

DIALOGUE

‘It’s Difficult to Stay, and it’s Hard to Leave’ Stories of Refugee Journeys in Australia

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Louise Olliff (LO): Hala and I have come from Melbourne to talk about African refugees in Australia from more of a personal than an academic perspective. We’re not presenting ‘research’ on these issues, but rather our own experiences and stories. As such, we don’t intend to represent or make sweeping statements about all African refugees in Australia. What we would like to do is share with you some of the diverse stories that are sometimes lost in the public discourse.

We’d also like to challenge or deconstruct some of the discourse around refugee experiences and resettlement and focus on the Australian community (people like me) as ‘actors’ in the refugee journey. We want to use stories to talk about how our own journeys have been shaped by each others’ perceptions, assumptions and expectations, and how these are intimately tied to the way in which African refugees are able to negotiate their place in the Australian community.

And perhaps our stories will also show how some of the challenges faced by refugees – of finding jobs, respect, safety etc. – and the fears expressed by people in the Australian community around newcomers, seem to reflect a discord between our differing expectations and reality.

But first, how Hala and I came to know each other. We met through the Sudanese Australian Integrated Learning (SAIL) Program in Melbourne.

Hala Arfish (HA): The SAIL Program is a group of wonderful volunteering people who come every Saturday morning to help people like me with their English. It’s for all age groups and levels of language. SAIL involves 450 members of Sudanese community, 350 volunteers and seven campuses.

I started going to SAIL in March 2003, a month after I arrived in Australia. It has been great to meet those people every Saturday. People you know and some you don’t. They all come for one reason, and that is to share and to teach English. I first met Louise in October 2004. Since then we have met every Saturday at the SAIL Footscray campus, in the Western suburbs of Melbourne.

LO: One thing I love about SAIL – and I have been going now for over three years – is being able to share stories and talk with Hala each week. I have learned a lot about Sudan through her, and I think I’ve also learned a lot about Australia. For example, when we were thinking about what to present here, I asked Hala a couple of questions about what her journey to Australia has been like, particularly in relation to earlier conversations we had had at SAIL about Hala and her family returning to Sudan. The title of our presentation came from a conversation, which went something like this: ‘Hala, why do you want to stay in Australia?’

HA: ‘My dream is for my children to educate very well and to graduate from the best university in Australia. I want to continue studying what I started in Sudan – journalism. I also want safety for me and my family. I am trying to forget the experiences we went through in Sudan and Egypt. I want to work with people who respect you for who you are and respect your culture and just make you feel you are one of them, working together and sharing ideas. These things make anyone love the country they live in.’

LO: ‘And why do you want to go back to Sudan?’

HA: ‘I am thinking about going back to Sudan because it’s really hard to get those things at this time. It’s been difficult for me to stay home and let my husband do two shifts a day and all that for us to survive. So I said to myself, I have to find a job... and when I did it made my life more difficult! The childcare fees and the school fees became higher. My Uni fees, the rent, the bills, everything has become more expensive.

For me and my husband, our life has become work – an endless coming from work, going to work. We feel guilty having two children and not having the time to spend with them. That’s such shame! I am always asking myself, what are we working for? Buying a house? Going for a holiday? Saving some money for our kids? We haven’t done any of these things and we have been working hard for three years. The life for me and my family is a boring life. We have to cover the cost of our life by working day and night.

The thing that is holding me to stay is education for my children and me, but paying University fees that are so high is also very hard. Sometimes we have to borrow some money to buy food and sometimes we have eaten only one meal a day. There is no difference between Australia and Sudan! We try to forget the hunger we lived, but life in Australia keeps remind me of what we went through before. We keep hoping for a better life in Australia...’

LO: It has been conversations like these that have really made me think about how the Australian community shapes the refugee journey. And whether someone remains an ‘outsider’ or is given a door inside, depends so much on the host community. But before we go into that, it’s important that we introduce ourselves, because our stories will make better sense with some context around them.

So, me: I was born in Australia but spent my childhood in Hong Kong. My father is an engineer who worked in refugee situations for many years with UNHCR and has always been politicised. My ideas and worldview are very much shaped by him. I have a degree in Journalism and International Development, and a Masters in Anthropology. I work for the Centre for Multicultural Youth, a community-based advocacy organisation. I have lived on five continents. In 2006 I spent three months volunteering in a Liberian refugee camp in Ghana. I only speak English fluently, though I’m learning Arabic and have basic conversational Khmer. This is what I bring to the equation when I meet Hala each week at SAIL.

HA: My name is Hala Musa Arfish. I was a professional athlete (gymnast) in Sudan. I am married to a former professional soccer player and we have two children. My great great grandfather was a King in the Nuba mountains of Sudan. I speak four languages. I work as a childcare worker and am currently studying for my Diploma in Children’s Services at Victoria University. I started learning English when I came to Australia, four years ago.

LO: Going back to our theme, the role of the Australian community as ‘actors’ in the refugee journey, I think sometimes our perceptions or ideas about *who refugees are* shape our expectations of how a ‘refugee’ should act and where they ‘fit’ within the Australian community. When there is discord between the two, this is when communication breaks down and conflict, misunderstandings, fear and discrimination arise. For example, there was the experience that Hala had when she first arrived...

