

The Blood Brothers - Shared ancestry and identity among the Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk and Bari of South Sudan(Part 1)

By Joe Mabor



South Sudan, though officially born on July 9th, 2011, is home to around 64 tribes. These tribes are not only united by the 21-year struggle for freedom and independence but also by thousands of years of shared ancestry that can be traced back to the ancient Nile Valley. Yet, its post-independence journey has been marred not by unity, but by conflict, tribalism, and political rivalries rooted in ethnic allegiances. The narrative that pits one group against another has overshadowed the deep kinship that binds its people — blood brothers.

This article, the first in a series aimed at raising awareness of our shared ancestry and identity, seeks to ignite a cultural and historical renaissance as a foundation for national unity. I will argue for the concept of “blood brotherhood,” a bond not based on modern politics and division, but supported by linguistic and genetic evidence. Part two will focus more deeply on the origin of this shared ancestry.

Linguistic Kinship – One tongue -Liep, Many Clans

Linguists such as Joseph Greenberg, Christopher Ehret, and M. Lionel Bender have categorized most languages in South Sudan under two major phyla: Nilo-Saharan and Niger-Congo. The Niger-Congo languages include Ubangian languages like Azande, and Nilo-Saharan, the most spoken languages include Eastern Sudanic, Central Sudanic, Surmic, Daju and Koman languages with Eastern Sudanic having Nilotic languages being spoken by about 70-80% of the South Sudan population based on estimates. The

notable Nilotic languages are Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk, Anuak, Luo and Karo languages such as Bari, Kakwa, Kuku, Pojulu and Others. Central Sudanic languages includes Beli, Modo, Madi and others. I will focus more on Nilotic languages since they are the most spoken ones.

The Eastern Sudanic family (which includes Old Nubian and possibly the Meroitic language of Kush) is believed to have formed before 5000 BC. The larger Nilo-Saharan family likely dates back to the Paleolithic era, more than 12,000 years ago. However, the unity of Nilotic languages is relatively recent. Linguistic evidence points to the southeast of present-day Khartoum as the homeland of Nilotic languages, dating back to the Neolithic period (about 4000 years ago). Archaeological discoveries at sites like Kadero, northeast of Khartoum, support this, revealing evidence of pastoralism dating to 3000 BC—likely by Nilotic groups.

French Egyptologist Claude Rilly suggests the Eastern Sudanic languages emerged in southern Egypt and gradually expanded southward, where pro-Nilotic languages began to differentiate. During this time, Central Sudanic-speaking farming communities coexisted with Nilotic pastoralists and agro-pastoralists. The linguistic split between Eastern and Central Sudanic languages may date back to the Paleolithic.

The Nilotic languages started to diverge about 2000-3000 years ago when some Nilotes believed to be Southern Nilotes (such as Kalenjin, Datog and others), and perhaps the Eastern Nilotes (E.g Karo speaking groups and Masaai), moved Southward to South Sudan where they most settled. Linguistic experts believed the Southern Nilotes then split from Eastern Nilotes and moved to Uganda and Kenya. The Eastern Nilotic speaking people like Masaai are believed to have left South Sudan for East Africa from less than 2000 years ago. But this has been put to question by the archaeological study in South Sudan carried out by David K. Kay and his group which found the Nilotic evidence in South Sudan only from 400-500 AD (After Birth of Christ), in the areas that were populated before by Central Sudanic speaking people around 500 BC.

The last Nilotes to migrate out of Sudan according to Stephanie Beswick who spent many years studying Dinka, were the Western Nilotes: Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk and Luo. Evidence of Luo people is found by Kay and his group in South Sudan from around 700 AD onward. The Luo people of Jok later arrived in Kenya between 1490–1517 AD. Dinka were the last Nilotes to migrate out of Gezira region in Sudan from 1300 AD, slowly moving South with some taking Blue Nile to Kurmuk, arriving in Rumbek region in 1650 and some preceeding Northward until Abyei in 1700-1730. It takes about a 1000 years of separation for a languages to diverge and become intelligible due to geographical, social, and temporal isolation. This means that the Western Nilotic languages split recently as they slowly got isolated while people gradually migrate Southwards due to climatic conditions and possible political pressure during the ups and downs of the Kush Kingdom, and until the fall of Alodia in 13 Century AD.

