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Narratives of Return Among Refugee-Background South Sudanese in New Zealand

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Abstract

Ideals about return to the country of origin are important among many refugee-background communities. In this article I describe and analyse the return narratives created and disseminated among refugee-background South Sudanese in New Zealand (NZ). The return narratives of this community promise returnees substantial social and economic rewards, such as easy employment and a peaceful life alongside family. These are positioned in opposition to the common problems of resettlement, such as lack of employment, poor literacy, and other indicators of marginalisation. The research underpinning this article was conducted in 2011, during which there was a unique historical conjuncture between South Sudanese independence and a community members' positive experience of return. In this article I use return narratives from three interviewees to examine the connections between this conjuncture and community members' resettlement experiences and their sense of belonging in NZ. The varying narratives of these interviewees illustrate the diversity of the NZ-based South Sudanese community and provide an instructive overview of the similarities and differences among their various return narratives.

In describing these narratives, I show that they emerge from marginalising experiences of resettlement in NZ and present an argument demonstrating the intersection between these experiences and the community's widespread lack of belonging. I suggest that the prominence of return narratives is less about unambiguous feelings of belonging toward South Sudan than it is about lacking belonging in NZ. I argue that these narratives are connected to broader community projects of discursively and imaginatively constructing South Sudanese lives, and that the ideals of return allow South Sudanese in NZ to live within resettlement's constraints.

Introduction

Research into all stages of refugees' experiences has been prominent in the social sciences over the last three decades. Many forced migration

scholars have adopted 'transnational' or 'diasporic' frameworks to better understand refugees' lives, and refugees' transnational networks and movements are an important focus of this work (Al-Ali, Black, & Koser, 2001; Cheran, 2006; Hopkins, 2006; Lewis, 2010). Transnationalism is defined as "a social process whereby migrants operate in social fields that transgress geographic, political, and cultural borders" (see Brettell, 2003, p. 48; and Glick Schiller, Basch, and Szanton Blanc, 1995, pp. 48-63). For Safran (1991, pp. 83-84), a diaspora requires a collective consciousness formed through forcible dispersal from a homeland. Despite theoretical disagreements over the definition of diasporic communities, this "diasporic consciousness" is a fundamental attribute of almost all definitions (cf. Clifford, 1994; Cohen, 1997).

Much of this research attests to the importance of refugees' diasporic imaginings and their often overwhelming desires to return to their places of origin. Wahlbeck (2002) argues that place of origin is the most important component of a definition of diaspora precisely because of its importance to diasporic communities. According to Brah (1996, p. 192), this is true even if that 'home' "is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is always a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'." Return ideals play an important role in refugee-background South Sudanese experiences of resettlement in New Zealand (NZ), and ideas of return underlie many of the shared practices and values held by NZ's South Sudanese community. After many discussions with various refugee-background persons about the label 'refugee', I prefer the descriptive term 'refugee-background' rather than the definitional term 'refugee'. Members of the refugee-background community in NZ consciously use 'refugee-background' as best representing the conditions of their lives. Although explicit in indicating they are no longer refugees, the term simultaneously serves notice of their continuing inequalities vis-à-vis other NZ residents and highlights the continuing effects of their experiences upon their resettlement (cf. O'Rourke, 2011; for further discussions which agitate for a wider shift away from the often-derogatory 'refugee' label, see Hebbani,, Obijiofor, & Bristed, 2010; and Wille, 2011).

The community-wide construction and dissemination of narratives promoting permanent return to South Sudan that I discuss in this article should be of great interest to both the academic and South Sudanese communities, especially for those people wanting greater ethnographic

knowledge on what the South Sudanese diaspora think about the development of their new nation.

