

Dinka Folktales Retold

Retelling and translation from Dinka into English

by Atem Yaak Atem

1 Why people become hungry

Once upon a time, there was no hunger. One day Tik, the Woman, went to a bush near her home to collect firewood for cooking.

When she approached a dry pond with grass around its edges, she saw a pinkish, flat round object. Woman was surprised. She stopped to see what was happening. The thing was cutting the grass, which it rolled into itself.

“Why are you doing this, my child?” she asked.

“I am eating”, replied Yäc, * the Stomach.

“Is there nothing else you can eat”, she asked.

“Nothing”, Yäc said.

“Then I will take you home to feed you”, Tik told Yäc.

“I am happy. I will go with you to your home”, replied Yäc.

When Tik picked Yäc, it coiled itself onto the Tik’s belly, where it lodged itself firmly.

On arrival home, Yäc began to prick Tik’s inside.

Under a blunt pain, Tik asked Yäc why it was hurting her.

“I want to eat”, it replied.

Tik got food and began to eat. The pain disappeared immediately. But each time Yäc wanted food, it would just prick the inside of Tik. She would eat to feed Yäc. And that is why become hungry.

**Yäc (stomach). The /c/ in Dinka language is pronounced as a palatal /ch/, and has no exact equivalent in English.*

In Dinka

Bën de Cɔk

Ƴɔn thɛɛr ke cɔk e liu, e cii kɔc ye nɔk cīt men yen kɔc nɔk emɛɛn.

Na Ƴɔn nɛ kōōl tōk ke Tik lo e Ƴōŋic, bī lo kuany nɛ tiim ben ke bën thal nɛ miëth bī cam.

Ƴɔn cen thiök kenë pul cīnic pīu, go Tik kē cīt atēny thith cīt rīŋ tīŋ ke tō nɛ agör de pul. Ku ye kēnë e wal tɛm ku dol keek nɛ yeyic.

Yen e kē cī Tik tīŋ kǎn acī yeen cɔk gǎi arëēt. Go kōōc ku thiëc ye “Yeŋö ye yīn ye yīn ye kēnë looi, menhdi?”

Go Yǎc dhuk nhom ye “Ƴɛn cǎm.”

“Cīn dēt peei tō ba cam?” acī Tik dhuök Yǎc.

Go Yǎc lueel ye “Acīn miëth dēt tō ba cam.”

Go Tik lëk Yǎc ye “Ke yīn ba laar baai, paandīe ba yīin lo yiëk miëth ba cam ba kueth.” Go Yǎc gam.

Ƴɔn cī ke thök nɛ jam ke Tik dɔm Yǎc bī boom nɛ yeyic, muk cīt men yenë meth muk. Nɛ kaamë yic, Yǎc acī rɔt paac enɔŋ Tik bī lo pat nɛ yeyic, ku jalkë lo baai. Ku tē ceth ke dhölic, Yǎc acī rɔt duööt nɛ Tikic agut tē ben lo yiëc biäk thīn.

Ƴɔn cī kek cop baai, ke Tik yök rɔt ke nɔŋ kē yeen reemic.

Go Yǎc thiëc ye “Yeŋö loi rɔt emɛnë?”

“Ƴɛn kɔr ba cam” acī Yǎc dhuk nhom.

Go Tik miëth lööm ku ciëm. Go arɛɛm wën jǎl nɛ tē cīn gǎäu.

Ku nɛ kaam thok ebën kɔɔr Yǎc een bī cam e ke yǎny de Tik ŋuet bī cam nɛkë yenë miëth cī Tīŋ cam ye bën ke ye cǎm de Yǎc eya.

Ku ye kǎn yen eke dhöl e bīi cɔk bī kɔc ya dɔm ku ye keek nɔk.

2 The Advent of Death

Once upon a time, Jok, * the Evil One, used to come at night to the village while people were sleeping. The people Jok carried away never returned. They

would be dead. Because of that people became very angry with Jok. They met and agreed to do something to stop Jok from killing people. The best way to do that was to kill Jok himself.

