

Keeping in Touch via Cassette: Tracing Dinka Songs from Cattle Camp to Transnational Audio-Letter.¹

This paper explores Dinka songs as poetic autobiography, focusing in particular on their composition and circulation as audio-letters between South Sudan and the global Dinka diaspora. Drawing on current debates on mobility and belonging, the paper explores how a tradition of personal song making, which is rooted in a culture of pastoralism and localised mobilities, has been repackaged to accommodate population dispersal across continents and cultures. While ‘big’ mobilities (transacted by civil war) have caused Dinka societies to expand and grow, the paper considers how audio-letters simultaneously bring clan groups together through a combination of old cultural forms and new geographies and concerns. Through the analysis of two Dinka Bor songs, the paper explores how the immediacy and potency inflected in the sonic and poetic convention of the genre nourishes Dinka social and spatial relations and helps to define and redefine their pasts and futures. It concludes with a reflection on the ‘affiliative power’ (Suchman 2005) of the cassette, which, despite increasing access to digital technologies, has remained the song carrier of choice, and has thus become implicated in the complexity of connections, identifications and intimacies of this contemporary global cultural practice.

Key words: South Sudan, Dinka, forced migration, adaptive flux, personal songs, cassette tapes, connectivity.

Faced with the bloodless convenience of digital music, it is human nature for some people to hanker after the cumbersome, the labour-intensive and the fallible – to pause and rewind (Lynskey, 1999).

This article has its beginnings with a distorted cassette-tape belonging to a Dinka colleague in London on which was recorded a song that had been composed and performed by her uncle in South Sudan some 20-years previously. Although musically sweet and apparently mild-mannered, the song consisted of a fierce denunciation of his wife who had become involved in a series of extramarital relationships. Rather than inform his relatives about this humiliating state of affairs in a letter, however, he had chosen to make public his predicament in a song, utilizing a culturally apposite expressive medium that will allow him to communicate his outrage with the confidence that his candour would be interpreted according to

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the cultural expectations, values and parameters of this poetic discourse, while simultaneously protecting the respect and status he enjoyed within his clan.

The story ‘fast forwards’ to a meeting at the University of Edinburgh some months later, where my colleague and I had travelled to meet with partners of a research project on Dinka language and song.¹ Among those present was a Dinka researcher who had recently joined the team and was visiting from Khartoum. When the subject of Dinka song taxonomies was introduced into the discussion, I used the opportunity to raise specific questions about the cassette recording. Addressing my London colleague, I asked: ‘Would your uncle X’s song be categorised as *diet ke kér* (insult or shaming song), *diet ke waak* (cathartic song; literally meaning ‘song of bathing’) or *diet ke jiëëm* (song communicating personal feelings and information)?’² It was the Khartoum-based researcher who replied, however: ‘It could be any one of those categories’ she clarified, ‘I know that song; I have that cassette!’

The two Dinka women looked at each other in astonishment. Through their common possession of the cassette recording, it was immediately established that they – one a refugee in London, who had been displaced to Cairo as a child, relocated to Calgary under a UNHCR resettlement programme, and recently moved to London to join family members; the other a self-settled refugee in Khartoum – were from the same western region of South Sudan, knew countless people in common, and may even be related. Decades of forced removal has meant that the active preservation of kinship and ethnic-territorial bonds has become crucial amongst Dinka, both within, and outside South Sudan. Unexpectedly, a cassette recording of a song had unearthed a social connection, raising a range of questions about the multiple social, aesthetic and material affordances of personal songs in the context of contemporary Dinka global mobilities and prompting further investigation into the articulation of these issues.

This paper explores the deployment of Dinka songs as poetic autobiography, focusing specifically on their composition and circulation as cassette audio-letters between South Sudan and the global Dinka diaspora. Drawing on current discourses on mobility and belonging, the paper explores how a tradition of personal song making, which is rooted in a culture of pastoralism and localised mobilities, has been repackaged to accommodate population dispersal across continents and cultures. While consecutive civil wars have subjected Dinka migrants to new cultures, languages and livelihood practices, it argues that cassette audio-letters play an important role in support ongoing interaction – both real and imagined – between

clan members and their homeland, melding old cultural forms and technologies with new geographies and concerns.

The paper is divided into three sections: The first offers a brief outline of Dinka social, cultural and geopolitical histories against a background of civil war and forced migration. It proceeds with an analysis of two personal songs, focusing in particular on how the sonic and poetic conventions of the genre underwrite ongoing senses of time, place and belonging. Finally, it concludes with a reflection on the ‘affiliative power’ (Suchman 2005) of the cassette tape, which remains the song carrier of choice in this particular context, and has thus become implicated in the complexity of connections, identifications and intimacies of this contemporary global cultural practice.

