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**CONTENTS**

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>South Sudanese Diaspora in Australasia</b><br><i>Jay Marlowe – ARAS Guest Editor</i>  | <b>3</b>   |
| <b>The Sudan-born in Australia: a Statistical Profile</b><br><i>David Lucas, Monica Jamali, and Barbara Edgar</i>  | <b>10</b>  |
| <b>Sudanese heritage and living in Australia: Implications of demography for individual and community resilience</b><br><i>Julie Robinson</i>  | <b>25</b>  |
| <b>Convenient Labels, Inaccurate Representations: Turning Southern Sudanese Refugees into ‘African-Australians’</b><br><i>Melissa Phillips</i>   | <b>57</b>  |
| <b>Agency and Belonging: Southern Sudanese Former Refugees’ Reflections on Life in Australia</b><br><i>Janecke Wille</i>   | <b>80</b>  |
| <b>Sudanese Settlement: Employing Strategies of Intercultural Contact and Cultural Maintenance</b><br><i>Jay Marlowe</i>   | <b>101</b> |
| <b>Blocked opportunity and threatened identity: Understanding experiences of disrespect in South Sudanese Australians</b><br><i>Ibolya Losoncz</i>   | <b>118</b> |
| <b>South Sudanese communities and Australian family law: A clash of systems</b><br><i>Danijela Milos</i>   | <b>143</b> |
| <b>Positive Parenting: Integrating Sudanese traditions and New Zealand styles of parenting. An Evaluation of Strategies with Kids - Information for Parents (SKIP)</b><br><i>Santino Atem Deng and Fiona Pienaar</i> | <b>160</b> |

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>The Settlers' Dream: Resettlement Experiences of Sudanese Refugees in New Zealand</b><br><i>Julius Marete</i> | <b>180</b> |
| <b>No Room In My Car</b><br><i>Priscella Engall</i>  | <b>194</b> |
| <b>Tribute – Wangari Maathai (1940-2011)</b><br><i>Maureen Boyle</i>   | <b>204</b> |
| <b>ARAS Guidelines for Contributors</b>  | <b>206</b> |

## Convenient Labels, Inaccurate Representations: Turning Southern Sudanese Refugees into ‘African-Australians’<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article critiques the label ‘African-Australian,’ which has been widely adopted in both popular and academic discourse without critical attention to its relevance and impact. The blanket application of the label ‘African-Australian’ to new entrants from Southern Sudan in particular, as well as refugees and migrants in general, homogenises their experiences and must be unpacked. Doing this requires consideration of two inter-linked aspects; the meaningfulness of Africa as a label and the impact of imposed bureaucratic labels. The works of Mudimbe<sup>2</sup> and Mbembe<sup>3</sup> are instructive here in dispelling myths about Africa’s homogeneity through a historical perspective on efforts towards African self-definition, uncovering the dominance of negative discourse on Africa and Africans. Zetter’s,<sup>4</sup> and later Malkki’s,<sup>5</sup> research on refugee communities uncovers how identities are formed and transformed by bureaucratic action with a focus on labelling. Making a critical connection between designation and service delivery, Zetter also highlights the non-participatory nature of

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<sup>1</sup> This analysis and the associated critique of ‘African-Australians’ have emerged from an ongoing Australia Research Council Linkage Project on the settlement of visible refugees and migrants conducted in the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne for which the author is the Doctoral Candidate. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2010 African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific (AFSAAP) Conference. I would like to thank participants at the AFSAAP Conference for their comments, and Martina Boese, Alexandra Kurmann and Marshall Tuck for reviewing an earlier draft of this article. My thanks to the two anonymous *Australasian Review of African Studies* reviewers for their feedback on this article.

<sup>2</sup> V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Achille Mbembe, “On the Power of the False”, *Public Culture*, 14:3 (2002): 629-641.