Therefore, in this article I describe and analyse the discourses of return common among the South Sudanese community in NZ and highlight how community members narrate the benefits of permanent return to South Sudan. I also establish that the dominant narrative advances return to South Sudan as a positive alternative to ongoing resettlement and demonstrate how it emerged from South Sudanese individuals' specific resettlement experiences. In doing so, I show that a shared narrative promoting return allows those community members who perceive their resettlement as marginalising to position their resettlement experiences within the context of an imagined and idealised final return to South Sudan. In response to reviewers' comments, rather than using the UN-preferred 'repatriation' (broadly considered the voluntary final return of a displaced person to their place of origin (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 1996), in this article I use the less specific designation 'return'. Despite the South Sudanese community's narrative consisting of ideals about final and unidirectional return to the country of origin, hopefully the use of 'return' indicates the voluntary nature of this idealised imaginative construction. In this way, the term 'return' throughout this article is used solely to indicate a permanent, physical, unidirectional and, importantly, *voluntary* return to the country of origin.

Throughout my discussion of the South Sudanese community's return narratives, I present an argument which demonstrates the intersection between NZ-based South Sudanese individuals' resettlement experiences and how these experiences of resettlement affect those individuals' sense of belonging. To do this, I demonstrate that the construction and reproduction of the community's dominant narrative of return is linked to different individuals' specific experiences of resettlement in NZ, and show how idealised return narratives become an important means through which members of the South Sudanese community in NZ come to terms with the difficulties of resettlement, by reiterating their belonging to another place and people. I suggest, however, that the increasing prominence of this discourse is not necessarily about individuals' unambiguous sense of belonging with regard to South Sudan but rather about a collective failure to develop any feelings of belonging within NZ.

The failure to develop a sense of local belonging is an important component of the return narratives disseminated by the South Sudanese community in NZ: indeed, my argument is that many of the other

negative aspects of community members' resettlement, such as lack of employment, poor literacy, lack of language competency, poor educational results, and other indicators of social, political and economic marginalisation (see O'Rourke, 2011), while important in and of themselves, become even more important when understood through, let alone experienced as, the whole existential experience which many South Sudanese (and other refugee-background individuals) have of resettlement in NZ. Therefore, these narratives of return to South Sudan, and the underlying ideals about return they represent, are, at least metaphorically, somewhat *Gestaltian* in nature: greater than the sum of their individual parts in that each individual return narrative effectively synthesises the entire community's resettlement difficulties into a collectively-held sense of non-belonging.

This is why, despite the often heard or read portrayals of South Sudan as an insecure, dangerous or undeveloped place, many community members continue to harbour hopes of permanent return to their place of origin. One community member's positive assessment of the new nation of South Sudan after a family visit, therefore, made a welcome and reassuring counterexample to the struggles many people face in life in NZ. Indeed, I argue that it was the combination of this firsthand positive assessment with the community's shared feelings of non-belonging and the historically significant independence of the new South Sudanese nation which was directly responsible for the widespread creation and dissemination of the dominant return narrative.

Narratives of return: an overview

Collective and individual narratives and imaginings of future return to the place of origin are common among refugee communities. To have discovered the presence of these among the South Sudanese community in NZ is therefore not surprising. What is particularly interesting, however, is how these narratives gained importance during the period in which I conducted my fieldwork (between February and August 2011). Early- to mid-2011 was a unique time in South Sudanese history, and the narratives I discuss here arose over two crucial periods: the first around the time of South Sudan's referendum on independence in February 2011; the other after a short-term visit to South Sudan made by a well-known community member following South Sudan's independence in July 2011. Due to the marginalisation South Sudanese experience in resettlement in NZ, narratives of return became increasingly common throughout this period. These narratives, which initially resembled the classic diasporic imagining of return to a time

and place before exile, became, quite rapidly, an oft-repeated truism that not only was return possible but that it was actually beneficial.

