

The Australasian Review of African Studies

African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific

Volume 32 Number 2 December 2011

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No Room In My Car

Priscella Engall

Independent Journalist

I am told this story the day after it happened and I commit it to paper as soon as I can conjure up a felt-tip. An African man named Bona was arriving for the first time to Australian soil on a visitors' visa. He lives in the Bahr al-Ghazal region of Southern Sudan, in the heart of the Horn of Africa. He is a proud Twic Mayardit tribesman. His immediate family members all live in the western Sydney suburb of Westmead, including his wife Rebecca and their six children. I know one son Ajak, who is a promising soccer player and committed student at Della Salle College in Ashfield. He is the epitome of the bicultural struggle of the African Australian existence. In school uniform he is a wraith-like figure of reserve. Then a few weeks later at a formal cultural event – a welcoming party for his father with 2000 guests - he adopts the uniform of western youth with a swagger befitting the son of a respected elder. However he is clearly uncomfortable when he must give a speech with his father hovering expressionless just behind him. Ajak has reached the Sudanese age of a warrior, where he must assume the responsibilities of a man. This fact would surely not be lost on him.

Bona is an elder and his arrival at the airport is a matter of heated anticipation. Vibrating mobiles shiver inside the pants pockets of many community leaders. Later I was to find out that Bona was not just an elder; he was a key member of the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA). This army was at the forefront of the resistance movement when the South first decided to go 'bush' and take the fight to the heart of the Islamist northern regime who were committing genocide against their southern Christian neighbours. It was this underground rebel movement who the Dinka tribes decided to donate their sacred cows to. They would feed the hungry boys and men, when food sources were low. Killing a cow for food was against the Dinka tradition and the ultimate emasculation of a clan's status but they were fighting for the ultimate prize, a free and independent republic.

So at Sydney Airport at 6am that Sunday morning, a large car carrying about eight people is there to greet Bona. Everyone gathers in the terminal taking hundreds of photos; celebrating the great man. But there is a problem when they arrive at the carpark. There is no room in the car for Bona. Yes, it never occurred to anyone in the pick up party that there

would need to be a seat free for their overseas guest. Luckily another elder had arrived in his own car. And the two drove off together.

The elder who told me this story shook his head in dismay and embarrassment but I knew – that is the Sudanese way. For people who have traipsed thousands of miles through the elephant grass and apocalyptic thorn trees between Sudan, Ethiopia and then Kenya, some customs don't compute. When you have been living in a survivalist mindset - the finer practicalities of western society like planning ahead and car seating, does not necessarily sit easily in the Sudanese way of thinking.

The call of a cultural / tribal obligation echoed that day at Sydney Airport and afterward. That tribal obligation was acknowledging the arrival of a great leader high up on the totem pole of community elders, by gathering together. But when a community member is asked to rally for themselves on an individual basis, there is a pause. Individual response – without counsel from others (peers, elders) – is a foreign concept to them. Yet this is the model for resettlement programs that have been set up in Australia and in many other western countries where the Sudanese have formed a significant regional quorum of the UNHCR's refugee program over the last eight years.

Existing resettlement programs do provide a level of community development / capacity building support however case management models are the bread and butter of the support structure. There is a danger in working with individuals as silos, not as part of a living breathing communal whole with others. And this is the tricky rub of the situation; squaring up the formal procedures that follow when a new migrant steps foot off the plane here, with the cultural / tribal elements that are not erased simply through a change of postcode and geographic location. These elements operate at a cultural level with the community as a whole. And by decoding and learning something about the tribal practices of the refugee community that is being resettled, then people with undervalued wells of resilience and resourcefulness, may just have a chance at a life post-conflict and post-forced migration. Otherwise all the good intentions in the world and all the well-resourced support programs, can fail to reach the intended target group and fall short of fulfilling the ideals of the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees.

Over the last year I have been studying and interviewing the Southern Sudanese, one of the largest refugee groups who have arrived in Australia on the Humanitarian Entrants program in the last eight years.

A few years ago I would have been hard pressed to string together a single sentence about Sudan beyond a few geographical facts. But all that changed when two Africans moved in next door to our home; Elizabeth a Kenyan lady and Caesar, from Sierra Leone. I started spending time with the couple and was invited to their wedding to write a story about this unusual union.

Finding out Elizabeth and Caesars' story stirred something in me. I had over the last few years drifted away from my sociological roots at uni. Now I was reconnecting with my ethnographic yearnings as a teenager, imagining the lives of those featured in my father's National Geographic pictorials from the 60s.