<sup>4</sup> Roger Zetter, “Labelling Refugees: Forming and Transforming a Bureaucratic Identity,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 4:1 (1991): 39-62; Roger Zetter, “More Labels, Fewer Refugees: Remaking the Refugee Label in an Era of Globalization,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20:2 (2007): 172-192

<sup>5</sup> Liisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology Among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*, (London: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

labelling which is relevant to the premise of this article. To expose the irrelevance of the 'African-Australian' label, I present statistical data on new arrivals to Australia from African countries, and a case study of new settlers from Southern Sudanese backgrounds entering Australia under the Refugee and Special Humanitarian Program. Through this analysis I conclude that the label 'African-Australian' has been imposed as a convenient bureaucratic tool that denies the diversity it subsumes. In order to avoid inaccurate labelling greater care must be taken to develop labels with new and emerging communities.

### **Introduction**

*The hope is that if the white man is so curious about the black man, one day he may actually stop and listen to him. The fear is that the white man has found and used so many evasions in the past to replace or simulate dialogue to his own satisfaction that he may go on doing it indefinitely.*<sup>6</sup>

Australia has been a destination for refugees and migrants for several decades, and is home to a large Southern Sudanese diaspora.<sup>7</sup> According to Census data, over 24,147 Sudanese-born entrants arrived between 1997 and 2007.<sup>8</sup> In spite of its successful settlement programs, Australia has grappled with how and what to name some of its newest entrants from the African continent, just as it has for earlier groups of migrant and refugee arrivals from other countries.<sup>9</sup> Southern Sudanese-Australians in particular have vacillated between being labelled as Africans, refugees, Sudanese and East Africans to name but a few examples. Arguing that to date most labels have been unsatisfactory in scope, this article focuses on the appropriateness of the label 'African-Australian,' which is now widely employed in public discourse.

The specific focus here will be on the application of the label to Australians of Southern-Sudanese origin; one of the largest communities

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<sup>6</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1990), 24-25

<sup>7</sup> Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) 'Sudanese Community Profile' 2007, [http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/delivering-assistance/government-programs/settlement-planning/\\_pdf/community-profile-sudan.pdf](http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/delivering-assistance/government-programs/settlement-planning/_pdf/community-profile-sudan.pdf) (accessed 10 April 2009)

<sup>8</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 'Census 2006: People Born in Africa' 2008, No 3416.0 [www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au) (accessed 14 October 2010)

<sup>9</sup> Eileen Pittaway and Chrisanta Muli, *The settlement experiences of refugees and migrants from the Horn of Africa* (Horn of Africa Relief and Development Agency, 2009), 8.

of African-background in Australia, who were forced to flee their homes in Sudan due to persecution on the basis of ethnicity and identity.<sup>10</sup> To do this I first consider the structure of labelling practices more broadly, and racialised stereotypes of ‘Africans’ which have implications for the label ‘African-Australian.’ I then turn to the available data for ‘African-Australians’ and show how this label has been applied in practice in bureaucratic, scholarly and social service domains. Using statistical patterns of ‘African-Australian’ migration to Australia and the way in which the term is employed in a recent Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) report, *In our own words African Australians: A review of human rights and social inclusion issues*,<sup>11</sup> I expose ‘African-Australian’ as an inadequate catch-all term for migrants and refugees coming from a range of countries under multiple visa streams. While there are numerous examples of research on and about ‘African-Australians,’ the AHRC report has been chosen because of its inclusive national scope.<sup>12</sup> Finally, I look at the complex question of identity and labelling in Sudan and show that Southern Sudan’s recent history, and future as an independent state, makes the imposition of an ‘African-Australian’ label onto Australia’s Southern Sudanese communities an insensitive gesture by Australia as the host state. In this article I also question the usefulness of such a broad label as ‘African-Australian,’ either as a descriptor for diverse communities, or an analytical tool through which new and emerging communities are understood, and policy responses developed, to address their needs. By acknowledging that the labels applied to Southern Sudanese-Australians is illustrative of a larger phenomenon that has been experienced by other new arrivals, and uncovering the impacts of homogenisation and mis-representation that

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<sup>10</sup> Amir H. Idris, *Conflict and Politics of Identity in Sudan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Douglas H. Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan’s civil wars* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), “In our own words African Australians: A review of human rights and social inclusion issues” 2010a, [www.humanrights.gov.au/africanaus/review/](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/africanaus/review/) (accessed 5 July 2010)