Nevertheless the Western Nilotic languages share about 60-75% vocabulary with Luo languages (E.g Shilluk, Anuak, Acholi and others) having the highest similarities. Dinka and Nuer languages have lexical similarity of about 70%. It is worth noting that based on earlier Arab geographers and writers, Dekin (1562-1577), an earlier Sultan of Funj

Kindom, claimed that Shilluk and Dinka were his brothers, and that he could speak the Dinka language. This would suggest languages of Western Nilotes were even more related as late as 14 Century.

Examples of shared vocabulary among Western Nilotes and Eastern Nilotes:

English	Dinka	Nuer	Shilluk	Bari
Water	<i>piw</i>	<i>pi</i>	<i>pi</i>	<i>Pion</i>
Milk	<i>ca</i>	<i>ca</i>	<i>ca</i>	<i>Le</i>
Fire	<i>mac</i>	<i>mac</i>	<i>mac</i>	<i>Kiman</i>
Land	<i>piny</i>	<i>piny</i>	<i>piny</i>	<i>Kak</i>
Sky	<i>nhial</i>	<i>nhial</i>	<i>nhial</i>	<i>Ki</i>
Cloud	<i>puol</i>	<i>pool</i>	<i>pool</i>	<i>diko/Aduor</i>
Eat	<i>cam</i>	<i>cam</i>	<i>cam</i>	<i>Nyese</i>
Death	<i>Tho</i>	<i>Tho?Liw?</i>	<i>Tho</i>	<i>Thuon</i>
God/Spirit	<i>Nhialic/jök</i>	<i>Kuath/jök</i>	<i>Jwok</i>	<i>Ngun/ajök</i>
Cow	<i>wen / ɣɔk</i>	<i>yan / ɣɔk</i>	<i>dhyan</i>	<i>Kiten</i>
Crocodile	<i>Nyan</i>	<i>Nyan</i>	<i>Nyan</i>	<i>Kinyon</i>
Leopard	<i>kuac</i>	<i>kuac</i>	<i>kuac</i>	<i>Koka</i>

Since the Eastern Nilotic speakers split earlier from the Western Nilotes, their languages have diverged significantly but still retained some lexical similarities. Karo speakers seems to have been influenced a lot by Central Sudanic and Bantu speakers they found in South Sudan that they discarded some of their past Nilotic customs such as pastoralism and probably adapt new words.

Languages do change over time when people get isolated or interacted more with other people they met. A Good example of this can be found among Karo speakers like Bari, Kakwa and Pojulu. Even though they are the same people and practically lived in the same geographical area, their languages slightly diverged resulting separate languagea although with high lexical similarity.

Another example is among the different Dinka dialets. I am from Rumbek and I had issues understand other Dinka dialets when I first got out of Rumbek. For instance, during my high school in Kampala, I met fellow Dinka from Bor, Twic and Aweil. I wasn't able to understand fellow students from Twic and Bor, and I had difficulity understanding my friend from Aweil, even though we spoke the same language – Dinka. We literally had to speak in English to understand each other. This was just due to about 300 years of isolation aftering migating to Bahr El-Gazal as some people migrating together split. Among Bor and Aweil are people of ancient sausage tree(Rual) revering clan of Mayual, just like most Agaar Dinka. After living with them for sometimes, we could than understand each other in Dinka. It is of course also possible that the current Dinka dialects started off during Gezira days as people gradually migrated southward clan by clan. Nilotic languages would have diverged in similar manner. You can see then that the most popular languages spoken in South Sudan were just one language as late as first millennium AD, and still share very large vocabulary base as shown in Western Nilotic languages.

Genetic Bonds — Blood brothers

Genetic research supports linguistic kinship. A landmark study by Tishkoff et al. (2009), which examined over 121 African populations and 60 non-African ones, found that Nilo-Saharan and Chadic speakers formed a distinct genetic cluster. Nilo-Saharan-speaking populations from South Sudan, Nigeria, and central Chad grouped together, suggesting a shared ancestry.

“Chadic-speaking and Nilo-Saharan-speaking populations from Nigeria, Cameroon, and central Chad, as well as several Nilo-Saharan-speaking populations from southern Sudan, constitute another cluster (red)”.

Further analysis of East African populations in the study revealed subclusters aligning with linguistic divisions. Nilotic populations formed a genetic cluster distinct from Central Sudanic ones, reflecting thousands of years of divergence.

