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## **Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne)**

### **Southern Sudanese Culture**

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# Introduction

This paper provides information on the family structure of the Southern Sudanese communities. The paper was prepared by the Migrant Information Centre as part of Southern Sudanese Cross Cultural Training the Centre offered in September and October 2004.

The section of the training on family structure covered:

1. Marriage
2. Composition of the family
3. Roles and responsibilities of family members
4. Gender roles
5. Community attitudes to pregnancy and birth
6. Community attitudes to children and their behaviour
7. Changes in the family structure in Australia
8. Sudanese concept of confidentiality
9. Attitudes to
  - ★ Disabilities
  - ★ Mental illness
  - ★ Domestic Violence
  - ★ Divorce/separation
  - ★ Death

## Marriage

Southern Sudan is divided into three regions known as Bahr El Ghazel, Upper Nile and Equatoria. Within these three regions there are many different languages and traditions for marriage ceremonies and agreements.

Traditionally, men can marry more than one wife. The number of wives depends on the man's position and power within the community.

Dowry systems operate in Southern Sudan. A man or a man's mother can choose the woman or the woman's family for marriage. They then approach the girl and tell her that they want her to be married. She then goes to her father or the male head of the family and tells him of the proposal. Women do not generally choose their husbands.

The father or the male head of the household checks whether the family is a good family. If they believe they are a good family the girl's sisters will negotiate with the man's brothers to meet to negotiate the dowry for the bride's sisters. Once this has been completed, the sisters will arrange a meeting for the groom, his father and senior male relatives to meet with the bride's father to negotiate the dowry. This process can take more than a year particularly as weddings are not held during the dry season.

People from the Nuer and Dinka tribes pay the dowry in cows to the bride's family. Others tribes pay in goats and pigs and some tribes pay money or crops depending on the major source of economy within the tribe or region.

In Nuer tribes, 40 cows are generally paid to the bride's family compared to Dinka where 100 cows are paid. Cows are distributed amongst the male relatives of the extended family. The bride's sisters also receive one cow regardless of the number of sisters in the family.

The process for payment of dowries has changed since many families have been forced to migrate to other countries. In Australia people pay part of the dowry as money and some in cows (or money) paid to relatives in the Sudan. The negotiation process with relatives has remained unchanged in Australia.

Families prefer dowries paid in US Dollars at about \$150US per cow. In Australian Dollars, cows are valued at \$200 each. The number of cows is based on Sudanese tribal traditions even for those families living in Australia.

An example of a typical Nuer or Dinka marriage dowry in Australia once both families have agreed to the marriage

★ Dowry for the bride's sister	\$ 2500
★ Dowry for the father	\$ 800
★ The cost of the marriage ceremony	\$ 3500
★ Dowry for the mothers of the bride	\$ 2000
★ Wedding dress for bride and dresses for maid	\$ 3000
★ Car for bride and music systems	\$ 3000
★ Australian wedding ceremony	\$ 5000
★ The total cost of the cows	\$ 6000
<b>Total cost</b>	<b>\$25,800</b>

In Australia girls can marry the man she loves but he must maintain traditional processes in meeting with the bride's family and paying the dowry.

## **Compositions of the family**

In Africa and the Sudan the family is an extended family. The family includes grandparents, mothers, father, children, uncles, aunts, cousins, nephew and nieces. Children from the same father and different mothers consider themselves as brothers and sisters. All of the children within the extended family are considered equal and must be treated equally.

Each family has a male head who is responsible for all family members. The head is usually the first-born son of the previous head of the family who takes his place on his death.

The head of the family and his wives are obligated to care for their nephews, nieces and cousins as their own children. Once the children become adults they are in turn responsible for caring for them, their own parents, aunts and uncles when they age.

If the cousins, nephews and nieces are not cared for by the head of the family as their own children, this can bring shame on the family and the children of this family are not cared for by other family members when they reach old age.

## **Roles and responsibilities of family members**

In Sudan, the family is responsible for caring for family members and the welfare of the family as a whole. Traditionally, men are the head of the family and they are responsible for the whole family. Women look after the old, the sick, and the mentally ill, although many of these responsibilities have been eroded by urbanisation. Whether in rural or urban society, however, the burden of these social services falls upon women.