<sup>12</sup> See for example: Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria, *Horn of African and Sudanese Communities in Victoria Statewide*, No. 2, 2007; Susan Evans and Rachael Gavarotto, *Long way home? The plight of African refugees obtaining decent housing in Western Sydney* (Anglicare NSW, 2010); Katie Fraser, *Out of Africa and into Court: The Legal Problems of African Refugees* (Footscray Community Legal Centre, 2009); Linda Murray, Carol Windsor, Elizabeth Parker, Odette Tewfik, “The Experiences of African Women Giving Birth in Brisbane, Australia,” *Health Care for Women International*, 31:5 (2010): 458-472; Carolina A. N. Pereira, Nicolette Larder, and Shawn Somerset, “Food acquisition habits in a group of African refugees recently settled in Australia,” *Health & Place*, 16:5 (2010): 934-941.

occurs through broad labels, I seek to make the case that changes in labelling practices and processes warrants greater attention. Such changes should take place alongside investing more in learning about pre-arrival experiences and histories of new communities to understand their unique diversity.

Within resettlement contexts there seems to be much less attention devoted to bureaucratic processes of labelling than there has been in sites of displacement and countries of asylum.<sup>13</sup> Whether this is due to the position of government bodies like the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) who devise such labels,<sup>14</sup> the inability of settlement service providers dependent on tenuous funding provided by the DIAC to work outside imposed categories,<sup>15</sup> or the lack of voice given to newly arrived communities to define and determine their own labels is hard to gauge.<sup>16</sup> Zetter's work on bureaucratic labelling of refugees provides a framework for my analysis to further investigate the critical moment of encountering new entrants settling in Australia, and the innovation of terms used to identify them.<sup>17</sup> Zetter brings to the fore a consideration that while labels don't equate to identity they can transform it in exceptional ways.<sup>18</sup> He also contends that convenient labels and inaccurate representations emerge from "bureaucratic interests and procedures" forming rigid labels.<sup>19</sup> Considering the complexity of Sudanese identity, which emerges out of specific pre-arrival experiences, adds weight to the argument that Southern Sudanese-Australians have been mis-labelled as 'African-Australians.'<sup>20</sup> The analysis presented in this article is based on ongoing research and draws on the author's own work experience both in Southern Sudan and the settlement services sector in Australia. Given the homogenising and 'Other-ing' nature of the label 'African-Australian,' which I suggest is too broad to be

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<sup>13</sup> Gillian Cowlishaw, *Black, White or Brindle: Race in rural Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 250.

<sup>14</sup> James Jupp, *From White Australia to Woomera: The Story of Australian Immigration* (Victoria: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 57-59.

<sup>15</sup> Ghassan Hage, *White Nation : Fantasies of White supremacy in a multicultural society* (NSW: Pluto Press, 1998), 138-9.

<sup>16</sup> Pittaway and Muli; Anthony B. Zwi, et al, "Placing ethics in the centre: Negotiated new spaces for ethical research in conflict situations," *Global Public Health*, 1:3 (2006): 264-277.

<sup>17</sup> Roger Zetter, 1991; Roger Zetter, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Zetter, 1991; 2007, 174

<sup>19</sup> Zetter, 1991, 41.

<sup>20</sup> Dianna J. Shandy, *Nuer-American Passages: Globalizing Sudanese Migration* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007).

meaningfully adopted, this article will refer instead to migrants and refugees as ‘new entrants.’ As will be explained later in the article, refugees originating from Southern Sudan are referred to here as Southern Sudanese-‘Australians’ as opposed to Southern Sudanese ‘refugees.’ Notions of identity in the Australian context explored in this article are informed by the literature on African identities in other sites.<sup>21</sup>

Mindful of essentialising, Mudimbe and Mbembe voice concern about the use of ‘African’ as a homogenous label which will be considered here, but is rarely given attention in scholarship on ‘African’ communities.<sup>22</sup> On their arrival, new entrants of African-backgrounds land in a country where all things ‘Africa,’ including themselves, are understood through the lens of pre-existing stereotypes. These stereotypes of African human experience are often negative ones, as Mbembe notes;