I soon discovered my neighbours were part of a sizeable African diaspora of refugees living in Western Sydney. Most it turned out were from the East. I was introduced to a man named Moses, a Sudanese Dinka, who had fled the civil war to Jabarona camp in far north Sudan, and then Egypt and then Sydney. That chance meeting firmed my resolve, to find out more about these proud warriors now housed in suburbia.

At Easter I finally secured my green card into the inner sanctum: a tribal gathering in the unlikeliest of places, a primary school in Granville on a Saturday afternoon. The hall was full of men sitting in the staff room; most in formal dress. Each told various permutations of the one story – struggles experienced overseas and now here, pain felt at the stinging criticism from the government about their inability to integrate and their frustrations about understanding the “systems” here. The women arrived later with traditional African food. The youth were allocated time to talk to me, once the elders gave the nod. This particular tribe meets at this school every weekend to attend to community business.

From this point, I knew there was a parallel universe operating in Sydney. A fascinating Sudanese subculture taking shape, mirroring life from home and providing a security blanket to people living in exile from everything they have ever known.

To calculate the exact number of Sudanese living in Australia is an inexact science. There are 28, 136 who have officially arrived since 2000.

But even The Department of Immigration and Citizenship acknowledges this number is an underestimation because so many have arrived via countries other than Sudan, for example, Uganda, Kenya and Chad. The Australian Bureau of Statistics' last Census was held in 2006 when the Sudanese were very newly arrived and not yet on the ABS radar in terms of targeted assistance in filling out the forms. As a consequence, they have often slipped through the statistician's net.

Most Sudanese refugees hail from the south of Sudan. Sudan is a nation that has been fractured in spirit and mind since the British signed off on the colony in 1956 and left 40 million people to forge an independent future on the back of a region divided in half already by peoples from different racial and religious backgrounds. Civil war has been endemic between the Arab Muslim populated north and the Christian/animist African southerners. A campaign to enforce strict Islamic Sharia laws in the south and the discovery of key oil reserves in the border areas of Abyei, the Nuba Mountains and the Blue Nile State, were tipping points for civil wars that raged til 1972, and then reignited from 1983 to 2005.

The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Accord was signed on very shaky grounds, conditional on a free and fair referendum in January 2011. Despite the Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir threatening to postpone the voting and fears of bloodshed, the referendum went ahead with 98.9% voting for secession. On July 9th history was made as The Republic of South Sudan was declared Africa's 54th country. The pipelines that stretched from the oil wells in the south to the refineries in the north were the only ties that united the two regions previously. Now they prove to be an intractable bone of contention in this acrimonious divorce.

The Southern Sudanese represent a cohort of new arrivals who epitomise the dislocation experienced after being offered passage to a western country like Australia. Most of the Sudanese arrivals were raised in agrarian/agricultural settings and lived their formative years in remote villages – boys in cattle camps - and then in refugee camps. Some practiced polygyny and lived with their wives in one village in a number of tukul grass huts and operated as an extended family with deeply rooted kinship ties. Cows were valued above all else and rarely killed for food. Many adhered to a number of strict ceremonies and rituals marking stages of life from birth to death, which both defined expectations of that person in the years to come and also offered a sense of identity and belonging. One ritual being the cauterized scarification of a boy's forehead marking his passage to manhood / warrior, with a web of intricate V-shaped lines

or dots that best approximated a bull's horns, and that also clearly marked which tribe he was from. Then there were legal matters in the village, which were divided into civil law and customary law matters. Civil law easily related to public issues such as theft, while customary law matters like personal arguments over the bride price in an arranged marriage, were referred to the chief of the village.

The transplanting of these fiercely tribal warriors to the terracotta-tiled suburbs of Australia was never going to be straightforward. Now these two worlds co-exist in Sydney, with a subculture as distinct as the jagged welts crisscrossing some people's foreheads. With a group of people who adopt some western practices like securing employment or attending Training and Further Education classes on a regular basis, but whose daily routine is still driven by tribal directives laid down by a council of chiefs.

As seen in the recent ABC program *Foreign Correspondent*, the story of Valentino Achak Deng as told in the bestselling novel *What Is The What* reminded us what happened to some of the Lost Boys of Sudan who survived civil war, starvation, man eating crocs, months of traveling barefoot through confronting terrain, only to find the fairy-tale of resettlement in the United States did not always have a storybook ending. The essence of the journey remains the same in Australia. From a cattle camp, to a refugee camp to a cramped apartment block with running water but with extended family forced to live many suburbs away depending on housing availability, there was now a new chapter in their forced migration story that would involve a lot of confusion, fear and frustration.

