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South Sudanese Diaspora in Australasia

Jay Marlowe – ARAS Guest Editor
University of Auckland

Introduction

On the 9th July 2011, the world witnessed the birth of the world's 193rd country – the Republic of South Sudan. This country now emerges as an independent state from Sudan after enduring more than four decades of civil war since 1956. This protracted conflict between north and south Sudan has created one of the largest populations of displaced people in the world. This special issue considers part of this resulting diaspora in Australia and New Zealand. Over the last two decades, there has been a significant immigration of Sudanese people (predominantly from South Sudan) who have resettled in Australia and New Zealand under humanitarian auspices. Most of these people arrived as refugees looking for the chance to begin a new life.

The word 'refugee' can have multiple meanings. The contributions in this special issue use this term as defined under the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the more universal 1967 Protocol which establishes that a refugee is a person who:

A person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution.

The protracted conflict between north and south Sudan have provided compelling grounds for well-founded fears of persecution and has resulted in the displacement and destruction of many communities, particularly in the south. It was often in neighbouring countries that South Sudanese people received refugee status which afforded them certain protections from countries signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention.

Caution must be used when considering the applicability of the 'refugee experience' to Sudanese individuals and communities. Whilst there are some important distinctions between a migrant and a refugee, these terms can be highly generalised, and potentially unhelpful or even misleading. Despite this criticism, it is worth noting some of the differences between

the two terms. Refugees often have had to leave home by the fastest route possible, which might include: leaving behind loved ones; taking dangerous escape paths; not knowing where they are going; taking very few (if any) material possessions; lacking documentation that attests who they are; and not knowing when or if they can return home. Migrants, on the other hand, frequently know where they are going, have time to pack their bags and generally can return home if life abroad does not work well. Such generalisations can be unhelpful and there are 'grey' areas where some refugees might see themselves more as migrants and vice versa. It is also important to acknowledge that these experiences do not encompass people in their entirety and there are a number of studies that now document the resilience that Sudanese people have shown to respond to such difficulties.¹ Whilst the contributions in this special issue generally relate to South Sudanese who have come to New Zealand or Australia as refugees, the intent and focus within each article is upon the particularities of their experiences related to forced migration and resettlement rather than drawing upon generalised understandings of 'the refugee journey'.

A brief historical overview

From 1899-1956, Sudan was under British colonial rule where the country was governed primarily as two distinct states and imposed law between what is often characterised as a predominantly Islamic north and a Christian/animist south. After England withdrew in 1956 and Sudan became an independent country, a supposed system of power sharing was established. In many respects this arrangement was a mute exercise, enabling the north to exert control over the south. With government and military power centralised in the north, the region of south Sudan has had a long history of oppression and conflict caused by both colonisation and lack of political representation.

The two major civil wars between north and south Sudan account for more than forty years of protracted conflict since the country gained

¹ Jay Marlowe, "Beyond the Discourse of Trauma: Shifting the Focus on Sudanese Refugees," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 23:2 (2010): 183-198; Robert Sampson and Sandy Gifford, "Place-Making, Settlement and Well-Being: The Therapeutic Landscapes of Recently Arrived Youth with Refugee Backgrounds," *Health & Place*, 16:1 (2009) 116-131; Laura Simich, David Este, and Hayley Hamilton, "Meanings of Home and Mental Well-Being among Sudanese Refugees in Canada," *Ethnicity & Health* 15: 2 (2010): 199-212; Peter Westoby, *The Sociality of Refugee Healing: In Dialogue with Southern Sudanese Refugees Resettling in Australia*, The Diversity Series (Australia: Common Ground Publishing Pty Ltd, 2009).

independence in 1956.² Whilst this conflict can be conceptualised as a conflict between Islamic Arabs based in the north and southern black Christians, several writers maintain that this history cannot be simply viewed as conflicts between ethnic or religious identities as there have been contentious debates about access to natural resources – most notably oil.³ The first civil war occurred between 1955 and 1972, and ended with the Addis Ababa agreement, which granted the south regional autonomy. According to Ruiz, this first conflict resulted in the internal displacement of 500,000 people and created 180,000 refugees from the total estimated five million residents living in the south.⁴