Two brave men offered themselves to kill Jok. One of them was right-handed while the other man was left-handed.

The two volunteers went out to a nearby open grassland, which Jok used to cross on his nightly mission to the village to kill humans. Each of them was carrying a spear with long a long shaft and huge and sharp blade.

It was a short time after the men's arrival at the spot when Jok appeared swaying from side to side as was his habit.

After seeing Jok, the men began to argue among themselves about who should spear Jok. The right-handed one wanted to throw his spear at Jok but his companion refused, saying he should be the one to kill Jok.

After a lengthy disagreement, the righthanded man agreed to let the lefthanded man kill Jok.

When the lefthanded man threw his spear at Jok, he missed him. Jok fled.

And that is why people have been dying to this day.

**In Dinka it is spelled jɔk. It means several things, among them, spirit, deity, god (God is Nhialic), divinity, ghost, disease or illness. In the context of this folktale, jok (jɔk) for evil spirit that believers in traditional religion think causes death. The plural of jɔk is jak.*

Bën de Thuɔɔ

Ƴɔn thɛr ke ɔk e tɔ. Ku yeen e ɔŋ rac arëet. Yeen e bën baai wakɔu tɛ cī kɔc nin ku bī kɔc thël bei nē yōöt yiic. Ku ke kɔc cī keek jɔt aa cīe bɛer lɔ dhuk ciëen nēkē ye ɔk keek lɔ nōk.

Yekënë aci kɔc bën cɔk riöc arëet ku rɛcke piöth.

Ƴɔn nē kööl ke kɔc cɔl amat bīkē jam nē kē bī looi. Amat aci bën thök nē wët cī kɔc kedhia jam men ke ɔk bī dhiil nōk bī thou.

Kɔc kerou cī ŋeeny arëet röth yök, luelkē men bī ke ɔk nōk. Go amat wët den gam. Ku ke köckē aye raan tōŋden cam ku ye raan bī lɔ kenē yeen ye cuëc.

Ƴɔn e wëëric ke kek lo bii në baai thok, të Ƴɔn yenë Jɔk tëëk thïn ke lo në bëi ke kɔc yiic. Ku keek aake muk tɔɔɔ bï ke Jɔk thöör. Gokë lo tɔc në bëi thook, buuth ke Jɔk thïn.

Ku në kaam cekic e tïit ke thïn ke Jɔk bö cït men thæerden dhia, ku akën kɔc tïɔ.

Ku teer aci rot ɔɔl në kaam de cam kenë cuëc yeɔa bï Jɔk kan thöör. Go raan cam muɔl ku yööc cam bï ya yen bï Jɔk kan thöör.

Go cam rot jɔt ku thëër Jɔk në tɔɔ, go wuöc, ku ket dëëy keek, dhuk tēden yen bën thïn në wëër thok ebën.

Ku në ye kë cenë Jɔk wuöc bï nöc, yenë ke ye kɔc thou.

3 Owl's Horns

Once upon a time there lived Agumut, the Owl and Adöl * in the same neighbourhood. Adöl used to weave a beautiful shelter for herself and her young ones. Agumut did not know how to build a shelter for himself. He envied Adöl for her skill.

One day, Agumut decided to evict Adöl and her children from their home.

While Adöl and her children were inside, Agumut came and stood in front of the nest, with his bulging eyes, threatening: "Leave your house for or I will spear you with my horn you see on my head. Where do I begin my attack? Do I hit you on the right or left side?"

"Let me first get out with my children before you enter the house", Adöl begged Agumut as she was shaking with fear.

Agumut entered and enjoyed staying in the shelter that Adöl had built for herself and her children.

The problem did not end there and then for Adöl. Any time Adöl built a new shelter anywhere else, Agumut went and chased away Adöl with her young ones. That went on for a long time. Each time Adöl built a new home, Agumut went and took it.

While that was going on, Adicol, * was aware of what was going one between Agumut and Adöl. Adicol did not like what Agumut was doing to Adöl.