On an individual level, the Federal Government does provide a resettlement support program for these new arrivals. Through the Humanitarian Settlement Strategy, each person is assigned a caseworker for six months from Settlement Services International (SSI) to help with initial assessments and provide short term housing, introductions to basic services such as Medicare, and referrals to counselling and language support such as 510 hours of English classes. After six months, the client is then exited off the program and referred to local Migrant Resource Centres who deliver the Government's Settlement Grants Program where up to 5 years of assistance is provided with a number of casework, community development and capacity building programs. People are informed about pathways to employment, further education and training, life skills, social support groups and translation help. The Department of

Immigration and Citizenship has identified five years as a useful barometer to measure how long it takes to complete settlement and fully integrate into Australian society.

However this resettlement service provision map tells but a fraction of the story. In tandem with this formal settlement process, the community has found sustenance and support from within. An informal process of resettlement takes place which is often invisible to mainstream service providers or society. This process operates on a community level and often supports those formally mandated processes and channels. The model operates in much the same way that complementary medicine works with more traditional medical practices, to deliver best outcomes for people who may not be equipped yet to engage with westerners or western practices. For example, a caseworker from SSI may meet a new arrival at the airport and deliver them to a home on their first day but many times a community leader will be in contact shortly afterwards, or the person will have looked into where their nearest place of worship is. From there, they will find out which is their nearest church which is offering a Sudanese service. From there, they will meet their support networks.

By drawing on their own tribal practices and procedures, which are mushrooming and creating an intricate tapestry of (sub) cultural practices, the Southern Sudanese operate in a world hidden from the mainstream, where customary rules of law from Sudan take root. This is where culture and identity informs and facilitates resettlement.

It is hard to reduce to words on a page, the significance of this Referendum to the Southern Sudanese. Many lives had been lost in order to arrive at emancipation and the formation of a free and independent country. So again the collective superseded the individual. Some community members forfeited good jobs so they could be free to work at the sub centres during registrations in November and voting in January. They worked tirelessly as either Identifiers (where they checked the Sudanese lineage/origins of each voter) or support staff. Donning the sub centre uniform gave the individual a sense of empowerment and status within the community; that they were helping their country of origin move forward out of years of oppression and repaying the debt of their fallen ancestors.

The community machinations that operated in the lead up to the Referendum again underlines the importance people placed on being a

part of the decision making process and having a personal stake in something greater than themselves. Living in exile, the draw to be together and make decisions on a communal basis takes on greater significance.

The community is mobilized to come together at meetings that affect the community as a whole, rather than address individual issues. When a call goes out about community business, other matters take a backseat and attendance is required. People are still hardwired into a land and its history. Younger community members walk around the streets listening to recordings of the speech that the former SPLA leader Dr John Garang gave in September 2005 shortly before he was killed in a helicopter crash.

On a daily basis, every ounce of their being is directed toward African affairs and these community associations. The organizations are constantly chasing up funds and resources to keep their cultural heritage and traditions alive, and more importantly to support those trapped back home to fulfil their kinship obligations. Elders deal with internal problems, such as marital discord or child dispute, with mediation between all parties in some ways much like they did at home. If a community has agreed to a traditional marriage, pressure is applied to pay the bride dowry in cattle. Meetings are called with the extended family and elders to try and work out how the person can be supported financially to meet his marriage obligations.

So why do the cultural / tribal practices and communal aspect of resettlement matter? Because it does connect with anecdotal evidence that suggests this underpins the key to survival and the ability to integrate into a new environment.

Amidst the debate over the last two years about the merits of the migration program in Australia, there is no disputing that many issues pre-arrival for the Sudanese impact on the post-arrival life of a person. So for someone who may have been eyewitness to the loss of family, experienced torture, trauma and survivors guilt, lost their home and buried their young, there can be a myriad of psycho/social issues to address. However in looking at media reporting and government rhetoric about this group, it has been easy to generalise Sudanese refugees as mere victims. This label perpetuates a running narrative where the two words become synonymous – refugee/victim.

What gets lost in this negative labelling of a person as a victim, a refugee, a woman at risk or unaccompanied minor, is the fact that these people did survive. When all the odds were against them, this large influx of migrants survived what would crush many others. Now in Australia this community has proven to be a highly resilient group of people who have arrived here and have attempted to retain part of what kept them alive. And a solidifying thread throughout their anecdotes and stories about a key aspect of their resilience is culture. So it would seem logical therefore to not leave this crucial piece of the resettlement puzzle out of the discussion when it comes to policy and programming decisions.

With this in mind, enhancing the cultural competency of those directly involved in the byzantine chain of refugee service provision should be prioritized. Once upon a time service providers who were in the business of supporting newly arrived culturally and linguistically diverse communities operated within a fairly narrow framework. Interpreters and translators were employed, brochures printed, the odd DVD resource produced. Today the support landscape has evolved with community engagement teams that operate at the local council level, and with agencies like Centrelink. Some police local area commands employ multicultural ethnic community liaison officers, schools have Refugee Transition Units. However job titles may have changed but there has been a lag in understanding what true engagement is. There needs to be more of a holistic approach that understands cultural competency training with staff is just as important as printing a brochure in the home language of the client. So many resources that have been produced often gather dust in the reception areas of service providers.

