

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE UDUK TRIBE

Almost nothing is known of the Uduk Tribe before the year 1800 AD. At that time, they lived in villages and hamlets on the south shore of the Daga river. Their language and culture suggest that they were distantly related to the Ganza, Gumuz, Komo, Twama, Mao and Shita Tribes. There was little or no commonality with the Nilotic Tribes, including the neighboring Nuer and Mabaan.

At about that time, the Nuer began an eastward push into Uduk territory. There was fighting for the territory, but the Uduk were greatly outnumbered, and, hamlet by hamlet, they uprooted and moved north to escape the conflict. Some stopped when they reached the banks of the Yabus River; others continued further, to the Tombak Valley. By or before 1870, the migration was complete.

In the meantime, gold had been discovered by the Egyptians in the upper Blue Nile. By 1821, they took control of the gold-rich areas, putting pressure on Arabic –speaking peoples of northern Sudan to migrate southward. In time, these peoples, situated as a buffer between Egypt and Ethiopia, grew in strength and power. In about 1870, one of these tribes, the Baggara began to send raiders into the territories of the Hill Burun, the Jum Jum, and the Uduk. A few years later, the Turuk also began slave-raiding.

These raiders also affected the lives of the Gumuz, the Komo, the Mabaan, and the Uduk near the Yabus River. Trapped between the Nuer to the south and the Baggara to the north, by 1895 the territories of the Hill Burun and the Jum Jum as well as the Tombak Valley were virtually deserted. It happened in this manner: When the raiders attacked, the tribesmen fled into the bush. Because the women could not run as fast as the men, many more women than men were captured. Eventually, the remaining men and the few women just stayed in the bush. Conditions were so bad in the bush, however, that most eventually simply surrendered to become slaves of the Baggara, though some did manage to flee northwest and take refuge with the Ulu.

In 1904, the government of Sudan intervened and pacified the area. The Uduk who were still within Sudan were encouraged to return to their homeland. There were not many. And the men outnumbered the women by a ratio of about 6:1. A generation later, there were still far more men than women.

The first recorded use of the term “Uduk” was in 1906, by the British explorer Nickerson; this name was being used of the Uduk by the surrounding tribes; while the name may be derived from Arabic, there is no evidence that this is so. The Uduk simply called themselves “kwanim pa”, the people of the homeland.

Slave trading was finally abolished in The Sudan in 1927, and in Ethiopia in 1935.

Life was finally returning to “normal” when, in 1937, smallpox struck. Because of the lack of understanding of science, no one knew what the cause was. Survivors blamed others as “witches”; families were totally torn apart again.

In 1938, the first missionaries and medical clinics arrived. Then, in 1940, the “Italian War”, also known as World War II, arrived. While the war did not directly affect this part of Africa, it did affect the ability of the missionaries to continue with their work. After the War, Barbara Harper and other missionaries arrived in force. The language was translated and schools were begun. Primers were published in 1955 (copies are available on request); the first Uduk dictionary was published in 1956 (copies available on request), and the first New Testament translation arrived in 1964.

Sudan became an independent nation in 1956. The government was dominated by Muslims, who, in 1964 forced the missionaries out. A census in 1956 found a total of 8,300 Uduk. This had increased to 10,000 in 1966 in spite of a 50% mortality rate by the age of five due to malnutrition and disease.

Christianization really began in the early 1960’s (copies of Barbara Harper’s paper on the Christianization of the Uduk are available on request).

When the missionaries were forced out, the forms of Christianity remained and expanded, but much of the substance was lost for a time. When Wendy James arrived in 1966, for example, the average number of marriages per person over a lifetime appears to have averaged about four. The Uduk were infamous in the region for the impermanence of the marriage relationships. This impermanence of marriage resulted in incredibly complex and intertwined family ties.

Most people lived in hamlets in which the matrilineal birth-groups dominated. Sorghum and sesame were raised in the high meadows, maize in the flood-plains. Porridge and beer were the food staples. Malnutrition and starvation were common, but food was shared freely within the birth-group, and often outside of it. Men raised crops for their wives and children, but work-parties and beer-fests were common within the hamlet, and often with nearby hamlets.

Individual wealth was culturally discouraged, as was debt and virtually all commerce except the barter of goats for cattle.

All of this was to be irrevocably changed by the invasion of government Muslim soldiers in 1987. The people fled their homeland, many to Nor Deng, Karmi, and then Bonga, Ethiopia, over a period of 20 years, but many were separated. With the partitioning of the Sudan in 2009, many attempted to return “home”, but it was too dangerous, and they fled to Doro Camp in South Sudan.

Beginning in 1999, some few began to emigrate to the United States; Isaac Soma was the first, and he and Rehab Yakub (a sister of Peter Gasmalla) moved to Salt Lake City where they were directed to our church by one of their missionaries, Jim Ardill, now a Regional Director of SIM. After a few years, at a time of tribal distress, they went their separate way. In February, 2011, after Peter Gasmalla moved here from Dallas, most of the Salt Lake City contingent returned to be a part of our church family. (Half of the immigrant Uduk currently live in other cities across the US and Canada.)

Many of those in our congregation have a strong desire to minister to others in the Uduk Tribe, both domestically and in South Sudan. We need to embrace them and their dream of sharing God’s Word.