Except for a small number of liberated, educated young women from wealthy families, girls remain within the household and they are segregated at all festivities, eating separately after the men. Men socialise and eat together separate from women. In a small family, the husband eats alone or, more frequently, takes his food and eats with his male neighbours.

Young university couples might live much the same as in the West, in a house without relatives. They might live, eat, and socialise together. Nevertheless, traditional patterns are deeply rooted, and the husband would often be away visiting his male friends in the market and cafés.

In wealthy families in the Sudan, a servant helps the wife with the children. Educated women, whether married or unmarried, have greater freedom and mobility particularly if they are employed. Nevertheless, she would not trespass upon male-dominated social norms.

In some respects, uneducated women have greater freedom so long as it is with their peers and female relatives. Paradoxically, segregation creates a spirit of independence, particularly among educated women, for there are a number of aunts,

cousins, and grandmothers to look after the children and allow the mothers to work outside the home.

Nevertheless, social traditions govern the way of life of Sudanese women. The segregation and subordination of women in Sudanese society should not obscure the fact that women dominate the household just as their men command public life. The home and the rearing of children are their domain, so long as they uphold male-oriented social norms.

## **Gender Role and Expectations**

When a woman gets married, she leaves her family and becomes a part of her husband's family to be cared for, and to care for others, in the family.

The primary role for women is maintaining the home and caring for children and other family members. Only a small number of women receive tertiary education.

Some Sudanese men believe that a woman should stay at home all the time and they do not allow them to participate in social activities. Alternatively, some Sudanese women are highly educated and the community and their husband allow them to participate in community activities.

Some Sudanese men do not respect educated women; the work and contribution they make in the community. These men expect all women to do home duties and give birth to many children. Because people are dying every day in Sudan, they believe that women should give birth to as many children as she can.

If we look at Southern Sudanese families here in Australia, women are the majority and they are the ones who attend social gatherings. Some women are attending school and some work in offices. Nevertheless, some men still strongly believe that traditional culture and beliefs should be maintained in Australia and that women should stay at home

## **Attitudes to Pregnancy and Birth**

It is the custom in some tribes for women to marry very young at 12 years old. They start having children at a very early age, even before their reproductive organs are fully developed. This jeopardises their health and even their lives during pregnancy and after delivery.

The cultural requirement that one must have a son in order to secure the family's future encourages women to have many children, giving birth frequently before they have regained their health properly.

Pregnancy is considered a gift from God and it is a sign of fertility to both men and women. It is expected in the community that a married woman give birth as soon as God blesses them. If the woman is married for one year or more and she does not become pregnant, people will start talking about her and tell the man to look for another woman. Community influence in these situations depends upon the strength of the man's character and his attachment to his wife.

When a woman is pregnant she will have full support from the family especially her mother in law. Some Sudanese men show concern for their wife when they are pregnant and treat their wife with respect and care. Some men believe that pregnancy is easy and they still demand that their wife complete all her home duties right up to the birth.

At the time of birth in Sudan, women are cared for by their female relatives particularly her mother or mother in law if they are both alive. In the cities in the Sudan the hospital nurse cares for the mother until she gives birth. In the village, the midwife cares for the mother. In the Sudan, people including husbands are not allowed to enter the labor room.

Many men will not go in the labor ward in Australia. However this is slowly changing.

## **Attitudes to Children**

The socialisation of boys and girls are distinctly different in Southern Sudan. Girls get their instructions from elder females at home. They are trained how to handle utensils, how to maintain them in the home and cooking. They are also taught how to be decent, truthful and respectful and it is expected that her posture, manners and use of language reflects this. It is believed that this prepares girls to be good future mothers.

In contrast, boys are trained to be valiant, tough and able to endure hardship so that they can protect themselves, the family and the society when they become adults.

The whole family views girls as a source of wealth. She is protected by the family whilst boys are encouraged to socialise and participate in community activities with other men after the age of seven.

Girls are now attending school and they play sport. However, families in Australia still consider her a source of wealth. As a result, they expect their daughters to be respectful and responsible, and to be married and to make the family proud of her. In Sudanese culture, girls are not allowed to have boyfriends.

## **Changes in the family structure in Australia**

Immigration has changed roles and responsibilities in Southern Sudanese families for men and women, youth and children. In Sudan, the wife and female relatives take care of the house and children without any support from male family members. In Australia, a man has to help his wife dress the children and take them to school. The wife generally picks them up from school. This is a major difference from life in the Sudan and it has occurred because many women do not have extended family in Australia to assist them.