HA: When I arrived in Australia in 2003 I spoke no English. I was saying to myself: Finally, we have made it to Australia; the land of dreams. The place where we can lay down our worries, forgetting all the experiences we went through and hoping for a better life. After finishing my 510 hours at the Adult Migrant English Services (AMES) I was told by Centrelink that I had to find a job. I tried to tell Centrelink that my English wasn’t good enough. The woman at Centrelink said to me: ‘You can be a cleaner’. I was very upset when she said this to me, not because cleaning is bad or anything, but because the way she told me was rude... *You can be a cleaner.*

LO: I have heard these same kinds of stories over and over again. The idea that refugees should be grateful to be cleaners or to work in an abattoir or factory, regardless of their background or ambition, seems to me to be based on popular perceptions Australians have of Africa and Africans. And I suppose this is hardly surprising when you consider that the average Australian understanding of that far-away continent - 'Africa' - is very much manufactured by World Vision ads, the odd news reports of death and conflict, and the violence and poverty depicted in African *American* popular culture. Do you think you should name World Vision? Might it be more sensitive to use a generic term, eg aid agencies?

So I guess here I'm talking about how *perceptions* are created and how this in turn feeds into attitudes and behaviours, which easily leads into a discussion about discrimination. The undermining force and persistent experiences of racism and discrimination (or perceived discrimination) in Australia, is something I have learned from talking to Hala each week.

I remember a few months ago there was a house auction across the road from SAIL. We went, because Hala and her husband had been looking to buy a house for a while. When we walked into the house, the real estate agent automatically handed me the flyer, completely oblivious to Hala, even though she was closer to him. I was appalled, although Hala didn't seem to blink an eyelid. I handed her the flyer and we walked in. This was one moment when I recognised my own privilege; of being an 'insider'.

HA: I am going to talk about some times that I have felt like an 'outsider'. One time I really felt like an outsider was following the comments made by former Immigration Minister, Kevin Andrews, about Africans not integrating. I think these comments are obviously not right – I mean, he failed to provide any evidence to support his comment, other than incidents in Victoria where one young Sudanese man was murdered. If one person is murdered, shouldn't he be the victim, not the one to blame? I don't understand what "integration" Mr Andrews was talking about. The Sudanese community has only been here for a few years. We go to school and we are eager to learn. We work hard. *Insider, what else can we do?* After this comment, I felt like we are not welcome in this country and we have been rejected in a country where we felt like we belong. When I first heard the comment, I cried and I said to my husband: Why are we here? It just made me devastated, living in a land where you feel like no one believes in you and what you are trying to do. And the fact that it is the *Immigration Minister* who is making these comments – he is not just anyone, he is the person in charge!

But, I am not going to be angry. Andrews' comment made me want to show you [insiders] that we *are* integrating and we are trying our best for this country. I believe that the Sudanese community can do much more... but we need the help of insiders, of course.

Another story that reminds me of being an 'outsider' was when I went to pick up my daughter from school. I saw my daughter wasn't happy and I asked her what was wrong. She said to me: 'I want my hair to be long like the girls at school and my skin to be lighter'. I said to her: 'Why? You look beautiful like that.' She told me the girls at the school were laughing at her and they asked her: Why are you black and what's wrong with your hair? And it's not just the children, but some of the parents were touching her hair and laughing. My daughter hated going to school!

I remember this friend telling me about an old Aussie man who was the librarian at his school. The man said to my friend: 'You know you are really scary with your black skin and your curly hair. When I first saw an African person here I was really scared.' My friend replied: 'You know, the first time I saw a white person in my country, I was crying for two days. My grandma, she was praying and asking God, what has this man done to make him sick and to change the colour of his skin like this?'

LO: However, we don't want to end on a negative note. A question that remains for me is how the broader Australian community can get a better sense of the diverse stories of people coming from Africa, so that the 'victim' is not the overwhelming narrative, and we can see and use and be part of all the wonderful things that African Australians like Hala bring to our shores. Programs like SAIL are one small way – the fact that Hala and I are presenting at this conference in Canberra is testimony to that – but what other ideas do we have? I will leave this to Hala to wrap up.

HA: I want people in Australia to treat us as equal. There is no difference between me and you. Forget about the colour of our skin. It's just colour. Try to understand and know us. We are very respectful and kind people.

I have tried my best to make friends with 'insiders' because I want to know what other people think about us African Australians. What I have found is that they think we are born in the jungle and we don't know anything about technology. Yes, some of us were born in the village and it was very hard for us to go to school. I remember my mum telling me and my sister how lucky we were because we were born in the capital city [Khartoum]. She was telling us about how she walked for two hours every day to go to school, and when she got home she had to go help her dad on the farm and then to help her mum

cooking and cleaning. And all this was done without any technology – no washing machine, no dishwasher, everything by hand.

In this country, we are doing the hardest jobs, from cleaning to factory work. And that is okay. We are still learning. Insiders, we come from war and some of us lost our families and kids, but we are still strong. We want you to be patient with us. Give us time. We are going to learn. Just look at the migrants from Asia – they arrived in Australia and the same story happened to them. But look at them now. In every hospital there are Vietnamese and Chinese doctors. Go to the bank, and the manager is a migrant. They have been here longer than us, and look at what they have done. If you give us the opportunity, you are going to see what we can do for this country.

I love this country and I am willing to learn. But it's too much. It's so hard. It's too much to take from insiders and not get any respect for who you are. It is so difficult to stay in this country where your whole life is work and you don't have any time to spend with your family and your kids. And you are doing all of this and it isn't enough to cover the cost of life in Australia, but you can't return [to Sudan] because of the war. It is so hard to leave, and it's so hard to stay. We need your help, insiders.

LO: If you want to find out more about the SAIL program, go to www.africanoz.net/~SAIL