

## RIVERSIDE DWELLERS OF THE WHITE NILE

by *Mary Myrtle Jaques-Aldridge*

In the vast, steamy swamps which border the White Nile on its way through the Sudan are found various Nilotic tribes, and it is strange to reflect that it was not until three-quarters of the way through the nineteenth century that any reliable information at all concerning them existed. Much remains to be learned. The East bank is inhabited by the Dinka, the largest of the Nilotic tribes, while the Shilluk are found on the West bank. The Nuer occupy both banks of the river. All these tribes dwell in beautifully thatched, circular huts — many raised on piles above the swampy ground.

The territory of the Dinka extends over a vast area. It is everywhere flat, and largely swamp in the wet season — a terrain hard on man and beast. Totemism is strongly developed among these Dinka, i.e. the belief in a special relationship between a family group, or clan, and a certain animal, plant or other object. In the case of the Dinka the totem is usually an animal. If, for example, it is a crocodile, then the people of the group whose totem it is regard themselves as bound to the crocodile by ties corresponding to those of human kinship. It is tabu for any man to injure his totem animal, and many Dinka speak of it as their ancestor and refer to it in terms identical with those used for human relatives.

And what do they look like, these Dinka? In common with the other Nilotic tribes they are jet black and the men are unusually tall — about six feet three or four inches; some have been known to attain a height of seven feet. They are very thin, with spindly legs. Sometimes they look really terrifying, their faces daubed with white paint — war paint — wearing large earrings and carrying enormously long, sharp-looking spears. It is easy to believe that these warriors have no difficulty in striking their adversaries with terror. Their manners, however, are sometimes amazingly at variance with their ferocious aspect as, if one asks to take their photograph, they will giggle bashfully and pose charmingly — and then ask for baksheesh.

Some of the women wear silver bracelets from wrist to elbow, sometimes as many as thirty-nine on each arm. Others wear little or no jewellery and are clad in very drab-looking garments. These are probably married women as, once wed, they have no need to try and catch the eye of eligible young men and they relinquish their finery to their families and it may, perhaps, be worn by a younger sister when she reaches marriageable age.

The Shilluk, not nearly such a large tribe, unlike their neighbours across the river, who recognise no supreme chief, have a king who is absolute head and rules by divine right as direct descendant of Nyakong, the first Shilluk king. Like the Dinka they worship chiefly the spirits of their ancestors and, again like the Dinka, the Rainmaker is the most important member of the community. He has absolute authority and is recognised as being the earthly abode of the spirit of a great ancestor. When the Rainmaker becomes old, however, he is either buried alive or strangled and a new one elected.

The Shilluk have the reputation of being the best craftsmen of the river bank portion of the Sudan, for they are excellent thatchers and iron-workers. Beside canoes they use small rafts made of reed which resemble almost exactly those used by the ancient Egyptians. This would seem to support the theory that the Egyptians did, in fact, migrate South up the Nile.

The men of this tribe sometimes have a row of round scars, often very raised, like a string of beads, from ear to ear across their foreheads. Apparently these tribal marks are made at the age of about six years and the process of achieving them is primitive in the extreme.

A series of punctures is first made with a fish-hook, perhaps with the string attached, just as it has been used for fishing. Then a half-moon shaped incision is cut with a short, sharp knife, from one end of the fish hook punctures to the other. The blood runs down into the eyes, and is said to have a beneficial effect upon them and to cure all eye troubles, to which the natives are very subject. Soot, generally obtained from the bottom of a cooking pot, is finally rubbed into the wounds. The process may be repeated at intervals, as many as four or five times, until the desired scar effect is obtained.

The Nuer people are of the same common origin as the Dinka, who they despise for, they say with contempt, when they set out to raid the Dinka they leave their shields at home. Their system of totemism is identical with that of their Dinka neighbours, but they recognise no divine king, as do the Shilluk, and the Rainmaker has far less ritual importance. Instead they have a land chief who gives judgement in disputes, in collaboration with the old men.