Cultural landscapes and ‘adaptive flux’

South Sudan is located in east-central Africa and shares its borders with Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic and Sudan to the north. It is the newest country in Africa, having only achieved Independence in July 2011, following almost half a century of civil war. The population of South Sudan comprises some 63 different language groups, the largest of which is the Dinka (*Muonyieng*), a Western Nilotic people who share close social, linguistic and cultural features with a number of east-central African Nilotic groups such as the Nuer and Luo. Dinka are scattered across several states in South Sudan, most notably Bahr el Ghazal, Jonglei, Upper Nile and parts of Southern Kordofan, which remains over the new international border in the (formerly northern) Sudan. While the vast geographical distances between them have resulted in marked linguistic and cultural variation across dialect groups, there nonetheless remains an overriding sense of Dinka identity rooted in common beliefs, values and practices, and reinforced by a shared history of war, trauma and forced migration.

Dinka are distinguished by their passionate attachment to, and identification with cattle, which are inextricably linked to all aspects of social, religious and political life. As described by Lienhardt, cattle for the Dinka are ‘something to which men have assimilated themselves, dwelling upon them in reflection, imitating them in stylised action, and regarding them as interchangeable with human life in many social situations’ (1961, 27). Regardless of the effects of modernity, the monetisation of the local economy, and the socio-political consequences of population dispersal as a result of civil war, cattle remain fundamental to Dinka livelihoods, social

relationships and identities (Deng 2010, 393).

Maintaining a cattle-based livelihood in unpredictable low-productivity savannah depends on fine-tuned knowledge of livestock and rangeland husbandry, which is achieved through the implementation of a variety of herd management strategies and by regular migration between at least five grazing grounds (cattle camps).³ Adopting an opportunistic approach to management based on flexibility, mobility, diversity and reciprocity is essential to mitigate the risks of high climatic variability, susceptibility to desertification, and the constant potential for social and resource-based conflict (Fernandez-Gimenez & Le Febre, 2006, 342). While each family occupies a permanent residence on high ground, boys and men (and occasionally young girls) will move seasonally with their cattle from one grazing area to another, following a relatively predictable pattern of annual rotation.

Challenges to pastoral livelihoods brought about by exceptionally high rainfall or extended periods of aridity demand coordinated tactical adjustments that may alter annual migratory routes and orbits. Van Arsdale (1989) describes such strategic accommodations as ‘adaptive flux’, a term that usefully situates the management of space and natural resources within the long-term context of herd-related activities. What he fails to incorporate in this economic scenario, however, is the role played by social institutions and cultural practices in the management of mobile livelihoods and in navigating their adjustments. Fernandez-Gimenez and Le Febre argue that such institutions in pastoral societies are inherently invisible, contextual and easily dismantled (2006, 349). I would contend, however, that spatial mobility as a livelihood practice relies heavily on these institutions as infrastructural moorings; and all the more so when called upon to deal with exceptional circumstances. Amongst Dinka pastoralists, for instance, economic agency is promoted through networks of social relationships and clan ties that are determined by clearly articulated cultural mores, and reinforced by highly visible, prescribed forms of oral discourse. Being a good ‘keeper of words’ is a measure of wisdom, leadership, respect and good neighbourliness; a concept depicted in the word *cieng*, which conveys notions of good human relations based on attuning the interests of the individual to those of others (Deng 1973, 15). Brockelsby, Hobbly and Scott-Villiers similarly note that amongst Ethiopian pastoralists, ‘voice’ is key to competence and livelihood security and is critical to generating respect, cohesion, response and accountability: ‘Having effective voice requires mobility, particularly for men: to be seen sharing information, to be visible at important resource points (wells, grazing

areas) and to be present when decisions are discussed and made. This movement creates a complex web of relationships that connect the individual and his family and lineage to the rural and urban contexts, to markets and to the state' (2010, 36).

The Spectacle of War and Peace in South Sudan

The political history of South Sudan has followed a tortuous, though well-documented trajectory. Since achieving independence from Britain in 1956, Sudan has experienced almost continuous conflict, which has caused widespread disruption and placed considerable pressure on bordering states through demands placed on them to provide refugee assistance or operational bases for rebel movements.