The South Sudanese community's dominant return narrative stated that there were substantial social and economic rewards for those people who returned to their country of origin. In particular, the combined promise of easy employment and the new possibility of a relatively peaceful existence close to family made return seem positively utopian compared to the lack of social connections and belonging experienced in NZ. The promise of employment was particularly important and was even more attractive for those community members who believed that the skills, education or experience they had gained in resettlement would assure them well-paid and high-status jobs upon return to South Sudan. Along with promises of employment, potential returnees were reminded that, unlike in their daily struggles with life in NZ, they already knew how to live within the sociocultural systems of South Sudan. The community's dominant return narrative alleged that, alongside their kinship and social networks, returnees' knowledge of these systems would assist them with reintegration into South Sudanese society. Indeed, the narrative related that close proximity to a person's important social networks would help returnees' in creating a sense of belonging. It must be noted, however, that not all South Sudanese in NZ actually wish to return to South Sudan. Therefore, vital to the analysis of this dominant discourse is the question 'why do some community members *not* plan to return?' Simultaneous investigation of these individuals' narratives reveals the heterogeneous nature of the South Sudanese community in NZ specifically—and refugees' experiences more generally—as well as the pragmatic everyday concerns individuals must deal with before return can be contemplated.

In stating this, I follow the position exemplified by Long and Oxfeld (2004), Catherine Nolin (2006), and Michael Jackson (1998), among others. Long and Oxfeld (2004) argue that, because use of the term 'return' needs to analytically distinguish between 'return migration' (or 'repatriation'), 'return' (as a process), and temporary visits to the country of origin (what I shall term 'visits'), investigation of return migration should highlight the full complexity of real migrants' *actual* return practices and ideals, rather than making simple generalisations about those returns (pp. 3-5). For similar reasons, Nolin (2006) suggests that research into transnational migration "needs to go beyond notions of unidirectional movement to be sensitive to the multiple realities within which (im)migrants operate" because such a perspective "challenges the unilinear, static, rather rigid assumptions of traditional

migration [research]…and opens research to the richness and complexity" of contemporary migration by including "the new kind of social spaces that are created by transnational (im)migrants and refugees" (p. 39).

Background, Methods and Context

The South Sudanese population in NZ numbered around 600 to 700 in 2011, with the majority spread between the cities of Auckland and Wellington (Department of Labour [DOL], 2007). Despite this estimation, however, true quantification of South Sudanese resettlement is notoriously inaccurate in both NZ and Australia (cf. Robinson, 2011, pp. 25-56). Like the South Sudanese population more generally, the majority of the NZ-based community is ethnically Dinka, with the Nuer a close second. However, there are many other South Sudanese ethno-tribal identities also represented (DOL, 2007). This research was conducted among a cultural performance group representing one of the smaller ethnic identities comprising the larger South Sudanese community in NZ and thus the research population was relatively small, numbering 60 to 70 at most (and in the interests of protecting my participants, I have removed identifying information such as ethnic group or city of residence, etc). As my original research agenda focused on the cultural performance group from within this particular South Sudanese ethnic sub-community, interviewees were recruited through a combination of factors. These included: adult status (this research was not given ethical consent to conduct data collection, especially interviews, among children, defined by both the relevant ethical committee and NZ law as individuals under the age of 18); membership within the cultural performance group; desire to participate; and English language competency (this was an important requirement for participation, as unfortunately not only did I not possess the resources to hire a translator or research assistant, but I was, and to a certain extent, remain, unable to undertake research within the appropriate South Sudanese language). Although this introduced a certain amount of sample bias with regard to the research participants, the gender ratios, age ranges, and other significant demographic indicators were almost equal. For example, interviewees were around 40% male to 60% female (reflecting a similar statistical difference in the NZ-based South Sudanese population in general) and ranged in age from early 20s to early 60s.

Following Barbara Kawulich (2005), I define the methods used in this research as 'ethnographic', a term that encompasses a wide array of

qualitative techniques including participation, observation, interviewing and narrative analysis. Participant observation was conducted over a period of seven months between February and August 2011, and ranged from participation in and observation of public cultural performances and smaller dance practices to observation of the cultural group's committee meetings and attendance at weddings and other similar events within the community. I also conducted three group interviews with the performance group's guiding committee and 19 individual interviews.

