



&lt; MORE STORIES

# Cows-for-Bride Inflation Spurs Cattle Theft Among Mundari in South Sudan

Save

By Matt Richmond and Flavia Krause-Jackson Jul 25, 2011 9:01 PM PT 0 Comments

Email Print



Facebook

Emmanuel Gambiri said an educated wife in his cattle-herding Mundari tribe in South Sudan costs 50 cows, 60 goats and 30,000 Sudanese pounds (\$12,000). <http://topics.bloomberg.com/sudan/> <http://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?u=http%3A%2F%2Ftopics.bloomberg.com%2Fnews%2F2011-07-26%2Fcows-for-bride-inflation-spurs-cattle-theft-among-mundari-in-south-sudan.html>

07-

26%2Fcows-for-bride-inflation-spurs-cattle-theft-among-mundari-in-south-sudan.html)

At that price, some men who otherwise can't afford a bride turn to stealing livestock in order to buy a wife and gain status, said Gambiri, citing a friend who is now a cattle rustler. A surge in "bride price" has fueled cattle raids in which more than 2,000 people are killed each year.

In his village of Terekeka, in the state of Central Equatoria, Gambiri recalls a time when wives cost as little as 12 cows and tribal chiefs wielded enough power to call the parents and set an affordable bride price.

Today, he says, it's a different story.



Twitter

Even as South Sudan celebrated its independence July 9, a two-decade civil war has left scars. The war eroded traditional authority and farming practices, leaving a generation of young men who have grown up either in the army, militias or refugee camps. <https://twitter.com/shar2?url=http%3A%2F%2Fbloom.bg%2Fq7hzNs&counturl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bloomberg.com%2Fnews%2F2011-07-26%2Fcows-for-bride-inflation-spurs-cattle-theft-among-mundari-in-south-sudan.html>

07-

26%2Fcows-for-bride-inflation-spurs-cattle-theft-among-mundari-in-south-

"These boys now don't know how to cultivate. All they know how to manage well is an AK-47," said Gambiri, 37, a program manager for a non-profit organization, in an interview.

In rural communities, where livestock is the measure of wealth, the ripple effects of the surge in bride prices pose one of the biggest social and economic challenges for the world's newest nation. About half of South Sudan's 8 million people live on less than \$1 a day and 85 percent of the adult population is illiterate, according to the UN.

Cow as Currency

sudan.html&title=South Sudan has only 40 miles of paved road, compared with almost 100,000 miles in the north. Amid such poor infrastructure, cattle are the most valuable commodity, supplying dairy and beef.

for-  
Bride+Inflation+Spurs+Cattle+Theft+Among+Mundari+in+South+Sudan&via=BloombergNews)  
Google+  
(https://plus.google.com/share?hl=en&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bloomberg.com%2Fnews%2F2011-07-26%2Fcows-for-bride-inflation-spurs-cattle-theft-among-mundari-in-south-sudan.html)

LinkedIn  
(http://www.linkedin.com/shareArticle?mini=true&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bloomberg.com%2Fnews%2F2011-07-26%2Fcows-

for-bride-inflation-spurs-cattle-theft-among-mundari-in-south-

sudan.html&title=South Sudan has only 40 miles of paved road, compared with almost 100,000 miles in the north. Amid such poor infrastructure, cattle are the most valuable commodity, supplying dairy and beef.  
for-  
Bride+Inflation+Spurs+Cattle+Theft+Among+Mundari+in+South+Sudan&summary=Emmanuel+Gambiri+said+an+educated+wife+in+his+cows+and+400+cows  
herding+Mundari+tribe+in+South+Sudan+costs+50+cows%2C+60+goats+and+30%2C000+Sudanese+pounds+%28%2412%2C000%29  
Bidding War



i9h9oysAVRYo.html)

Photographer: Flavia Krause-Jackson/Bloomberg

*Dinka villagers, wearing Obama t-shirts, pose for a photograph before re-enacting a...* **Read More**

(<http://topics.bloomberg.com/massachusetts/>). “There is little to exchange except that one currency on the hoof.”

With about 20 breeds, South Sudan has a cattle population of 11.7 million, as well as 12.4 million goats and 12.1 million sheep, according to the UN’s Rome-based Food and Agriculture Organization. That ranks South Sudan as having the sixth-largest livestock herd in Africa, with an asset value estimated at the equivalent of \$2.6 billion.

In the countryside, a cow can fetch between 400 and 500 pounds (\$150-190). In the capital of Juba, cows cost 1,000 and 1,500 pounds (\$375-560) a head, and bride price is between 150 cows and 400 cows.