According to Johnson (2000), the division between the current nation states of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan is the consequence of an accumulation of multiple conflicts in which religious affiliation and ethnicity have determined access to political power and economic opportunity, which in turn have shaped particular identities and affiliations. As with much of pre-colonial Africa, Sudan comprised numerous discrete kingdoms. During centuries of trade and migration, Sudanese in the northern region came to identify more with the Arab Middle East, while Southerners associated more closely with 'African' pastoralist groups of central and east Africa, remaining relatively unaffected by Islam, except when captured and transported northward as slaves (Fanjoy et.al. 2005, 10; Johnson 2000). This geopolitical division was structurally legitimized by the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (1899-1956), which bequeathed the civil service to the northern 'Arabs' and largely excised the Christian south from rights, responsibilities and benefits of government. Regardless of assurances made at Independence for the establishment of a more equitable federal system, growing disaffection in the south developed into full-scale insurgency in the early 1960s, aimed principally at self-determination. The civil war resulted in the death of some 500,000 southerners and the forced migration of hundreds of thousands more, both within Sudan and across the region.⁴

In 1972, following accession to power of an apparently moderate northern government, the Addis Ababa Agreement was brokered between Khartoum and the Southern Sudan Liberation Movement (SSLM), resulting in a ten-year hiatus in civil war, tenuously referred to as the 'development decade' (de Waal 2002). However, progressive Islamisation of elite politics in the North led to the gradual corrosion of the terms of the agreement, and in 1983, the whole of Sudan was declared an Islamic state, Arabic was pronounced the official national language and new civil and criminal

laws were passed reflecting an authoritarian version of Islamic law (Shinn 2004, 240). Considering these moves a unilateral abrogation of the 1972 peace treaty, the South responded by establishing the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and returned to war. The resulting conflict was far more extensive than the first civil war, lasting some 22 years, causing the death of roughly two million people and displacing an estimated five million, many repeatedly so.⁵

In 2005 a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed between the SPLA and the Government of Sudan, due partly to the conciliatory efforts of John Garang de Mabior, then leader of the SPLA/M,⁶ and a consortium of international donor countries, and impelled by a number of associated concerns such as war exhaustion, political divisions in the north, and interests in the burgeoning oil industry. The CPA provided for a six-year interim period of autonomy for South Sudan, followed by a referendum for the people of South Sudan to determine their future status. In January 2011, the South Sudanese voted overwhelmingly in favour of secession.⁷

Forced Migration and the Expansion of Dinka Rangelands

The wars in Sudan generated forced migration on an unprecedented scale, creating the world's largest crisis of human displacement.⁸ The heaviest toll on the South Sudanese took place during the second Sudanese war, when population dispersal took on a range of forms, broadly represented in this paper through a discourse of refugees and self-settled refugees. Such classifications distinguish pre-migration, flight and post-migration experiences, as well as attendant rights, struggles and opportunities.

During this period, some 460,000 refugees fled to camps in the Central African Republic, Chad, DRC, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda (Kaiser 2005, 351). One of the more extensively documented refugee experiences involved 26,000 Dinka (and some Nuer) boys, ranging between the ages of 7-17, who, fearing victimization by the northern Sudanese militia, fled on foot to refugee camps in Ethiopia. With the fall of the Mengistu government in 1991, the SPLA was compelled to withdraw all rebel forces and civilian refugees from Ethiopia. A vast majority of the refugees consequently fled to northern Kenya where they remained encamped for several decades. Some subsequently moved to Nairobi or Kampala, where they sought further education and economic opportunities. A small number (some 3800 in total) were resettled in the United States through the joint assistance of the United

Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the US State Department. Despite their access to educational and employment opportunities in the US, the overwhelming majority remain vehemently connected to their homeland, representing an often highly politicized diasporic voice and serving as an important economic resource for relatives in South Sudan via remittances (Ayieie 2011, 13).⁹

‘Self-settled refugees’ is a designation accorded those refugees who experienced almost no resettlement assistance. Amongst this category were a large number who settled in Cairo, where there remains a sizeable Dinka population to this day.¹⁰ For many, however, Cairo (to a lesser extent, Beirut and Damascus) was considered a first port of call (Lewis 2011, 80). Some, such as my Dinka colleague in London, qualified for the UNHCR asylum-to-resettlement programme, and were relocated to Canada or Australia.¹¹ A second category includes those who moved to localities in northern Sudan, where they became classified as Internally Displaced People (IDPs). Of an estimated 5.3 million IDPs, some 1.8 million settled in Khartoum, where they were relatively secure, albeit treated as servants and outcasts, and relegated to squatter camps on the outskirts of the city. Most of the remaining 2.2 million settled in socially ill-defined transitional zones bordering North and South Sudan (Duffield 2002, 84). Having lost direct access to cattle and other subsistence resources, the majority of these Southerners were dependent on wage labour and periodic relief assistance. According to Duffield, the Dinka, whose vulnerability was intensified by their perceived association with the SPLA, were particularly subject to harsh and exploitative labour relations (*ibid*).