Adicol wanted to help Adöl. He knew Agumut did not have horns but just long pointed ears.

One day, Adicol saw Agumut sitting outside the house he had taken from Adöl. Adicol flew over Agumut. He found they were not horns at all, after landing at Agumut's back, he got hold of Agumut's ears and began to shout repeatedly "These are not horns, but ears."

The loud and shrieky refrain brought to the scene all the birds in the neighbourhood. Agumut became afraid and flew away. But Adicol followed him singing "These are not horns, but horns."

From that day onwards the rest of the birds were no longer afraid of Agumut and his big eyes.

And that is why Agumut does not go out before nightfall.

This folktale is the origin of the Dinka saying "Kä ye tuŋ ke agumut", meaning these are just owl's horns, meaning that something is not true; just a trick to deceive people.

**Adöl is a brown bird of the ibis family. It builds very a huge nest that is rainproof and sunproof in a tree.*

4 Deadly Vengeance

Once upon a time when people became ill, they would go to the sky by means of a very long rope to get heal.

One day, a woman killed the hatchling of Atoc. *

Atoc became very sad because of her baby's death.

From there and then, Atoc decided to avenge the woman for causing the death of her child.

Atoc went and broke the rope that people used for ascending to the sky.

And this why people die.

This legend first appeared in early 1950s in written in Dinka, contained in Buŋ Tuenj de Ciër (primer).

**Atöc (Atöc) is a Dinka word for a small blue plumage with a small brownish spot on its chest. It belongs to the family of weaverbird.*

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Transmutation

About Atem Yaak Atem

Atem was born in what is now South Sudan, where he went to school. He obtained a B.A degree in English and Philosophy from the University of Khartoum in 1974, and later went to the UK for an M. Ed from the University of Wales, Cardiff in 1984.

Following his graduation in 1974 he did a diploma in Linguistics at the Institute of Afro-Asian Studies, University of Khartoum. He studied under Prof A.N. Tucker, a British linguist who at the time was one of leading authorities in the field of African languages. The study was an investigation of the so-called breathy as opposed to non-breathy vowels in the Dinka language (breathy vowels being /ä/, /ë/, /ë/, /i/, /ö/, /ö (although /u/ is a vowel it not part of the system under investigation) while the non-breathy variants are /a/, /e/, /ε/, /i/, /o/, /ɔ/. The importance of the study was that identifying the differences in the related vowels could help in determining how a particular sound segment (word) could be correctly pronounced as well as to determine the meaning of that particular segment. The outcome of the research by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), an American body, successfully introduced diacritics or umlauts now in use in the writing of Dinka since the late 1980s.

Journalism

In 1975 Atem joined *The Nile Mirror*, a weekly English language newspaper in Juba, Southern Sudan as features editor and reporter. From 1976-7 he studied Journalism at the Khartoum Institute of Mass Communications and graduated with advanced diploma in Mass Communications. A year later he attended another course in Journalism at the Berlin International Institute for Journalism, former West Berlin. He was awarded an advanced diploma in Journalism.

For more than four decades Atem has edited some of outstanding national or regional periodicals, among them *The Nile Mirror* weekly newspaper, founding editor of *Southern Sudan* monthly magazine from 1976- 1981. In the 1980s he branched into broadcast Journalism- founding director of Radio SPLA from 1984-1991. He has written for newspapers in Kenya, in one as a columnist.

When he came to Australia in 2000 to join his family that had come in 1997, he became an English-Dinka translator for bodies such as SBS. He briefly taught foundational English at the University of Newcastle in 2008 and later taught Dinka language, ethics and methodology of translation and interpreting at Granville TAFE, Sydney. He was one of the recipients of Awards for Excellence in Learning from TAFE of Western Sydney for that year.

Atem is the author of *Jungle Chronicles and Other Stories: Reflections of a South Sudanese*, which was published in 2018, and *Aesop's Fables* (selection) in Dinka translation. He works as a translator. He is also currently writing his memoirs. He lives in Sydney with his family.