It is this elementariness and primitiveness that makes Africa the world par excellence of all that is incomplete, mutilated, and unfinished, its history reduced to a series of setbacks of nature in its quest for humankind”<sup>23</sup>

Africa, as a unified and homogenous entity is, in addition to being an imposed label, a fiction that emerged out of flawed methods, the purpose of which was to justify colonising actions.<sup>24</sup> Recalling the power of “colonization [to] cohesively bind... the diverse, often antagonistic, collective memories of many African cultures,”<sup>25</sup> any re-emergence of the fiction of a universal ‘African’ figure must be resisted. Colonial practices in Africa silenced local discourses and ensured that this universal ‘African’ figure was portrayed as being ‘traditional’ and ‘exotic.’<sup>26</sup> Post-colonial scholars have documented how specific colonial strategies that refused to recognise the achievements of Africans, partly laid the foundation for their later marginalisation on the basis of race and

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<sup>21</sup> Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “Do ‘Africans’ exist? Genealogies and paradoxes of African identities and the discourses of nativism and xenophobia,” *African Identities* 8:3 (2010): 281-295; Achille Mbembe, (2002): 629-641; Ato Quayson, “Obverse Denominations: Africa?,” *Public Culture* 14:3 (2002): 585-588; Filomina Chioma Steady, “African Feminism: A worldwide perspective,” in Rosalyn Terborg-Penn et al, eds *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora* (Washington DC: Howard University Press, 1987), 3-24.

<sup>22</sup> Mudimbe, 1998; Mbembe, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Mbembe, 2001, 1.

<sup>24</sup> Mudimbe, 1988; Mudimbe, 1994.

<sup>25</sup> Mudimbe, 1994, 129.

<sup>26</sup> Mudimbe, 1998, 4; Mudimbe 1994.

simplistic stereotypes.<sup>27</sup> So powerful and dominating were colonial methods and actions that even now, “out of the idea, Africa has become a metaphor.”<sup>28</sup> It is true that out of this idea, a collective identity of Africans emerged that was taken up by nationalist movements.<sup>29</sup> But this was never purported to be a stable notion of identity that could inform one single vision of Africans, rather it was employed to unite Africans against colonising powers.<sup>30</sup> Migration further complicates notions of identity however it is not the intention of this article to consider identity formation in the numerous diasporas of migrants from African countries.<sup>31</sup> What I aim to uncover instead are the shaky grounds on which the myth of a homogenous Africa and ‘African’ has been built, that has unwittingly been repeated in the Australian context, in the false guise of an ‘African-Australian.’

### **What’s in a name? Why labels matter**

Labels are a short-hand reference; often used unconsciously without consideration to the power they possess to shape others’ understandings.<sup>32</sup> Within the Australian context, official support programs for newly arrived refugees such as settlement services, disproportionately emphasise trauma which has become a key label by which refugees are defined.<sup>33</sup> Marlowe’s critique of the trauma label adds that the term ‘refugee’ has become a “*master status*” through which all refugees are conceptualised.<sup>34</sup> I share concerns expressed by others about the prevailing use of the refugee label without consideration of its limitations

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<sup>27</sup> Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities,” in D. Morley and K. Chen, eds. *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, (London: Routledge, 1996), 441-2.

<sup>28</sup> Mudimbe, 1994, 30.

<sup>29</sup> Ndlovu-Gatsheni.

<sup>30</sup> Ndlovu-Gatsheni; see also Kwame Nkrumah, *Africa Must Unite*, (New York: International Publishers, 1963).

<sup>31</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Home and away: Narratives of migration and estrangement,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2:3 (1999): 329-347; Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, (London: Routledge, 1986); Stuart Hall, “Subjects in History: Making Diasporic Identities,” in W. Lubiano, ed., *The House that Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain*, (New York: Pantheon, 1997).

<sup>32</sup> Hall, 1997, 299.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Westoby and Ann Ingamells, “A Critically Informed Perspective of Working with Resettling Refugee Groups in Australia,” *British Journal of Social Work* 40:6 (2010): 1759-1776.