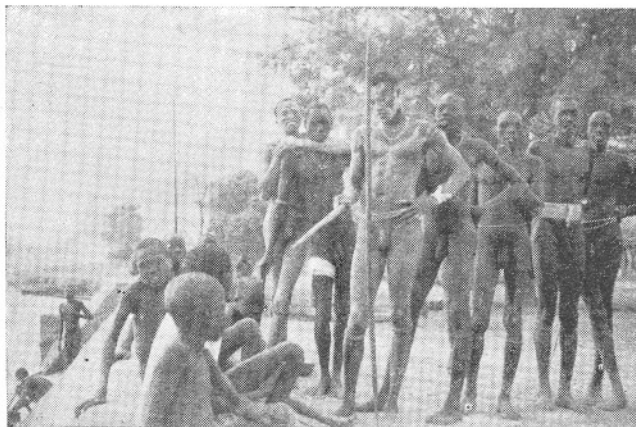
Like the other Nilotes, much importance is attached to cicatrisation and their foreheads are deeply scarred by six horizontal lines, like exaggerated frown furrows. The incisions producing these scars are made on a scale not found in other peoples and have far greater social significance, for they form the basis of the initiation ceremonies.

Parents, friends and even young girls may be present at these ceremonies which are conducted in the following manner. The boy lies on his back with his head, shaved and annointed with grease, over a hole which has been dug to catch the blood. The operator squats at his right side and, with a small sharp blade, cuts outwards from the centre of the forehead, above the eyebrows up to well over the right ear, down to the bone. This is the main incision and is the most painful, as it severs the supra-orbital nerve. The next incision is made about a centimeter above the first, and so on, until six more or less parallel lines have been completed. The left side of the forehead is then treated in the same way. Great importance is attached to the boy showing himself courageous, and they generally submit to this most painful operation with almost unbelievable fortitude. It would appear that this ceremony takes the place of the circumcision ceremonies of the East African tribes.

Some of the Nuer cattle present a very curious appearance, for they have the left horn trained across the forehead, while the right is trained to point upwards, in exactly the same way as those depicted in the



*Shilluk — showing bead-like scarring of the forehead.*



*Dinka — wood-ash covering against insects*

ancient Egyptian wall-reliefs in some of the tombs of Sakkara — another indication of the migration South of the ancient Egyptians.

It is habitual for these Nilotic tribes to go naked, their only adornment being beads — perhaps a string round the neck and another of the same colour round the waist. The fashion in the colours of the beads changes every few years. Many saunter about smoking long pipes, and the combination of nudity and a pipe is extraordinary. Many smear themselves liberally with wood ash as protection against the stings of insects.

The various hair styles of these people are very unusual. Some emphasise the hair-line with a band of orange chalk, probably brick dust, while others render their naturally frizzy hair quite straight, so that it stands out like a halo, and at the same time dye it red. This effect is achieved by plastering the hair and scalp with cow-dung, tying it up in a piece of cloth and leaving it for about three months. There daub a kind of white paste over their heads, the hair sticking up in tiny isolated knobs all over the scalp.

The women of the tribes, like the men, frequently go about completely naked. Some present a very startling appearance, with their heads shaved except for a strip of longish black hair running from their foreheads across the top of their heads to the nape of the neck. The shaved portion is dyed red. Some wear small, thick, silver rings through their upper lips, and the variety of ornament seems infinite—bracelets formed from a round section of elephant or hippo tusk; strange necklaces of beads made from large seed-pods bound together with elephant hair; and some wear huge safety-pins through their ears.

One fashion among these riverside dwellers is particularly ugly, as well as most impractical. The upper front teeth are wedged in early childhood in such a way that they protrude from the gums at an angle of about ninety degrees. In addition they are sometimes filed too sharp points. These malformed teeth are a much coveted aid to beauty.

Many, man and women alike, possess a most pungent and unpleasant odour, due to their habit of bathing themselves in cow urine. They wash all their cooking utensils in cow urine too, and this acts not only as an antiseptic, but it makes up for the absence of salt in their diet.

Those who have spent their lives among these primitive Nilotic tribes have, perhaps unwillingly, been convinced that it is foolish to assume that every Pagan custom is rooted in savage ignorance and marked by complete disregard for all moral issues. The point of view of such people, as well as their reasoning, will of course be strange to Western ways of thought. There is ignorance, bigotry, and callousness without a doubt. Many have been surprised however, at the fundamental similarity of outlook of black and white on major issues. To both it seems foolish to deny the existence of a Creator Deity; and the faith of the black is, in all probability, more vivid and unquestioning. To both justice is an ideal and the maintenances of law and order among a community desirable, if not essential.