Charities have been one of the first to take the lead in terms of restructuring. With many now adopting modes of service delivery based on NGO models of community development. Instead of a 'hand out' approach, they offer programs to work 'hand-in-hand' with their client groups. The difficulty has always been how to support the hard to reach people who are actually the most in need of assistance. Service providers had been scratching their heads and crying a familiar tune; "we are offering a free service, why aren't people accepting it with open arms." Information sessions would be held on useful topics such as nutrition or job seeking. Cups of tea would be prepared, sandwiches neatly quartered, colourful promotional flyers designed. Then no one from the target group would turn up.

Now with ethnic / community engagement teams, there are moves towards working with community leaders / elders, with the women's' groups, with youth groups etc. Now there is negotiation about when and where is the best times and places for having meetings and imparting information. Relationships are being formed and pathways produced that allow for cultural exchange that flows both ways. Those poor service providers sitting by their cups of tea in that cold and foreboding Town Hall, might have benefited from knowing that many Africans do not like eating bread and would wonder why they were being called for a meeting unless they felt they were in trouble for something. That is, if the flyer had reached them at all.

Professionals and workers in the resettlement support field are now encouraged to learn more about the communities they are providing a service by attending cultural events and ceremonies, understanding the communities' decision making structures and by building trust with leaders and families and young people. And by understanding that just because you may not possess the home language of a client, by watching, waiting, listening and being open to cultural exchange, that awareness and understanding increases.

In February I returned to Australia after travelling through Ethiopia and Kenya. While I was staying with the Kikuyu tribe in Naivasha the news broke that President al-Bashir had called the results of the Referendum early, finally recognizing the democratic electoral process by announcing that the South had overwhelmingly voted for secession and the Government in Khartoum would not stand in their way.

One week later there was a celebration event in a local park in Western Sydney that was whipped together very quickly to mark the birth of the new country. Again the circumstances surrounding the organization of this Sudanese event illustrates customary / tribal practices coming to the fore. The community was compelled to speedily arrange a gathering, partly propelled by political reasons. The celebration had to take place pre-March before the Chairperson of the NSW umbrella organization was about to vacate his position and others present themselves as worthy successors. As in Africa, when a leader is finally forced to vacate his seat after overstaying his term of office, there is much lobbying to take over.

The day I arrive home, I see campaigning has already started at a feverish pace. Only one candidate from each Southern Sudanese state is allowed to stand. As the event draws closer, the budget swells. VIPs have been

invited, including the NSW Police Commissioner and Kevin Rudd, the Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs. My attempts to suggest that Kevin Rudd may not be coming because of the Christchurch earthquake fall on deaf ears. So now an informal picnic has turned into a large affair with a stage, tent, jumping castles, sound system and DJ. Extra funding is required. Two program flyers are produced, one for service providers indicating a start time of 2pm and another for the community saying the event starts at 10am – four hours deemed suitable to allow for African time.

The day arrives and there is a full program of speeches, prayers and cultural performances. Some of the boys from Lakes State have bleached their hair a burnt orange shade, to replicate the initiation tradition at home where a boy moves up to warrior status after showering his hair in cow urine, which turns his locks a bronzed yellow. Shields are on full show, bodies are daubed in white paint, people dance with spears and grass sticks. As usual, there is an easy mix of western and traditional garb. All leaders will be in formal suits, despite the mercury rising to over thirty degrees.

Again the veil of cultural / tribal practices and directives hold sway, from the planning of the celebration, ensuring all ten Sudanese states were represented in the cultural dances performed by the youth, giving equal time to religious and political reflections on the Referendum result and the seating of elders and leaders at the front of the tent area.

As the tent was dismantled, and the sun started to set and the formal part of the program came to close, the community remained behind in the park, clumped in pockets deep in conversation. Somewhere in the threads of that afternoon, lay some answers about moving forward with practical outcomes for both Southern Sudanese families now living in Australasia and those support agencies who are funded to facilitate that process.

It is fitting to end with a proverb – “She who can’t bear the smoke will never get to the fire.” Resettlement for the Southern Sudanese will take patience and some time, but there will be a wealth of information to learn from these proud people. Don’t let these people just walk by you on the street, without taking the time to recognize their amazing resilience and capacity to live.

This article is dedicated to Thomas Ater from Rumbek, a Sudanese youth worker who passed away in Juba, Sudan on 15th August 2011.