With the signing of the CPA in 2005, and increasingly since the Referendum in 2011, a new pattern of migration has begun to occur in the form of selective return, but this process has been slow, fragmented and heavily impeded by ongoing violence in the border regions. The International Organisation for Migration estimated that by the end of 2011, some 1 million IDPs had returned to South Sudan from the north (IOM 14 September, 2012).¹² Many have been settled in localities near border areas where there are virtually no social services or economic opportunities to support their reintegration and recovery. While there has been some successful resettlement in certain towns, the sudden influx of large numbers has contributed significantly to rapid, uncontrolled urbanization. Receiving communities in rural areas elsewhere, themselves victims of extreme impoverishment due to years of conflict and neglect, have been equally strained by the influx of IDPs.

Although the South Sudanese government places great store on the return of

educated and skilled South Sudanese from the overseas diaspora, only a small number has returned to date, and most are men. In his research on US Dinka refugees, Ayieie (2011) notes that age, marital status, education and occupational success contribute significantly to the reluctance to repatriate. In spite of its status as the 5th largest East African economy - explained primarily through the production and export of oil - decades of civil war have robbed South Sudan of the opportunity to develop its infrastructure and public services, and it suffers still from some of the world's worst human development indicators (Bennett 2005).¹³

Today, the Dinka remain one of the largest displaced populations in the world (Duffield 2002, 84). A typical diasporic family would comprise one wife and her children in one locality (e.g. Omaha), a second wife and family in another (e.g. Nairobi), and a husband who travels between his various homes and South Sudan, where he is preparing for the eventual homecoming of the entire family.¹⁴ Given this profile, Dinka migrants seem to exist in a constant state of mobility; their current 'transhumance' encompassing an extended geography of seasonal migrations shaped by a not dissimilar set of livelihood needs and cultural practices to that of their pastoralist past. While South Sudan may resolutely remain 'home' for most Dinka, the world has been gathered into their contemporary rangelands.

Negotiating identities beyond the war zone

Given this context of 'big mobilities' (Adey 2010), we turn to the sensuous drivers that connect Dinka people to one another globally and examine how they are actively invoked to support an ongoing sense of social, temporal and spatial anchorage.

It was my colleague in London who first alerted me to the significance of the making and distribution of songs amongst Dinka families worldwide. One day, while discussing song systems in her flat in London, she produced several large plastic bags of cassette tapes from a cupboard. While the copying and distribution of cassette tapes is practiced widely in Africa and across the African diaspora, and is particularly prevalent amongst groups that have experienced high levels of out-migration, Dinka songs are unusual in that they are explicitly composed and distributed as 'audio-letters'. Amongst my colleague's collection of cassette tapes were old songs that had been sent to her by relatives as reminders of a pre-forced migration home-space; others were freshly composed and dealt with current concerns. Many were original recordings made by relatives on a rudimentary tape-

recorder in South Sudan; others were copies of originals made by intermediary family-members, who, recognizing the importance of their content, took it upon themselves to distribute them to a wider network of clan members in the diaspora.

Dinka song culture is highly idiosyncratic, rooted principally in the poetic documentation and public disclosure of autobiographical information. As suggested by Deng, ‘Songs everywhere constitute a form of communication which has its place in the social system, but among the Dinka their significance is more clearly marked in that they are based on actual, usually well-known events and are meant to influence people with regard to those events’ (1973, 84). These songs are categorized by genre, each identified by their specific musical and performative distinctions, and classified according to their social function.

Most personal songs are performed solo, or, when performed in a group, are sung either in unison or in simple call-and-response (*arekic*). Unlike typical song structures of east-central African Bantu-speaking cultures, which are based on cyclical multi-part vocal and rhythmic interactions, and tend to adhere to hexatonic¹⁵ or equi-heptatonic scale systems,¹⁶ Dinka songs follow a standard pentatonic scale and comprise an extended series of linear, interconnected song-segments, accompanied only by clapping sticks (*atuel*) or a single drum (*lor*). The aesthetic canon of personal songs is based largely on the creative interaction between words and melody, the specific arrangements between which differ somewhat across dialect groups. A ‘good’ song for the Dinka Bor, for instance, should have vitality and exuberance; its melody should comprise many ‘corners’ (i.e. large and unpredictable intervallic leaps) that will stimulate interest and encourage a reaction. A good lyricist should make use of imaginative and judicious language to comment on social issues. This is achieved through the skillful deployment of metaphors, metonym and montage, which help to transform everyday experiences into a finely honed aesthetic performance (personal communication, Simon Yak Deng Yak, 20 January, 2010).

Dinka songs are contained within a clearly articulated ethos of proprietorship. Virtually every individual (including those in the diaspora above the age of +25 years) will accumulate a repertoire of personal songs during the course of their lifetime. An individual who lacks the talent to produce good songs will approach a respected composer and commission a song in exchange for a cow or an agreed sum of money. Occasionally a composer will be considered a talented composer of lyrics only, in which case a second individual, who has an aptitude for good melody making, will be brought into the process. Upon completion, the song

will either be taught directly to the ‘owner’, or, if the owner is not a good memorizer, by a group of relatives or age-mates, who will gradually pass it on to its owner.