The data presented in this article is entirely derived from interviews undertaken with three members of the South Sudanese community in NZ, all of whom arrived in NZ between 2000 and 2002. Despite a focus on only a small number of participants, it should be noted that the views expressed by these individuals are, I believe, generally representative of the many varying positions the South Sudanese community in NZ takes toward the idea of permanent return to the country of origin. Indeed, I have specifically chosen these interviewees *because* of their general representativeness. I suggest that, between the three of them, the positions taken by these interviewees can be generalised to encompass much, if not all, of the South Sudanese population in NZ (and possibly elsewhere, although this remains a matter for further empirical evaluation). As such they provide an important picture of the complexity inherent not only within this small yet vibrant community but also within processes of repatriation and return as well as refugees' lives more generally.

I wish to highlight that, in the interests of protecting the identities of my participants as much as possible, as well as to mask the particular South Sudanese ethnic sub-community to which they belong, all names used in this article are pseudonyms. These pseudonyms, although somewhat randomly chosen, were specifically chosen to sound European. Removing any ethnic-specific names not only further protects my participants' identities but, as many South Sudanese have multiple names (one of which is often a 'Christian name'), giving them a Christian-sounding name is also symbolic of the ways in which they interact with the NZ community.

Of the three interviewees whose narratives I discuss here ('Diana', 'Alfred' and 'Bernice'), only Diana had been back to visit South Sudan since arriving as a UNHCR-resettled refugee in NZ (thus I provide quotes from two separate interviews with the woman I call Diana). This she did immediately following South Sudan's independence in early July 2011. The substantial changes in her return narrative from before

and after her visit to South Sudan in July 2011 provide an important background to my argument. Therefore, the first interview I present here is with Diana and dates from May 2011, just before her trip to South Sudan to visit her family. All of the other interviews presented here—including the second interview with Diana—took place in August 2011, after Diana had finished her South Sudanese visit and resumed her resettled life in NZ.

Alfred, another of the interviewees presented here, had not yet returned to South Sudan at the time of our first meeting. Further although he was certain he and his family would return at some unspecified time in the future, this was originally spoken about only in an abstract fashion and they had no concrete plans to do so. As will be demonstrated, Alfred's feelings on resettlement changed significantly following Diana's return experiences. Despite this, of the three interviewees featured here, Alfred seemed the individual most committed to the South Sudanese community's dominant return narrative, and he also provided the most complete and idealised example of this narrative: the story of a man I call 'Ghali'. The narrative surrounding Ghali's life not only gives a detailed account of the dominant discourses of return prevalent among the South Sudanese community in NZ, it also demonstrates how these narratives are significantly connected with difficulties experienced in resettlement and the importance of these difficult experiences to the widespread non-development of a sense of belonging among South Sudanese community members in NZ.

Bernice is the final interviewee I present. Bernice's life story is dominated by experiences of marginality: as a widow; rejected and abandoned by her family; throughout life in Kakuma refugee camp; and, most recently, her social and economic marginalisation in NZ. Bernice's life circumstances meant that she had not and could not return to South Sudan. Beyond the impossibility of return, however, Bernice said that even given the chance she would not return: she had nothing and no-one to return to. Her return narrative provides an important counterexample to the more dominant return narratives common among the community and not only demonstrates the partiality of the dominant narrative but also the essential heterogeneity of the South Sudanese community in NZ: an important point both for the argument I am making here, as well as for reminding us of the problems of oversimplifying and overgeneralising about any aspect of refugees' lives and experiences. Using these interviewees, in this article I analyse the creation and dissemination of return narratives among South Sudanese in NZ, the

reasons behind the reproduction of these narratives, and, in Ghali's story, I provide a specific example of the dominant narrative form under discussion. I argue that the South Sudanese return narrative was strongly associated with a broader community project of discursively and imaginatively constructing the viability of future life in South Sudan. Specifically, I demonstrate how the maintenance of discourses and ideals of return allowed South Sudanese in NZ to live with resettlement's everyday structural constraints.