Since the end of a **civil war** (<http://www.aec-sudan.org/docs/cpa/cpa-en.pdf>), in which almost 2 million people died, thousands of men have returned home looking for wives. Greater competition has triggered a bidding war.

Bride prices have surged 44 percent since 2005, when a U.S.-brokered peace accord came into force, and currently half of the male population in rural areas can’t afford a bride, according to an unpublished **United Nations** (<http://unmis.unmissions.org/>) report obtained by Bloomberg News.

Frustrated by the prohibitive cost of getting married, some aspiring grooms go into debt. Others join armed gangs of as many as 50 men that plot raids. Two-thirds of respondents said men had to raid livestock to pay the bride price, according to the UN-Norwegian People's Aid study that interviewed 1,284 men and 1,392 women between January and March last year in five of 10 state capitals.

The study found that today's cattle raiders are poor, uneducated youths who were born in the shadow of the armed conflict between the Muslim north and the south, where traditional religions and Christianity predominate.

### 350,000 Stolen Cows

About 350,000 cattle are stolen a year, costing farmers 200 million Sudanese pounds in lost revenue, according to a 2010 study carried out by SNV, a non-profit organization, for the **Ministry of Animal Resources and Fisheries** (<http://www.goss.org/>). In 2009, about 2,500 people were killed in cattle raids, the study estimated.

At least 100,000 marriages take place each year at an average of 30 head of cattle, generating demand for 3 million head of cattle, the report estimated.

The casualties from cattle raids are often owners who put up resistance or villagers caught in the line of fire, leading to a cycle of reprisals and tribal violence.

Natural disasters such as drought or famine can also trigger cattle theft.

David Gressly, acting principal deputy special representative of the UN secretary-general for South Sudan, said he is aware of "no evidence" that criminality is caused by young men's desire get married.

### Bride Price Inflation

The driving factors for bride prices, on the rise since the late 1990s, have to do with the financial resources of the prospective groom's family, the educational level of the young woman, the size of the prospective bride's family or the political connections of the young man, Gressly said in response to e-mailed questions.

The causal link between high bride price and cattle theft varies and can only be made in some areas of the country, such as the Lakes State mostly populated by Dinka, the country's largest ethnic group, according to Peter Biar Ajak, an economist at the **World Bank** (<http://topics.bloomberg.com/world-bank/>) in **Washington** (<http://topics.bloomberg.com/washington/>).

"Cattle theft is driven by underemployment of youth who have a lot of time on their hands and a human desire to use their youth energy in accumulating wealth," he said in an e-mail.

On May 24, some members of the UN Security Council flew an hour north the capital Juba by helicopter to visit a Dinka village where the men re-enacted enthusiastically a cattle raid as a Western-style shootout with goats standing in for cows.

## Dinka Tribe

For the **Dinka** (<http://strategyleader.org/profiles/dinka.html>), who traditionally herd cattle when it's dry and grow millet during the rainy seasons, livestock used to be the only currency used to buy wives. In the most rural areas, where boys herding cattle use burned cow dung on their skins as mosquito repellent, this is still the case.

Dinka men, who are among the tallest in **Africa** (<http://topics.bloomberg.com/africa/>), value women for their beauty, social rank and education. A daughter of a chief or a girl with a high-school diploma, for example, will cost more. When courting, the men dye their hair red with cow urine.

A practice that goes back 4,000 years to the cradle of civilization in ancient Mesopotamia, bride price prevails in 90 percent of sub-Saharan Africa, where marriage payments are typically **four times** (<http://faculty.arts.ubc.ca/asiwan/siwan-jep2.pdf>) the annual household income, says Siwan Anderson, a development economist at the University of British Columbia in **Vancouver** (<http://topics.bloomberg.com/vancouver/>).

## 'Just Want Cows'

Though Dinka men are allowed to marry as many women as they want, most can only afford one wife. Traditionally, the bride price is paid by the groom's family to consolidate an alliance between families from different clans, and men seek to marry outside of their clan to extend their lineage.

By custom, the groom's family distributes cows to members of the bride's family, down to uncles and brothers. That pattern has changed. Survival considerations now shape the rules, and the bride's parents tend to keep the cattle.

"If a parent has 15 children and three of their daughters are old enough to marry, how else will the parents feed the rest of the children?" said Gambiri. "In rural areas, if you bring them cash, they will say, 'No, we just want the cows'."