Although subject to change, songs are nevertheless considered eternal and will be sung or listened to repeatedly over a lifetime. Given that song and dance are considered ‘arts of grandeur’, through which a person wins recognition and enhances his or her social status (Deng 1973, 80), performance and sites of performance are considered as significant as their content. Thus the body, space and notions of emplacement are constituent in the expression and experience of musical meanings.

In the following section, I offer a brief analysis of two song segments that have been selected from the Dinka Bor repertoire. The songs were selected for purely pragmatic reasons: they are short and relatively straightforward, which allow for analysis within the limitations of such an article. Their content, however, is emblematic of that of most Dinka personal songs. The ensuing analysis considers how time, place and cultural meanings are inflected in the poetic convention of this genre, focusing specifically on their relevance as locales of memory for the Dinka in the diaspora in particular.¹⁷

Majök Bil ë kuëi, Ciëér awel (Majok, shining like the evening star)

Song owner: Akoy Tiemraan Mayom Deng Chol (Twic East Section, Jonglei State).¹⁸

Majök Bilkuëi, Ciëér Awel
Majök Bilkuëi, Ciëér Awel
Ca wut yōc Magëér Kuëi Ayöl yäär
Marum ca wut yōc Marial Jök ee
Yee ḥa dut a yic ee ḥa wec a nyin ku yēn dhiëu pan dēen ci riääk?
Paan Anɔŋ ë Nyijëér ḥa dut a yic, eei
Wut Nyaŋ ca weŋ nyaai a cin, eei
Wok cinë weŋda ke jäl
Kon ë weŋ ee döŋ panom ajöm yäär gök
A yeei kon ë yäär biëi
Kon ë weŋ ee döŋ panom ajöm e yäär gök
Nuëër aci käŋ nyɔɔk cümen Aŋui, eei
A riääk baai kon e weŋ ee döŋ panom ajöm yäär gök
A yeei kon ë yäär biëi
Kon ë weŋ ee döŋ panom ajöm ë yäär gök

Majok shining like the evening star¹⁹
Majok shining like the evening star
I bought a colourful bull with a white tail for my clan
Like an ostrich, I bought a white and black bull for my clan
Who will comfort me and remove the tears from my eyes when I cry for our destroyed land?

Village of Anok Nyingeer, who will comfort me? Oh!
Wut Nyang took my cows from me, oh!
Our cattle have gone
A gourd of cow's milk was left on the ground
A gourd from my bright cow
A gourd of cow's milk was left on the ground
The Nuer played like hyenas
Famine came to the village where a gourd of the cow's milk had been left on the ground
A gourd from my bright cow
A gourd of cow's milk was left on the ground.

This song, which is locally categorised as *diet ke käckäc* ('song of history'), refers to the 1991 'Bor Massacre', which followed shortly after a split had occurred within the SPLA. Military commanders from the breakaway Nuer splinter faction, SPLA-Nasir, recruited an *ad hoc* militia to launch an attack on a group of undefended Dinka Bor, inflicting high fatalities, destroying homes and cattle, and displacing many thousands to neighbouring states (Johnson 1997). While referencing particular events, the song offers a highly subjective account of the massacre, illuminated through the emotionally charged experiences of the composer.

As is the convention of personal songs, the singer introduces his piece by praising his black and white bull, Majok, soliciting the attention of his audience through the use of a high, sustained vocal register. As Majok is also the personal name that he would have been allocated as a boy according to the seniority of his mother and to a known hierarchy of colour-patterns (*kit*) (Evans-Pritchard 1934), this poetic strategy is invoked to simultaneously identify himself and his place within his family and clan group. The personal bull is used as a sustained metaphor in such songs, simultaneously recounting exact social and political events while tapping into an entire social and cosmological system (Deng 1973, 97). In a comparable symbolic gesture of emplacement, by likening his bull to stars in the night sky, the singer situates the animal - and by association, himself and his clan - within its physical locality, typically playing on visual analogies of brightness and light to draw attention to his personal distinctions, and to those of his people and his place. Summoning the natural world is further played out through the metonymic reference to the ostrich (similarly black and white), which extends the poetic layering or visual montage in the song, and contributes to the sensuous invocation of place.

Having secured himself in his natural and cultural landscape, the singer describes the battle and its aftermath, prudently identifying his home space via the name of his clan leader and directing his appeal for consolation to those within his

inner circle. In contrast to his use of literary figuration to invoke affecting aspects of the event, the singer makes pointed reference to *Wut Nyang*, the Nuer religious prophet who mobilised Lou Nuer civilians (members of the so-called "White Army") to join in the attack (Johnson 1997), and accusing him of mercilessly scavenging off the Dinka people as a hyena would off carrion. The ultimate loss experienced by the Dinka Bor is manifest in the repeated image of an abandoned gourd of milk; a deeply evocative scenario into which is gathered a complex world of pastoralist inferences involving cattle, land, livelihoods, clan relations and cultural identity.