Diana's return

I first realised the importance return narratives had among the South Sudanese community in May 2011. South Sudan was six weeks from independence and people previously pessimistic about peace now became animated about the country's potential. Alfred, who had said in March that concerns over safety meant that he would not return to South Sudan for many years, suddenly began planning a trip. Another community member, Diana, actually purchased flights. She wished to see the new nation immediately. This was not an easy decision. It cost Diana over NZ$2000 and three days each way from Wellington through Sydney, Bangkok and Nairobi to get to Juba, South Sudan's capital. The journey cost a significant portion of the family's income and had to be paid for alongside raising a young family and several other significant expenses. Despite this, Diana said, the time was right: there was finally "a kind of peace" in South Sudan and, by the time she was to arrive in Juba in mid-July, there would also be a new country.

Speaking of her reasons for going back, Diana said:

> *May 2011, DIANA: One of the major reasons I am going is that I am the only one of my family here [in NZ...] The rest are still in Sudan [...] And now that there is peace, which is not a complete peace, at least they are now within the reach. And they have all met each other, after the war, except me. So they wanted to see me. And so I should try and go by all means, so that they can see me, so that they can see how I am. [...] So, since I left the Sudan in 1991, it has been a very long 20 years of almost unimaginable that I would ever see that place again. So I have to now go back and really see what it is like [...] that is what I want.*

Before returning, Diana had not expected that life in South Sudan would be a viable alternative to life in NZ. However, despite problems associated with lack of development, her views changed by the time she arrived back in NZ:

> *August 2011, DIANA: Yeah, the trip was good, and I was really in for a shock. I didn't know it [South Sudan] was that good. There has been a huge change. In other areas there has not been so much change, but [in Juba] has been a huge change, it is starting looking very nice. A whole new town from those times. I didn't expect that much, but I found there has been a big change. It is really very good [...] There will be, if nothing happen wrong or something challenging came, then within the next two years there will be something really good and really quick to take shape.*

As we sat in the living room of her small and impeccably kept two-bedroom suburban home, we ate, talked and watched a DVD of African music videos purchased during her visit. Diana was tired and sluggish, but a smile lit up her face as she showed me her children's presents and she spoke in a way which highlighted her positive experience. While we spoke, Diana showed me photos of her home and family, again revisiting her past:

> *RYAN: And what do you think about going home again now, because last time we spoke you weren't too sure?*
> *DIANA: Well, it is just my health about what I am worried. It can't let me. If I am healthy I would just be going. If only I was healthy, we could just be going. [...] [My family] were very happy to see me. But they were hard to say goodbye, to come back. All my friends and colleagues who are successful, they are better off. They are working, they have jobs and money and the kids can go to school.*

At the time of this interview, most people assumed Diana's tiredness was jetlag. No-one knew she had developed a serious and potentially life-threatening bout of malaria requiring hospitalisation. After her release from hospital, Diana still remained extremely positive about her return experience: malaria, like landmines, was a necessary risk to reconnect with her family, culture and past. By returning, South Sudan had shifted from being somewhere that, for Diana at least, existed

primarily in her imagination, memory and familial communications, and instead was now viewed as somewhere healthy people could realistically live and have a good life.

Diana's return was extremely important for South Sudanese in NZ in general. Other South Sudanese were already telling stories of other people's return to South Sudan, although these narratives were usually phrased in abstract terms and based on hearsay about anonymous returnees from elsewhere in the diaspora. Through her return, Diana became a pioneer and exemplar for South Sudanese in NZ: she was the first to return to an independent South Sudan. Others used her as reference for their own return ideals. More importantly, her positive assessment of South Sudan made a reassuring counterpoint to the struggles of life in resettlement in NZ. Diana's representation of her visit helped other South Sudanese construct a discourse that positioned South Sudan as a viable alternative to life in NZ.

Alfred's ambiguity

Diana's visit strengthened the potency of the return narratives already being constructed by NZ-based South Sudanese in 2011. For example, alongside the job opportunities which he expected to be waiting for him upon his return, Alfred explicitly mentioned Diana's visit when speaking of his own return plans. Most important for Alfred was Diana's positive estimation of South Sudan's social, political and economic development. Given the way Alfred used Diana's evaluation to justify his change of mind about his own permanent return to South Sudan, I suggest that these and similar comments can be understood as part of a broader process of a community-wide imaginatively constructed and idealised return narrative.