Bride price is linked to societies where women play a key role in agriculture, especially where rudimentary farm tools such as a hoe are used, according to Anderson, who wrote a 2007 paper on the economics of bride price. When a husband's family pays for a bride, they gain ownership of her labor as well as ability to bear children.

## Violence or Security?

Detractors say bride price exacerbates poverty by forcing young men to borrow -- or steal -- and exposes women to domestic violence because they are seen as bought and paid for by their husbands. Defenders say the practice is steeped in tradition and confers status and

security to women, much like a diamond engagement ring in Western society.

Almost two-thirds of Ugandan women in rural communities said the drawbacks of bride price -- abuse, lack of education, impoverishment -- outweigh the benefits, according to a **2009 report** ([http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/shss/swell/final\\_report\\_-\\_bride\\_price\\_poverty\\_and\\_domestic\\_vi.pdf](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/shss/swell/final_report_-_bride_price_poverty_and_domestic_vi.pdf)) carried out among 257 women in eastern Uganda (<http://topics.bloomberg.com/uganda/>), which borders with South Sudan.

“More and more, bride price is seen as cementing gender inequality, giving women little power and turning them into commodities to be passed from family to family,” Janet Otte, a field researcher on the study, said in an interview.

The death knell for bride price will likely be economic development and urbanization, according to Anderson. As more pastoral nomads settle into cities, roles will be reversed and the financial value shifts from the woman to the man.

In time, a father might find that instead of receiving a payment in cows, he will be expected to pay a dowry to find his daughter a suitable husband.

To contact the reporters on this story: Flavia Krause-Jackson at the **United Nations** (<http://topics.bloomberg.com/united-nations/>) or [fjackson@bloomberg.net](mailto:fjackson@bloomberg.net) (<mailto:fjackson@bloomberg.net>); Matt Richmond in Juba, Sudan via Johannesburg at 1999 or [pmrichardson@bloomberg.net](mailto:pmrichardson@bloomberg.net) (<mailto:pmrichardson@bloomberg.net>);

To contact the editors responsible for this story: Mark Silva at [msilva34@bloomberg.net](mailto:msilva34@bloomberg.net) (<mailto:msilva34@bloomberg.net>); Antony Sguazzin at [sguazzin@bloomberg.net](mailto:sguazzin@bloomberg.net) (<mailto:sguazzin@bloomberg.net>)



Facebook ([https://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?](https://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?u=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bloomberg.com%2Fnews%2F2011-07-26%2Fcows-for-bride-inflation-spurs-cattle-theft-among-mundari-in-south-sudan.html)

[u=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bloomberg.com%2Fnews%2F2011-07-26%2Fcows-for-bride-inflation-spurs-cattle-theft-among-mundari-in-south-sudan.html](https://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?u=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bloomberg.com%2Fnews%2F2011-07-26%2Fcows-for-bride-inflation-spurs-cattle-theft-among-mundari-in-south-sudan.html))



Twitter ([https://twitter.com/share?](https://twitter.com/share?url=http%3A%2F%2Fbloom.bg%2Fq7hzNs&counturl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bloomberg.com%2Fnews%2F2011-07-26%2Fcows-for-bride-inflation-spurs-cattle-theft-among-mundari-in-south-sudan.html&text=Cows-for-Bride+Inflation+Spurs+Cattle+Theft+Among+Mundari+in+South+Sudan&via=BloombergNews)

[url=http%3A%2F%2Fbloom.bg%2Fq7hzNs&counturl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bloomberg.com%2Fnews%2F2011-07-26%2Fcows-for-bride-inflation-spurs-cattle-theft-among-mundari-in-south-sudan.html&text=Cows-for-Bride+Inflation+Spurs+Cattle+Theft+Among+Mundari+in+South+Sudan&via=BloombergNews](https://twitter.com/share?url=http%3A%2F%2Fbloom.bg%2Fq7hzNs&counturl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bloomberg.com%2Fnews%2F2011-07-26%2Fcows-for-bride-inflation-spurs-cattle-theft-among-mundari-in-south-sudan.html&text=Cows-for-Bride+Inflation+Spurs+Cattle+Theft+Among+Mundari+in+South+Sudan&via=BloombergNews))



Google+ ([https://plus.google.com/share?](https://plus.google.com/share?hl=en&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bloomberg.com%2Fnews%2F2011-07-26%2Fcows-for-bride-inflation-spurs-cattle-theft-among-mundari-in-south-sudan.html)