Aluel Akuɔl Mabiöör Deŋ mənh dië tit wut (Akuol Mabioor Deng told me to wait for the people)

Song owner: Peter Bol Deng Arok (Twic East Section, Jonglei State)

Aluel Akuɔl Mabiöör Deŋ, mənhdië, tit wut
Acää gam, ɣen ci guɔ rööt näk Aja ë raan ayän
Aluel walën Gutkuac ë kääc ë ku tit wut
Acää gam, ɣen ci guɔ rööt näk Aja ë raan ayän
Aluel Bëny Gutajö ye kääc ë ku tit wut
Acää gam, ɣen ci guɔ rööt näk Aja ë raan ayän
Lueel Deŋ Gutbëér mənhdië wɔ kaa ye mëen ke wut eei
Lo bii ka cän riɔŋ ë dac wuɔɔc
Weŋ thɔɔr ë tɔŋ paan de Abuk
Lööm tɔŋ ë rial thäär Aja
Waai dië ë rial tɔŋ de bëny de wut acän weŋ nɔk
Yɔk cië nɔk cï wén de Agutjan
Weei kuɔ wɔ Dede

Akuol Mabioor Deng told me to wait for the people but I did not listen
I rushed to kill Aja as a dedication to a wrestler in my age-group
My uncle Gutkuac told me to wait for the people but I did not listen
I rushed to kill Aja as a dedication to a wrestler in my age-group
Chief Gutajo told me to wait for the people but I did not listen
I rushed to kill Aja as a dedication to a wrestler in my age-group
Deng Gutbeer told me, my son, we are the pillars of this community
I could not give up the opportunity to kill the cow when the people were crossing to 'toch'
I killed a cow with a spear that belongs to the family of Abuk
I took the spear early in the morning and struck Aja
My spear in the morning
I killed the cow with a spear that belonged to the leader of the cattle camp
I killed the cow like a son of Agutjan together with Dede.

This ox-song, *diet ke këep*, depicts the scene of a cattle camp during the rainy season (*toch*), which marks also the beginning of the wrestling season. The cattle camp is the spatial and metaphorical centre of Dinka social and cultural life, where

young men enthusiastically announce their preeminence through song while circumnavigating the space with their personal ox. This song, presented as part self-praise/part confession, is performed by a young man who is over-eager to demonstrate his prowess and to make public his admiration for his age-group. This he does by stabbing the bull, Aja (white bull with red markings on the neck) that has been assigned to ritually inaugurate the wrestling season, in spite of numerous warnings issued by his mother (*Akuol Mabioor Deng*), chief (*Gutajo*) and elders (*Gutkuac, Deng Gutbeer*) to await the return of his clansmen to the cattle camp. His moral quandary is compelling, expressed rhetorically through the high level of repetition recounting this courageous, though controversial deed.

As with the previous song segment, the composer weaves together place, lineage and cultural action, gradually unfolding in the ebb and flow of the song's narrative certain key figures within his familial chain of command. Unlike the previous song however, the purpose of this genre is specifically to praise oneself and to establish one's place within one's clan group. This is particularly evident in the last five lines of the song, in which the spear – the prototypical symbol of leadership, and associated with truth-telling, wealth, knowledge and prophetic vision (Beidelman 1971, 411) – is repeatedly used as a poetic device to secure these relationships. First, 'spear of Abuk' identifies the singer's place in his family (Abuk being the name of his father's mother's family). Second, the reference to the spear of the cattle camp leader endorses the singer's place within, and adherence to his clan hierarchy. He concludes by referring to his conquest via his most intimate self-identifiers: *Agutjan* (father) and *Dede* (nickname for mother).

Both examples demonstrate how songs operate as autobiographic discourse in Dinka culture. Through their use of simple, narrative style, singers recount actual events, engaging their audiences by offering fragments of their story only, thus allowing listeners to fill in the gaps of the narrative by calling upon their intimate knowledge of places, people and local meanings, and thus to participate in the imaginative and social world of the song. In each example, metonym, metaphor and montage are deployed as rhetorical devices to elaborate relational meanings, and each characteristically rehearses core tenets in Dinka cultural and social life. These include the tension between the individual and the collective expressed via the multiple social, political and aesthetic references to cattle; the cultural embeddedness of land, always finely envisioned through allegorical references to nature, seasonality and change; and the naming of clan members or leaders and places of relevance

(especially cattle camps and villages), using bull-names or secondary denotations that have meaning only to clan or ethnic-territorial insiders. Typically, the songs are presented as both self-reflection and public announcement, thus reinforcing within their rhetorical structure, a sense of immediacy, intimacy, inclusivity and moral endorsement. In this way, songs help to maintain and mobilize senses of belonging and attachment for those listening to them in the homes, community centers and church halls in the diaspora, thus extending their role as social and cultural moorings within the context of extreme spatial dislocation.