Mid-2011 was a unique time to be South Sudanese: it was their first real experience of independence, and the period between February's referendum and July's independence brought new hope for the NZ-based community. Coupled with the difficulties of resettlement, already potent return narratives became extensively disseminated. Diana's evaluations, South Sudan's recent independence, and the already widely-disseminated narratives of returnees gaining jobs, together reinforced the experience of marginalisation in resettlement and made return seem increasingly beneficial. For these reasons, Alfred now planned his own visit. He would use this trip to rebuild his networks in South Sudan, particularly among those who had successfully returned themselves:

ALFRED: You see, now I am really definitely wanting to go back […] I have spent long enough away from my family now. It is really good to go and to spend some time with them.
RYAN: So how long will you go for?
ALFRED: Well, I think at least for two months. Because, really, Diana just touched the base. And most of my friends, they haven't been to university but they just end up finishing high school. But today, if you go home, most of them are like school principals. Some of them are even Directors, of government departments. Even with that small knowledge. Because the government now is looking very really seriously for encouraging people to come back. Especially people from the Western world, with the Western ways and the Western philosophy. Because they see the only way we can develop faster is once there is a lot of contribution from the people who have been living abroad. So you go back, they assess your qualifications and 'boom!' Then they give you a good job straight away!

Although Alfred would spend some time visiting family, rebuilding his social networks was the most important function of this trip. He also wanted to make his own evaluation of the job market and the peace process. This echoes the findings of Long and Oxfeld (2004), who note that very often refugees' first provisional returns to their countries of origin are to re-establish social ties, kinship networks, and decide upon the viability of future return (p. 12). Connecting Alfred's upcoming visit to getting "a good job", I asked if he was planning the visit with the intention of future return. He continued:

ALFRED: Yes. So, I will go there and I will be building up my network and I will come back and do my Masters [in NZ]. I just want to finish my Masters […] And then when I finish, by that time South Sudan maybe will be a bit developed. And so, say, let's put about five years' time [2016], that will be a good time for me and that will be a good time to go and so we will think about going back then […] Yes, so, it is just a matter of getting those experience here and take it back home.

The dominant return narrative among the South Sudanese community in NZ was one that promised that returnees would receive well-paid employment close to family in a situation of relative safety. Alfred's narrative demonstrated how the varying aspects of this narrative are intimately connected with a lack of belonging in NZ: no matter the benefits NZ offered in terms of safety, education, and health and social welfare, Alfred still felt "out of place" in NZ and "back home" in South Sudan. Therefore, if South Sudan *were* safe, this would rebalance the cost-benefit analysis of the resettlement-return equation. Alfred then went on to tell me a story about a friend of his called 'Ghali', a story which presented a further and even more explicit example of the type of return narrative under discussion in this article. (As with all other names in this article, that of 'Ghali' is a pseudonym. Ghali's name has been a little more purposefully chosen, however: according to some informants, 'Ghali' roughly translates to 'hearsay' in the local Arabic dialect. Accordingly, I therefore felt the name 'Ghali' provided an appropriate pseudonym for the person explicitly mentioned in the ubiquitous but otherwise-anonymous narrative that I discuss below).

Ghali's story

Although stories like Ghali's were ubiquitous during early 2011, the protagonists of these narratives usually remained nameless. Despite knowing Ghali, Alfred's story demonstrates general return principles as much as highlighting the experiences of a real individual. Alfred told me Ghali's story while discussing why he changed his mind about his own plans regarding return. Ghali's narrative provided a concrete and personal example of both the jobs available and the social networks Alfred wanted to mobilise in South Sudan. The story goes:

