, 1996.
39. Anonymous female informant.
40. See, for example, Lidwien Kapteijns, *Women's Voices in a Man's World* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1999), 156.
41. Anonymous interview.
42. Dut Malual Arop interview.

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