Keeping in touch via cassette

In the above section I argued that the global connectivity between Dinka clan members is not only supported by the exchanging of audio-letters as information, but that the corporeality of songs and their sensuous invocations of time and place draws listeners into tangible, iterative associations with clan, home-space and cultural identities. Further to this, however, I argue that the cassette tape itself has become implicated in the intimacies and connections of this practice. As the continued song-carrier of choice – regardless of increasing access to, and mastery of digital technologies, both locally and in the diaspora – the cassette has assumed value through the way it similarly materializes time, space and relationships.

No doubt, a more pragmatic explanation for their enduring popularity would assert that cassette tapes and their players are typically more robust and resistant to dust, heat, and shocks than their digital competitors (CDs, MP3 players or laptops). So too is their affordability, their portability, and the perception of their durability a noteworthy basis for their continued use. While these may well have supported the enthusiastic recording of songs in the refugee camps during the second civil war to boost the morale of rebel forces (personal communication, Simon Yak Deng Yak, January 25, 2012), I would argue that their continued use as a global mediator of particular kinds of communication exceeds their practical function, distinguishing them as ‘affiliative objects’ that signify a more complex set of relational dynamics of association and exchange (Suchman 2005, 379).²⁰ As Radley aptly suggests, ‘Remembering is something which occurs in a world of things, as well as words, and (...) artefacts play a central role in the memories of cultures and individuals. (...) Artefacts survive in ways unintended by makers and owners to become evidence on which other interpretations of the past can be reconstructed’ (Radley 1990, 57-8, qtd. Tota 2001, 195).

I contend, therefore, that the cassette itself has become coopted into the affective dimension of song making and sharing in Dinka society, replacing persons in performances, yet simultaneously assisting in the mediation and maintenance of those human relationships. Making a cassette is a purposeful act and the product is a tangible result of that act. The materiality of this process and product cannot easily be replicated in the digital world. As Campbell has suggested (2012), home-recorded cassettes allow for ‘unintended spillages’ – i.e. background sounds, breaks and interferences – that invoke the minutiae of everyday and engender a sense of immediacy, intimacy and proximity. Far from ephemeral, therefore, cassette tapes provide temporary “presences” and a sense of grounded materiality that bridge the geographic, temporal, and affective distances that divided their creators and listeners (*ibid.*) Finally, as physical objects, they allow for written annotations, often inscribed in familiar handwriting, which supplies additional personal traces of their creators.

Sending a song as a ‘bloodless’ MP3 file over the internet lacks the symbolic value and physical presence of a cassette tape, which can be stored in a collection, as one would a box of letters or postcards, and proudly produced as a bag of memorabilia that tell the stories of your life and relationships.²¹ As the postal system in South Sudan is not yet fully operative, the circulation of cassette audio-letters is dependent on their being passed from hand-to-hand; a material exchange that contributes to the purposeful sociality of the practice and assists in securing connections between individuals and groups across the world.

A final consideration relates to the political and cultural agency of the cassette. The portable cassette player became the standard home audio technology in the mid-1970s,²² offering new opportunities for ordinary citizens to have control over their own ‘voice’, and to replicate and distribute it to whomever, and in whichever way they chose. I would submit, therefore, that the cassette’s origination in the 1970s has linked it imaginatively to the ‘development decade’ in South Sudan and thus iconically to a particular moment of peace, optimism and ‘voice’ in Dinka political history. However, whereas cassette technology facilitated the radical expansion and redirection of music production and dissemination in many parts of the world (Manuel 2001), I would argue that the geopolitical fragility of South Sudan at the time meant that the cassette offered Dinka communities the potential to reinforce existing cultural and musical practices and to secure them in time, place and memory.²³ With the resumption of war in 1983, and the ensuing mass exodus of Dinka from the south, the role of the cassette tape as political message-bearer and

preserver of cultural identity became increasingly exigent. Quite simply therefore, the cassette tape has enabled people to perform, listen to, remember and exchange their songs on the move.

Pause and rewind...