> *Ghali, he got a law degree from home, and then he came to Kenya. We have been there together for about 5 years, in Kakuma refugees camp. And then from there we came to here [NZ] in about 2000, and then straight away he spent one year at [a polytechnic institution] to polish his English, and then he went to [a university] to do a Master degree [...] And then after that he went for [another] Masters degree. And then after that he managed to get a job with a Ministry […] And he worked there for 5 years […] Then after that he decide to submit his proposal for PhD, the first one didn't went through. The second one didn't work*

through […]So now, he is discouraged. His wife is unhappy.
His children are not doing well at the school, he does not
know how to help them. So he says, 'No, now he wants to be
closer to his people'. So, finally, he was frustrated, so he go
back home last year [2010] […] And now he is working! He
is now a Principal Analyst with a Ministry. And so now I am
grateful that if we go home we have someone with the good
contact, so if we go home he can connect me with someone
straight away. So once I get home, I will be able to start
building now my contacts and stuff.

Ghali and others with similar stories are paradigmatic of the return
ideal circulated among South Sudanese in NZ in 2011, simultaneously
highlighting the benefits of return and problematising resettlement.
Ghali's story is about someone who worked hard and yet still felt as if
he had been failed by the resettlement process: indeed, despite attaining
language competency, two separate Masters degrees and a government
job, I suggest his story can easily be generalised to represent the views
of many other members of the South Sudanese community in NZ and
demonstrates how those individuals felt disenchanted with resettlement.
It also highlights that these feelings of disillusionment are related as
much to problems of belonging as it does to difficulties inherent within
resettlement and the supposed benefits of return: despite his otherwise
successful resettlement, Ghali did not integrate. He never felt accepted
or valued. He never belonged.

As well as indicating what successful resettlement would be like for
many South Sudanese in NZ, I further suggest that Ghali's story serves
as an 'ideal-type' narrative of the South Sudanese community's return
narrative. It was not just return's potential which was attractive to
members of the South Sudanese community in NZ but also the
perception that, unlike NZ, returnees were unquestioningly valued as
members of South Sudanese society. This was something missing in the
resettlement experiences of most South Sudanese in NZ. This refrain of
not being valued was important for all of the community members I
interviewed and I therefore suggest it underlies many of the wider
narratives I have referred to throughout this article.

Bernice and narrative diversity

Despite what I have noted above, not all South Sudanese who wish
to return will do so. Others simply do not want to go back to their
country of origin. This should be expected, as not everyone faces the

same day-to-day issues or has had the same experiences of NZ, South Sudan or refugee flight. Kusher and Knox (1999, p. 15) note that, despite common misconceptions, this heterogeneity of experience is perhaps refugees' only commonality. For example, the continuing insecurity of South Sudan was brought up repeatedly during many individuals' return narratives. Moreover, permanent return was physically impossible for those with serious health concerns. For these individuals, life was necessarily perceived through the lens of healthcare and NZ's benefits were obvious. Likewise, those with school-aged children were reluctant to encourage their return without a 'Western education.'

On top of these practical concerns, the dominant return narrative simply did not interest some community members. For some, NZ presented new opportunities or a better quality of life. For others, the same processes which had created South Sudanese refugees also meant not everyone felt particularly 'at home' in South Sudan or had developed a sense of 'belonging' alongside other South Sudanese. Furthermore, some had begun a new life or family in NZ while others had none remaining in South Sudan. For these people, South Sudan had nothing to offer. Bernice's story is an instructive case study of those not wishing to return. Of all the people I interviewed, Bernice best represented a position of non-conformity to the dominant diasporic discursive position. When I asked her if she wanted to go back to South Sudan, Bernice hesitantly replied:

> BERNICE: Umm, that is a hard question. I am not really quite sure. I don't know. You know, when I was in Kakuma, I said, 'if God didn't give me the resettlement, and there was peace in Sudan, that people should back.' Because there is nowhere else to go. But, it is my feeling, that these people are, I don't know. There is just something that I don't like it […] Maybe because of the hardship that I have gone through. I am not quite sure. I don't feel it like going back to my home. I don't know how to explain it. You know, there is something like, people are not really trustworthy. You know what I am meaning? People are really not like having the love for each other. Like, somebody is thinking about himself or herself more than the other person.