[hl=en&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bloomberg.com%2Fnews%2F2011-07-26%2Fcows-for-bride-inflation-spurs-cattle-theft-among-mundari-in-south-sudan.html](https://plus.google.com/share?hl=en&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bloomberg.com%2Fnews%2F2011-07-26%2Fcows-for-bride-inflation-spurs-cattle-theft-among-mundari-in-south-sudan.html))



LinkedIn ([http://www.linkedin.com/shareArticle?mini=true&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bloomberg.com%2Fnews%2F2011-07-26%2Fcows-for-bride-inflation-spurs-cattle-theft-among-mundari-in-south-sudan.html&title=Cows-for-](http://www.linkedin.com/shareArticle?mini=true&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bloomberg.com%2Fnews%2F2011-07-26%2Fcows-for-bride-inflation-spurs-cattle-theft-among-mundari-in-south-sudan.html&title=Cows-for-Bride+Inflation+Spurs+Cattle+Theft+Among+Mundari+in+South+Sudan&summary=Emmanuel+Gambiri+said+herding+Mundari+tribe+in+South+Sudan+costs+50+cows%2C+60+goats+and+30%2C000+Sudanese+pounds)

[Bride+Inflation+Spurs+Cattle+Theft+Among+Mundari+in+South+Sudan&summary=Emmanuel+Gambiri+said+herding+Mundari+tribe+in+South+Sudan+costs+50+cows%2C+60+goats+and+30%2C000+Sudanese+pounds](http://www.linkedin.com/shareArticle?mini=true&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bloomberg.com%2Fnews%2F2011-07-26%2Fcows-for-bride-inflation-spurs-cattle-theft-among-mundari-in-south-sudan.html&title=Cows-for-Bride+Inflation+Spurs+Cattle+Theft+Among+Mundari+in+South+Sudan&summary=Emmanuel+Gambiri+said+herding+Mundari+tribe+in+South+Sudan+costs+50+cows%2C+60+goats+and+30%2C000+Sudanese+pounds)

Iraq Unrest Having Limited Impact on  
Oil: Beveridge  
(<http://www.bloomberg.com/video/unrest-having-limited-impact-on-oil-beveridge-wGGUYxAMR7OrvoEcDaHm5g>)

Why Cantor's Defeat Is Significant for  
U.S. Stocks  
(<http://www.bloomberg.com/video/cantor-s-defeat-is-significant-for-u-s-stocks-ev3hEXB0RHCSvRPRvQJR8A.I>)

Michael Lewis Rips Stressed Wall  
Street Titans  
(<http://www.bloomberg.com/video/st-woes-butt-of-michael-lewis-s-latest-column-BMPfhnJoTHGhTIs3o88KTA.htm>)

Iraq Crisis Not as Bad as You Think:  
Bartle Bull  
(<http://www.bloomberg.com/video/iraq-s-economy-markets-survive-violent-unrest-9NgdZ9hLRhWF72Yh7CzcfA.htm>)

ISIL Raiding Millions From Banks in  
Iraq  
(<http://www.bloomberg.com/video/bremer-on-iraq-turmoil-u-s-options-VAI27EIoRbSISgyr9e6nTA.html>)

([http://www.taboola.com/popup?template=colorbox&taboola\\_utm\\_source=bloomberg&taboola\\_utm\\_medium=bytaboola&taboola\\_utm\\_content=texts-links-2c:well-text-links-2c:](http://www.taboola.com/popup?template=colorbox&taboola_utm_source=bloomberg&taboola_utm_medium=bytaboola&taboola_utm_content=texts-links-2c:well-text-links-2c:))

---

Bloomberg reserves the right to edit or remove comments but is under no obligation to do so, or to explain individual moderation decisions.

Share  Favorite 

Start the discussion...

Be the first to comment.



**D**

## Add Disqus to your site

# Bloomberg



**MORE CONTENT** 

(<http://www.freebooksbooks.com/docs/0119/2008/6/15/2216375/10116926986115221>)

| trk=tod- |  |

Trademarks (<http://www.bloomberg.com/trademarks>) | Terms of Service

(<http://www.bloomberg.com/tos>) | [Privacy Policy \(http://www.bloomberg.com/privacy\)](http://www.bloomberg.com/privacy) | [Bloomberg](#)

Careers (<http://jobs.bloomberg.com>) | Jobs by Indeed (<http://jobsearch.bloomberg.com/>) | Made in

0) NYC (<http://nytm.org/made-in-nyc>)

©2014 Bloomberg L.P. All Rights Reserved