In this paper I have attempted to trace Dinka personal songs from cattle camp to transnational audio-letter, arguing for their role in securing clan networks and anchoring cultural identities across cultures and continents. Drawing on van Arsdale's pastoralist analogy of 'adaptive flux', I have suggested that the ongoing circulation of personal songs is actuated by the role they play in providing cultural consistency for individuals and groups against a backdrop of considerable infrastructural insecurity, which has been brought about by war, trauma and forced migration. In the context of violent disruption and dislocation, senses of place and identity are moulded as much by actual territorial emplacement as by memories of belonging to particular social and physical landscapes (Lovell, 1998, 1-2). This paper argues that as a highly valued form of social discourse, personal songs offer a poetic space whose sensuous invocations of events, times and places draw listeners into tangible, iterative associations with clan, home-space and cultural identities. It further argues that the cassette tape has been coopted into this frame as a symbolic 'voice' that both embodies memories of locality and belonging, and carries them as repackaged audio-letters across the contemporary global Dinka rangelands.

As suggested by my Dinka colleague in London, who spent only the first 10 years of her life in South Sudan: 'Songs help us to see and to remember; they are our essence. If you know our songs, you will know the Dinka people.'

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² These denotations are specific to Dinka Bor dialect group.

³ It is important to note that most East-African agro-pastoralists also rely on fishing as a livelihood resource, along with a range of other economic activities. See: 'Pastoralism, policies and practice in the Horn and East Africa. A review of current trends.' *Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute* (ODI) April 2009.

⁴ See: <www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/sudan-civil-war1.htm> [last accessed 17 September 2012]

⁵ US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement, Annual ORR Reports to Congress (2005) <<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/data/05arc9.htm>>

⁶ The political party with which the SPLA is associated is the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM).

⁷ John Garang was instated Vice-President of the Government of National Unity in July 2005, but died in a helicopter accident only 3 weeks into office. He nevertheless remains associated with the liberation and ultimate secession of South Sudan.

⁸ See: Forced Migration Online <<http://www.forcedmigration.org/research-resources/regions/sudan>> [last accessed 15 June 2012]

⁹ See also: Luster, Tom, Desiree B. Qin, Laura Bates, Deborah J. Johnson, and Meenal Rana, 2008. "The Lost Boys of Sudan: Ambiguous Loss, Search for Family, and Reestablishing relationships With Family Members," *Family Relations*, 57: 444–456.

¹⁰ See: Fanjoy, Martha, Hilary Ingraham, Cyrena Khoury and Amir Osman (2005).

¹¹ Between 1994–2005, up to 50% of the Sudanese refugees in Cario were settled elsewhere. However, since 2005, resettlement has been severely restricted (Lewis 2011, 83).

¹² See: International Organisation for Migration (IMO) <<http://www.iom.int/jahia/media/press-briefing-notes/pbnAF/cache/offonce/lang/en?entryId=32248>> [last accessed 23 September 2012].

¹³ See: Southern Sudan Centre for Census, Statistics and Evaluation (February 2011) *Key Indicators for Southern Sudan*. <http://ssnbs.org/storage/key-indicators-for-southern-sudan/Key%20Indicators_A5_final.pdf> and <<http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/southern-sudan-statistics>> [last accessed 17 April, 2012].

¹⁴ Personal communication with numerous Dinka individuals in London and South Sudan.

¹⁵ 6-tones per octave

¹⁶ 7-tones equally distributed across the octave

¹⁷ Both songs are available on the CD entitled 'Songs of the Dinka of South Sudan' (Diet ke Jiëëñ ne Cuëny Thudän), which was compiled and produced by the AHRC Beyond Text 'Metre and Melody in Dinka Song and Speech' project.

¹⁸ Both songs were translated by the AHRC 'Metre and Melody in Dinka Speech and Song' research team. [Endnote 2]. Dinka orthography has not yet been standardized and the author acknowledges that some Dinka readers may annotate and translate certain words slightly differently.

¹⁹ Majok is the name of a white bullock with a black head, neck and rump.

²⁰ See also Appadurai, Arjun. 1986. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²¹ This is not to say that Dinka youth do not use digital technology, nor to suggest that as mediated aural spaces, MPs and the internet do not carry embodied meanings. See: Milena Droumeva & Vincent Andrisani. 2009. 'An Ear Alone is Not a Being: Embodied Mediations in Audio Culture.' *Interference Journal: Toward a Cultural Phenomenology of Mediated Aural Practices*. Vol.1: 1-16.

²² The cassette was initially designed in 1963 and made available to the public in 1965. Cassette players only became standard home audio technology a decade later and remained popular until the 1990s, when the CD began to cut into the cassette player market share in most parts of the world. In many regions of Africa, however, the cassette remains the principle audio technology. <http://www.ehow.com/facts_4867615_history-cassette-players.html#ixzz1yPoQ6cC4> [accessed 20 June, 2012]

²³ Kaiser noted that in the 1990s, Acholi Sudanese in the Kiryandongo Refugee camp in northern Uganda regularly recorded their songs on cassette. She suggests that preserving music was a way of signifying its importance and centrality, and of bringing 'traditional' music into some kind of continuum and accommodation with alternative, or competing forms of music (2006,184).