Indeed, Bernice was often explicit in saying that the violence which caused her initial flight was not assured of ending with independence. She was especially concerned with possible future ethno-tribal conflict,

particularly in a South Sudan where power would be divided along ethnic lines mirroring those of the civil war. For example, ethno-tribal divisions over distribution of power within southern independence forces led to the formation of splinter groups which often fought each other rather than the Sudanese government forces they were initially united against (see Hutchinson, 1996; 2001; McEvoy and Murray, 2008; and Schomerus, 2008). For Bernice, then, return offered little except the potential continuation of what had made her a refugee originally.

Attaining independence cost the lives of millions of South Sudanese (Johnson, 2011). Not to be forgotten, however, are the costs to those who fled as refugees: they may have their lives, but the loss of friends and family, inability to access land, property and possessions, and continuing effects on their physical, psychological, and emotional wellbeing cannot be overstated. In the case of Bernice, the conflict continued to assault her trust of other South Sudanese, particularly those connected to the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and incipient power structures of the new South Sudanese nation. After all, the violence she personally experienced was most frequently southerner against southerner, in villages and refugee camps far from the war itself, and often over trivial and insignificant events. Thus, despite independence, South Sudan's current and future power-sharing arrangements continued to worry Bernice and others with similar histories. Lest it be thought that these worries are solely the purview of a frightened and unrepresentative minority within some sections of the diaspora, similar concerns were also raised at around the same time in many academics' reviews on South Sudan's future (for example, see Kaiser, 2010, p. 54; and Mailer and Poole, 2010). Given the continuing insecurity and sporadic outbreaks of violence in places such as Wau and Bor, among others, perhaps these peoples' concerns were well-founded.

Concluding remarks

During 2011, a fundamental component of South Sudanese responses to resettlement in NZ was the community-wide construction and dissemination of a narrative promoting permanent return to South Sudan. The community's return narratives further increased in salience after a unique historical conjuncture in July 2011, when South Sudanese independence coincided with the positive evaluation made of South Sudan by a senior community member following a visit to the country. In this narrative, life in South Sudan was promoted as a viable alternative to life in resettlement. The utopian view of South Sudan disseminated by this narrative resulted in a fundamental shift in

conceptualisations of the viability of life in South Sudan. Implicit in the narrative is a feeling of a general lack of belonging within NZ. I suggest that, more than simply highlighting the benefits of return, members of the South Sudanese community reproduced these narratives to make their lack of agency and belonging seem more acceptable to them. This narrative was further strengthened by the recurrence of one persistent element: ubiquitous yet largely anonymous tales about the success of other returnees. The narratives relating the success of these other returnees highlighted the supposed benefits provided to returnees by the skills and experiences they had gained in resettlement and, in doing so, positively contrasted the worth of these skills and experiences in South Sudan with the denial of their value by NZ society.

The promise of successful return was the promise of a journey from an unfulfilled or meaningless life in exile to one in which the 'classic' diasporic vision would be fulfilled. Indeed, return became a utopian ideal within the community, but was predicated on several unproblematised assumptions such as the returnee finding employment, having a quality of life similar to that in NZ, and returning to a country largely free from violence and committed to equitable and democratic government. These are significant issues for a nation with a long history of social, political and economic oppression. For these and similar reasons, not all South Sudanese believed the dominant return narrative existing within the community during 2011. Despite the concerns raised by these community members, however, threats such as future outbreaks of ethno-tribal violence were lost within the pro-independence and pro-return narratives prominent among the majority of NZ community.

No matter whether or not they wished to return, however, everyone I interviewed was ambivalent about NZ: each was forced by circumstance into a life within a society in which they felt no belonging. Both the durability of the South Sudanese return narrative as well as the proportion of people wishing to return to South Sudan emphasise the failings of the resettlement system in NZ, despite the country's many obvious benefits. A feeling of belonging (or lack thereof) is a crucial part of these failings. This is something which demands redress, both for members of this community specifically, as well as for the refugee-background community in NZ in general.

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