The paternal lineage, Y-Chromosome, of Sudanese populations has been studied by Hisham Y. Hassan and his team, before South Sudan gained its independence, which gave a clear picture of the DNA structure of South Sudanese. The South Sudanese populations included in the study were Dinka, Nuer and Shilluk. Hassan and his team found the following haplogroups:

- **A-M13(A3b2):** Dinka - 62%, Shilluk - 53%, Nuer - 33%
- **B-M60:** Dinka - 23%, Shilluk - 27%, Nuer - 50%
- **E-M78:** Dinka - 15%, Shilluk - 20%, Nuer - 17%

A haplogroup is a genetic classification of individuals sharing a common ancestor based on a specific genetic marker. What you can see here is a strong presence of the A and B Y-DNA haplogroups, found predominantly among Nilotic speakers and associated with ancient East African and Nile Valley populations. B-M60 is a common haplogroup for Bantu speaking populations. The high presence of B-M60 among Nuer may suggest high assimilation of Bantu speakers after their migration out of Gezira region. It is not known if Nuer/Naath were originally Luo or Dinka speakers but it is believed they migrated out of Gezira to “a barren dry land called Kwer Kwong” considered to be Southern Kordofan. Niger-Kordofan speakers common haplogroup is B-60. E-M78 is common about North African populations like Egyptians and others. Its significant presence among Nilotic speakers of South Sudan indicates either North Africa origin or significant interaction with the said populations in the ancient Nile Valley.

Anthropologists such as Peter J. Newcomer suggests that Nuer and Dinka are similar and that hundred of years of isolation and population growth led to the distinct groups. However, this is very much disputed as some experts believe Nuer were originally Luo speakers. It is important to note here that Nuer language although grouped together with Dinka and Atwot due to their high similarities, it is more similar to Luo languages like Shilluk than Dinka is similar to Shilluk. But on the other hand, Nuer and Dinka religions have the highest affinity among the Nilotics'. The bottomline is that the

shared DNA components among Nilotic speakers indicate recent common ancestry within the past thousand years.

Although I will focus on this topic in the second part of the series, I would like to mention briefly that studies have also found genetic proximity between South Sudanese and Meroitic-era Nubians, suggesting either direct descent or intermarriage in the Nile corridor. Studies from Tishkoff et al. (2009), Lazaridis et al. (2016), and more recently from ancient DNA projects in Kerma and Nubia (2022–2023), confirm that Nilotic groups in South Sudan share a unique and ancient African heritage, mostly uninterrupted by later population waves from the north or east. This also reinforces the Southward migrations of Nilotic populations from Sudan.

Reflection and Conclusion: United we stand, divided we fall

These scientific studies tell us that we are one people: we are blood brothers. Does this mean that our ancestors didn't know that we are the same people? No! Our ancestors knew themselves as brothers as attested by the oral stories. For instance, scholar Lewis Anei Madut-Kuendit documented how Dinka elders referred to Shilluk as the people of Achan, an ancient Dinka sister and knew Shilluk as Dhøg, Shilluk ancestral name. Dinka oral stories also claim Nuer to be their own brothers, apparently "Pan-Manuer Ajang" linking them to the Jieng ancestor Ajang. Dinka Agaar call Nuer, people of Nyantoch Marol, the sister of Agaar Marol. Nuer and Luo also knew Dinka by their ancestral name as "Jang/Jieng", not as "Dinka" which is a colonial era name. Such continuity in names and stories confirms our deep-rooted brotherhood.

Despite the deep genetic and linguistic unity of South Sudanese populations, modern history has painted a different picture. Picture of civil wars, political rivalries, and colonial legacies that have redefined ethnic identities as points of division rather than kinship.

Colonial rulers used "divide and rule" tactics to fragment solidarity communities, and post-independence political elites have continued this practice, deepening tribal divides for political gain. But beneath our differences runs a shared bloodline. The tribes of South Sudan are not enemies by nature—they are one people scattered by history. Reclaiming that truth is the first step toward the National healing, and toward building a future worthy of the greatness we once had as Kushites — and can do again.

In part two, we will delve into the origins of our people and explore the glorious legacy they built with rest of the African populations in the ancient Nile Valley. References used are attached below.

Joe Mabor is a South Sudanese Software Engineer based in Germany. He majored in Software Engineering from Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS in Malaysia. He currently works as Software Engineer and Technical Lead in Germany-based multinational IT company. He can be reached at jmagany@gmail.com or via website: maboragany.com

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