

Bull Song by Ring Deng Biong

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Come with me to the Dinka land, and you will be amazed to see a most beautiful interaction between human beings and their animals that surpasses all ghazal poetry in the world. But first, some background:

Historically, the Dinka People come from the Kush kingdom, which included the Egypt of the Pharaohs and Sudan, under Baanqui and Tiheraqua, kings of the Nubian People. In the South of Sudan live the Dinka tribe, properly known as Monjaang, to which I belong. We speak Jaang, or Dinka, and I also speak Arabic, French, and English. I come from the village of Abyei near Wau, the capital of Bhar-el-Ghazzal province, which, in Arabic, means "River of Fast Running Deer", or *gazelle* in English.

Many wild animals migrate through this area, up from Uganda and Kenya. We Dinka are cattle-keepers, always on the move, protecting our herds, and looking for better grazing grasslands and clean running water for the cattle. We don't usually eat our cattle, except for sacrifices, festivals, or for welcoming guests. Dinka raise cattle mainly for milk and milk products, and do not use them to plough or transport things. Cattle are like our currency. We use them to pay ransoms, settle court fines, and to pay a dowry. A man's family can pay from 100-200 head of cattle as a bride price.

Bull colours play an important role in Dinka lives and naming practices. As first-born in my family, I have the birthright to all the pure-coloured cattle in my family's herd- white, black, red, and grey. A second-born male is entitled to the spotted cattle, while the last-born male gets the streaked or brindled cattle. The bull name I chose is *Malwal*, which means "red". This colour matches with my name *Ring*, which means "meat" or "beef", but I am also called Ring because, in Dinka, the red colour is associated with the goddess sun- the spirit of life- so my name is a spiritual one. The song bull I was given when I came of age was coloured red, and also named *Malwal*.

Song lyrics, dance, and story-telling are the poetry of the Dinka People, and our bull song is a special form of love poetry, known as Ghazal in Arabic. In Dinka land, we enjoy a ceremonial dance, long into the night, at the time when the young men gather to shape the long horns of their young song bulls to grow at different angles, according to their liking. When shaping and piercing the horn tips, to add tassels from the hair of a cow's tail or threads of fabric, the young men compose and sing songs to their bulls, simulating the newly-shaped horns. These bull songs not only praise the bull, but also God, nature, beauty, courage, friendship, and girlfriends.

Come with me now to the Dinka land. There is a tradition, at dusk, for young men to call out for their bulls with these individual songs. Each bull runs in from the herd on the grassland, frolicking to meet his owner, tossing around the tassels on his horns, and ringing the bell on his neck in such a beautiful rhythm to the song, in a kind of neck-dancing. The bulls lead the way in toward the cattle camp, with the young men running along by them, each holding a bunch of spears in one hand and waving a dancing club in the other, singing love songs about their girlfriends to the bull. Each bull goes around the camp several times.

All this time, the girlfriend would be in the camp, pretending not to pay attention to the words of the song the bull is dancing to. Even though the song is sung to the bull, she knows and feels that the song is about her because of the symbolism and implications of what she hears. Her friends come and tell her "why are you pretending to hide your love, when this beautiful song is all about you? Get up, sister, and "Tullkiew"! (make the uulating sound with mouth and fingers).

The girl would then get up and joyfully uulate, and they would all rush, uulating, to welcome the bull back from the "toch", or grassland. The girl begins to groom the bull, caress him, and brush away the flies, and then takes the bull to his stake in the camp and takes care of him. Here is the ghazal bull song I used to sing in Sudan, for my girlfriend Nyanriak, who is now my wife:

Bull Song (Dinka Ghazal form)

Malwal tok mac
Atuot mathok acic
Mor dit mathok acic
Autuot aya weec nhiak ko akole
Autuot aya weec nhiak ko akole
Mor diit ngouk dude
Ke diit ngouk dude
Abi Piny ala dir.

English Version

My crimson rose malwal
Whose dark horn-tips are as sharp as the first moon tips
The dark colour around his mouth makes his eyes shine bright like morning star
No drops of rain have ever stayed on him
No birds, insects have ever perched on him, because of his beautiful sleeky hide
When he roars in the veldt or grassland
The earth beneath him trembles, sending his messages across the fields
to the villages and cattle camps that he is the pride of the goddess sun
The light, warmth, and beauty of the tribe