The time period between 1973 and 1982 was one of general peace until the Khartoum government began making plans for implementing Shari'a Law in the south. In response to this policy and an increasing polarisation between the north and south, the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) was formed under the leadership of John Garang, who began to resist the efforts of the Northern-based government. Garang was originally a government soldier and formed this rebel faction in response to the government's policies and actions in the south. This defection and new rebel movement proved a significant catalyst to the second civil war in 1983, with the resulting displacement of tens of thousands of people.⁵ The war intensified noticeably after the *coup d'état* of the fundamentalist National Islamic Front in the late 1980s headed by Omar Bashir (who, in 2009, was charged by The Hague under the International Crimes Court for war crimes against humanity). By 2001, it was estimated that two million people had been killed by war-related violence and famine, with an additional four million displaced.

It was in the late 1990s and early 2000s that the South Sudanese plight became well known on the world stage. Much of this awareness stemmed from the experiences of the 'Lost Boys' who acquired this title as a reference to JM Barrie's tale in *Peter Pan*. Many of these so called boys

² The conflict in Darfur is not represented here. This special issue has focused primarily on Southern Sudanese people who have been displaced. For a detailed and historical account of the conflict in Darfur, see Julie Flint and Alex De Waal, *Darfur: A Short History of a Long War* (London: Zed Books, 2005).

³ Douglas Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars* (Oxford: James Currey Publishers, 2003); Jok Madut Jok, *War and Slavery in Sudan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

⁴ Hiram A. Ruiz, "The Sudan: Cradle of Displacement," in Roberta Cohen and Francis Mading Deng eds., *The Forsaken People*, (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 1998).

⁵ Ruiz.

(and also girls) made their way by foot to refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya where they spent years in adverse conditions that meant few opportunities for education, scarce resources and limited security.⁶ Others found places of asylum in Egypt, Syria and other neighbouring African countries. It was from these places that tens of thousands of South Sudanese people forcibly displaced were offered opportunities for resettlement in countries signatory to the UN 1951 Refugee Convention.

The last civil war between the north and south officially ended with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005. This agreement provided provision for a referendum that was held in January 2011 as an opportunity for south Sudanese people to take a mandate for autonomy or unity with the north. The people of South Sudan voted an overwhelming 99 percent majority to cede from Sudan in response to decades of war and oppression from its northern counterpart. However, there are still accounts of skirmishes and tensions between rival groups within South Sudan and between its borders with Sudan. Reports of escalating violence near the contested borderlands have become increasingly commonplace over the last several months. These developments may further destabilise an already tense relationship between these two regions, with warnings that Sudan's southern region of Kordofan could become the next flashpoint to another major conflict.

In response to the experiences of forced displacement, the UNHCR identifies three durable solutions as long-term outcomes for people with refugee status:

- (1) Voluntary repatriation to country of origin;
- (2) Local integration in the country of first asylum; or
- (3) Integration in a third country of resettlement⁷

Of these durable solutions, this special issue focuses on the narratives of those who have followed the least common path: resettlement. The UNCHR report on the state of the world's refugees defines resettlement as the "transfer of refugees from a state in which they have initially sought protection to a third state that has agreed to admit them with permanent-residence status."⁸ Less than one percent of the world's refugees are presented with the opportunity for this resettlement path.

⁶ Olle Jeppsson and Anders Hjern, "Traumatic Stress in Context: A Study of Unaccompanied Minors from Southern Sudan," in David Ingleby, ed., *Forced Migration and Mental Health*, (New York: Springer, 2005): 67-80.