<sup>34</sup> Jay M. Marlowe, “Beyond the Discourse of Trauma: Shifting the Focus on Sudanese Refugees,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 23:2 (2010), 185.

or when it ceases to be valid.<sup>35</sup> Kumsa's study of young Oromos in Canada, for example, found 'refugee' to be -

a label of exclusion. That the young Oromos are referred to as refugees even years after they have become Canadian citizens suggests that 'the refugee' is a label used to distance people further away from the nation and point them to another place of be-longing."<sup>36</sup>

Interestingly, Mbembe suggests that the African subject is also portrayed as "wounded and traumatized."<sup>37</sup> What both examples noted here reinforce is the inherent nature of labels to "carry and express relations of privilege and subordination, the power of some to determine for others how they will be named, what differences are important for what purposes."<sup>38</sup> Zetter adds that processes of labelling, including stereotyping, control and designation, are as important as labels themselves.<sup>39</sup> Such processes distance those who label from those who are labelled through a "gaze from above."<sup>40</sup>

Individuals who fall within broadly labelled categories are unlikely to share common attributes and common experiences. Neither is an imposed label necessarily formative to their identity.<sup>41</sup> But beyond being a game played by intellectuals,<sup>42</sup> institutional labelling can transform identity because it instructs public policy that determines entitlements, as Zetter has found:

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<sup>35</sup> Mammad Aidani, "Existential Accounts of Iranian Displacement and the Cultural Meanings of Categories," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 31:2 (2010): 121 – 143; Barbara Harrell-Bond, "The experience of refugees as recipients of aid," in Alastair Ager, ed. *Refugees: Perspectives on the Experience of Forced Migration* (London: Pinter, 1999): 136-168; Martha Kuwee Kumsa, "No! I'm not a refugee: The politics of belonging among young Oromo in Toronto," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 19:2 (2006): 230-255.

<sup>36</sup> Kumsa, (2006), 241.

<sup>37</sup> Mbembe (2002), 630.

<sup>38</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 14.

<sup>39</sup> Zetter (1991), 44.

<sup>40</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, (New York: Routledge, 1998), 264.

<sup>41</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1990); Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*, (London: The Women's Press, 1990); Young, 21, 33.

<sup>42</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990), 14.

Labels do not exist in a vacuum. They are the tangible representation of policies and programmes, in which labels are not only formed but are then also transformed by bureaucratic processes which institutionalize and differentiate categories of eligibility and entitlements. In this way, labels develop their own rationale and legitimacy and become a convenient and accepted shorthand.<sup>43</sup>

One seeks to be included to be entitled; being endorsed with a label, such as ‘refugee’ or ‘African-Australian,’ can attract valuable services or funding. There is a further element of conformity because, as noted above, labels are based on stereotypes “which involves disaggregation, standardization, and the formulation of clear cut categories.”<sup>44</sup> Another consequence of stereotyping in the process of labelling is the simultaneous assumption of common needs.<sup>45</sup> The AHRC report falls into this trap by suggesting that ‘African-Australians’ have largely similar experiences, regardless of country of origin or visa status, and presuming policy recommendations for all. It thus produces “authentic and inauthentic migrant perspectives [relying] on assumptions of both what migration already is, as well as what it should be.”<sup>46</sup> And, I would add to this, an assumption of what ‘these migrants’ need as being largely the same for all who come under the ‘African-Australian’ label. Malkki’s work reveals how refugees subvert and resist imposed labels; she cautions that universalised figures such as refugees can make it “appear that there are specific empirical features or personal traits that render this or that person recognizable.”<sup>47</sup> She observes that after being labelled, groups can then be problematised and have corrective measures imposed on them accordingly, without attention to root causes of their plight. One could posit that for ‘African-Australians,’ who I argue are generally understood to be refugees, greater weight has been placed on their vulnerability and status as ‘trauma victims,’ than to institutional racism in the Australian context, as a cause for disadvantage.

An important consequence of labelling relates to public perceptions of new entrants. References to ‘Africans’ in the public domain, especially

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<sup>43</sup> Zetter (2007), 180.

<sup>44</sup> Zetter (1991), 44.

<sup>45</sup> Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, (London: Routledge, 1986), 100.

<sup>46</sup> Ahmed (1999), 334.