Many Sudanese children spend more time at home with their families and are generally allowed much less freedom of movement than their Australian peers.

Some youth try to maintain their culture in Australia. However, some young people do not agree with some Sudanese culture and traditions so they are happy to adopt Australian traditions. Nevertheless they want to maintain family values especially the respect and closeness of the family.

The family structure remains the same in Australia as in the Sudan.

## **Role of women and men**

Traditionally, women stay at home to do cooking, cleaning and to take care of their husband, children and extended family.

However, the conflict in the Sudan has greatly affected the family institution, causing changes in the family structure and roles between men and which were not in existence in the past. Women have become breadwinners and caretakers. They have been forced to assume more responsibilities and many women feel overburdened.

Many Sudanese cultures consider a woman as the junior partner in a marriage. Whatever a woman possesses is regarded as belonging to her husband and his family. In the past this protected women because they were assured of a functioning extended family structure.

There are many well-qualified Southern Sudanese women. Sudanese women love their country just like men do. In order for women to play their rightful roles in nation building to their potential, the fundamental rights of women and children that are enshrined charters should be respected in Southern Sudan.

## **Confidentiality:**

In Sudan there is nothing called confidentiality or privacy. They believe that the rest of the community should discuss anything that happens to one person. The decision to resolve any issues impacting on one individual is made by elders and leaders of the community.

In Southern Sudan there are some problems that are solved at the extended family level. All members can discuss the problem and offer solutions. However, elders and the head of the family will make the final decision on what is best for that individual and the family as a whole.

Educated people in Australia have learnt about confidentiality and privacy laws and they understand its significance. As a result, more people are respecting the privacy of others particularly if they hold a professional position.

## **Disability**

There are some families here with disabled children and relatives with disabilities particularly as many people have been injured during the war. Southern Sudanese families care and support family members with disabilities to give them courage. People who have been disabled as a result of the war are seen as the responsibility of the community.

## **Domestic Violence**

In most Sudanese families a women is not allowed to talk about domestic violence because they believe that it is a family issue. No one is allowed to interfere in the



problem unless they are invited to say something. It is when this happens that the issue is seen as a big problem.

In Southern Sudanese culture women expect to be disciplined by their husband after they leave their parent's home. In Sudanese society it is the husband's responsibility to discipline her.

Women respect the culture and their relatives and sometimes they think of their children. What will happen to them if I leave the house? Many women prefer to put up with domestic violence for the sake of their children.

This situation is likely to change in Australia because women do not have to leave their home, they do not lose custody of their children and they can receive an independent income.

## **Divorce/separation**

When divorce occurs, the dowry paid to the bride's family must be negotiated. If the couple has children, they belong to the man and remain living with his family. If there are no children, all cows paid to the bride's family are returned to the husband. If there are more than three children, then no cows can be given back to the man. If there are less than three children, then some cows are returned to the husband.

Divorce is seen as the last resort when problems cannot be solved. The community believe it is not good for children to have divorced parents especially girls who might be mistreated by other women or wives in the husband's family.

Family members try to solve the problems. If it cannot be solved it is then referred to the community for a solution. The children's welfare is taken into consideration.

If it cannot be resolved at the community level it is referred to the Courts for a final decision on the matter. Children are given to the father no matter how old they are.

Because of the children's interests, some women prefer to live in violence rather than place their children under stress. They prefer to take the risk to make their children happy.

## **Death**

Death of family members is seen as a great loss to the family and the community as whole. If the man dies, his wife will look after the family until the eldest male child is mature enough to take on the role of the head of the family. This usually occurs once he turns 15 years and he is then responsible for the family.

If a woman dies, the husband has the right to marry again so that she can help him raise his children. In some tribes in the Sudan a man can marry a sister of his late wife so that she can look after her sister's children.

## **Mental illness**

People with mental illness are seen as a big responsibility to the family and the community in general. When a person develops mental illness, the whole community are expected to support the family with the sick person.

If the person with mental illness is not harmful to other people they remain free within the community and everyone keeps an eye on them to ensure their safety. However, if the person is violent or harmful to themselves or others they are taken to a mental hospital if they are living in a large city or they are placed in jail if a hospital is not available.