⁷ UNHCR, *Rethinking Durable Solutions*, The State of the World's Refugees: Human Displacement in the New Millennium (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁸ UNHCR, 2006, 142

Whilst representing a minority of people's lives with refugee status, the UNHCR acknowledges the potentially positive resettlement outcomes for those taking this journey and highlights the necessity to better understand the particularities and complexities of these experiences.⁹

The Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship grants protection to approximately 13,000 humanitarian entrants annually.¹⁰ Recent UNHCR reports indicate that Australia has had the second or third highest rates for refugee resettlement in recent years (these statistics do not include asylum seekers).¹¹ A significant portion (and at times a majority) of Australia's humanitarian intake in the early to mid 2000s were Sudanese people. New Zealand also plays a significant role in the resettlement of refugees and offers up to 750 places annually. Whilst the Sudanese community is much smaller in New Zealand, there is a growing population here as well.

Contributions in the Special Issue

The contributions in this special issue note a number of considerations related to Sudanese people's experiences of resettlement in Australia and New Zealand. The article by *David Lucas, Monica Jamali and Barbara Edgar* outline a number of key characteristics of the Sudan-born and compares the different waves of Sudanese flows to Australia. They provide important insight into the demographics of the Sudanese community in relation to language, gender, education, religion and age. *Julie Robinson* then takes a more critical approach to unpacking Australia's census data and other population reporting tools to estimate what the current Sudanese population in Australia currently stands – approximately 30000 people. She provides an updated picture of residents of Australia with a Sudanese heritage, and considers the implications of these demographic characteristics for individual and community resilience. *Melissa Phillips* provides an overview of how the term 'African-Australian' has been used uncritically in both academic and popular discourse in which Sudanese people have been subsumed. Through her analysis, she notes how this label can be imposed as a

⁹ UNHCR, 2006.

¹⁰ DIAC, "Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Programme" (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, accessed 23 June 2007, see <http://www.migration.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/60refugee.htm#f>, 2007).

¹¹ UNHCR, "2008 Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum-Seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced and Stateless Persons," (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, accessed 28 January 2010, see <http://www.unhcr.org/4a375c426.html>, 2009).

convenient bureaucratic tool that denies important considerations of diversity.

The special issue then introduces several pieces of research that examine the settlement experiences of specific groups of Sudanese communities living in Australia or New Zealand. *Janecke Wille* discusses her research in Canberra with Sudanese men and women and their experiences and perspectives on belonging and agency. Her article demonstrates the complexities of integration and uses the concept of belonging to further interrogate the salient considerations of what 'successful' settlement might entail. Following from this article, I then present an ethnographic study about how South Sudanese men living in Adelaide maintain a connection with their past and also participate in the present by examining acculturation and social capital theory within a contrapuntal perspective. This article highlights the growing call to not only consider the experiences of Sudanese people but to also critically examine the important role of how the broader society responds to them.

Ibolya Losoncz discusses her research with Sudanese people and their perspectives on and experiences of disrespect. Using motivational posturing theory, she offers a framework for understanding the community's sense of disrespect and suggests several approaches for Australian authorities and the Sudanese community that could help build respect. *Danijela Milos* presents her current research in Adelaide to highlight the discrepancies between the family dispute resolution processes of South Sudan and Australia. She illustrates the difficulty South Sudanese communities face in understanding and adapting to Australian family law and provides some recommendations that could help facilitate this process. *Santino Atem Deng and Fiona Pienaar* make a valuable contribution by outlining an evaluation of a parenting program for Sudanese parents living in New Zealand. This article clearly articulates some of the complexities of parenting in a new context and makes several key recommendations that offer some practical ways forward. *Julius Marete* introduces his research with Sudanese participants that he conducted in Kenyan refugee camps and in New Zealand. His findings show that pre-arrival expectations and experiences can impact people's subsequent well-being and efforts to integrate into their new communities and makes recommendations for more effective human service provision. *Priscella Engall* finally provides a creative writing piece that offers perspective into the particularities of engaging with the Sudanese community in Sydney. This special issue provides particular insights to understanding the complexities of successful

Sudanese settlement. A Sudanese man once told me, 'You cannot fix a leaking roof in the night.' It is my hope that this special issue will further illuminate understandings of this emerging community, identify issues that need to be addressed and celebrate the success, resilience and aspirations of those who have made a new home far away from their country of origin.

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