<sup>47</sup> Malkki, 8.

the media, present them as strangers who are alien to the wider society.<sup>48</sup> Such a distancing image, linked to a monolithic label because of convenience and stereotyping, demands one to ask, as Razack has, how such narratives are consumed.<sup>49</sup> Although her analysis focuses on Rwandan narratives of pain and suffering in the Canadian context, her implication of the racial power of those who consume the narratives of Black suffering holds wider relevance. Trapped between representations as traumatised and vulnerable, or problematic strangers, ‘African-Australians’ have become imbued with symbols that influence how they are received and that they have no role in shaping. This includes in the case of Southern Sudanese-Australians, a perception that they are disproportionately violent and unable to ‘settle’ in Australia.<sup>50</sup> Simmel explains how these formed impressions of the ‘Other’ interact with actual relations:

The relation constitutes the condition under which the conception, that each has of the other, takes this or that shape and has its truth legitimated. On the other hand, the real interaction between the individuals is based upon the pictures which they acquire of one another<sup>51</sup>

The pictures we acquire of one another are framed by the labels by which they are known. Hence the representation of vastly diverse groups of new entrants as ‘African-Australians’ can impact on their settlement experiences, and host community perceptions of them, because it contributes to one dimensional stereotypes of ‘all Africans.’

### **Who is an African-Australian?**

Census data can provide a clearer picture of countries of origin and visa status for African-born Australian residents. It shows that close to fifty percent of all African-born persons in Australia – 43.1% and 41.9% in the 2001 and 2006 Census respectively, are English-speaking persons from South Africa of European-descent,<sup>52</sup> who entered Australia as migrants.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Caitlin Nunn, “Spaces to Speak: Challenging Representations of Sudanese-Australians,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 31:2 (2010): 183 - 198.

<sup>49</sup> Sherene H. Razack, “Stealing the Pain of Others: Reflections on Canadian Humanitarian Responses,” *Review of Education, Pedagogy & Cultural Studies* 29:4 (2007), 391.

<sup>50</sup> Nunn, 184.

<sup>51</sup> Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel, translated and edited with an introduction by Kurt H Wolff*, (Illinois: The Free Press, 1950), 309.

<sup>52</sup> Graeme Hugo, “Migration between Africa and Australia: a demographic perspective. Background paper for African Australians: A review of human rights and social inclusion issues,” 2009, [http://www.humanrights.gov.au/africanaus/papers/africanaus\\_paper\\_hugo.pdf](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/africanaus/papers/africanaus_paper_hugo.pdf) (accessed 12 November 2011).

Nearly half of all Australians of African origin are therefore white, skilled migrants, from South Africa. Yet it would seem that the term ‘African-Australian’ is in fact actually being used to label the other half of this group; black migrants and refugees.<sup>54</sup> For instance, the AHRC report states that ‘African-Australians’ are migrants from almost all of the African nations, but is silent as to whether its findings also include the first group mentioned above – white, South-African born skilled migrants.<sup>55</sup> With no South African communities listed as being consulted for the report, and given the AHRC’s findings on discrimination due to visibility and skin colour, it seems unlikely that this is the case.<sup>56</sup> So, it seems that ‘African-Australian’ has come to mean ‘African born Australian - other than white South-African.’ Further exploration of the literature suggests an even more complicated picture, as is illustrated in the following example.

Where ‘African-Australians’ are examined in social services reports, one can identify a pattern of generalising the plight or problem of a few entrants of African background, to ‘all’ Africans. Generalising from one or two countries to a whole continent seems a dangerous methodology. For example one can hardly imagine a scenario today where Greek or Italian migrants would be put under the umbrella of ‘European-Australians.’ Labels applied to earlier groups of migrants and refugees have been refined over time for good reasons including their lack of fit and strong advocacy on the part of communities themselves. Yet the lessons already learnt have not been applied to new entrants in Australia such as Southern-Sudanese Australians.

I illustrate this trend through discussion of a small sample of reports below. Footscray Legal Centre’s report on *The Legal Problems of African Refugees* concentrates on clients originating from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan and Somalia: the four largest source countries for refugees and Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) entrants.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless this is not a representative sample of ‘all’ African refugees in Melbourne.<sup>58</sup> A majority of ‘African refugees’ interviewed by the organisation Anglicare

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<sup>53</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008.

<sup>54</sup> Refugee is used here in the broadest sense and includes entrants arriving under Australia’s Refugee and Special Humanitarian Program.

<sup>55</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (2010a), 3.

<sup>56</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (2010a), 12.

<sup>57</sup> Fraser.

<sup>58</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008.

for a recent housing study were from a Sudanese background,<sup>59</sup> and fifty percent of participants in a study of ‘African’ birthing practices were Sudanese women.<sup>60</sup> These sample sizes of Southern Sudanese refugees is hardly surprising given that refugees from Sudan constitute the largest number of refugee entrants from Africa.<sup>61</sup> What is surprising is the decision of researchers to generalise from the particular case of Southern Sudanese-Australians, to the general, ‘African-Australian.’ The Footscray Legal Centre report even points to specific problems faced by Southern Sudanese-Australians prior to arrival that affect their knowledge about Australian legal systems.<sup>62</sup> Persisting with this label therefore does not assist with formulating solutions. It leaves little or no space for Congolese-Australians, Liberian-Australians, Sierra Leonean-Australians and Kenyan-Australians, to name but a few groups of new entrants whose unique pre-arrival experiences are lost when painted with the broad brush of ‘African-Australian.’

Other researchers have moved away from ethnicity toward geography, defining ‘African-Australians’ as migrants and refugees from the Horn of Africa.<sup>63</sup> A risk in drawing up these kinds of boundaries is that one can become bogged down in geographical constraints, as the Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria (ECC-V) appears to do in, albeit correctly, distinguishing between Horn of African and Sudanese communities.<sup>64</sup> Few clear boundaries exist in this region - the Horn of Africa has not traditionally included Sudan which straddles an uncomfortable position whereby politically it is part of both the African Union and Arab League. Geographically Sudan lies in North Africa, but the formerly autonomous region of Southern Sudan and now newly independent South Sudan have closer links to countries of the East African Community.<sup>65</sup>

Being ‘African-Australian’ provides no information on visa status in addition to country of origin, which is an important guide for entitlements

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<sup>59</sup> Evans and Gavarotto.

<sup>60</sup> Murray et al.

<sup>61</sup> Department of Immigration and Citizenship

<sup>62</sup> Fraser, 7.

<sup>63</sup> Pittaway and Muli; Omar M Farah, *The African Employment Challenge: the achievements and challenges of the Horn-Afrik Employment, Training and Advocacy Project 2007-2010*, (Carlton Local Agencies Network, 2010).

<sup>64</sup> Ethnic Communities’ Council of Victoria.

<sup>65</sup> Apollo Nsubuga-Kyobe, and Liz Dimock, *African communities and Settlement Services in Victoria: Towards Better Service Delivery Models*, (Melbourne: Australian Multicultural Foundation, 2002).

and potential settlement pathways. Despite reporting on inter-generational issues and gender relations, the AHRC's 'African-Australian' is ageless and without gender. Other reports cited above make some attempt to disaggregate data by age or gender but not always both together. These omissions undo efforts by others who fight against the "production of the 'Third World Woman' as a singular monolithic subject;"<sup>66</sup> potentially rendering 'African-Australian' women silent and invisible. Acknowledging shared religion, gender and locality in Australia, Nsubuga-Kyobe and Dimock suggest 'sub-Saharan black African' as an alternative label to 'African-Australian.'<sup>67</sup> To date, their label remains one of the only instances where colour, namely black, is explicitly named in reference to Australians of African-backgrounds.<sup>68</sup> Positively claiming and developing a discourse of blackness could have potential in the Australian context, as a method for what has been referred to by Spivak and others, as strategic essentialism.<sup>69</sup> But it would need to be reconciled with notions of blackness endorsed by Indigenous Australians in a way that does not obscure their specific histories of racism.<sup>70</sup> New entrants would also need to be cognisant of the risk that "when forms of Otherness that break out of the confines of dominant defined identity enclosures are articulated, these are perceived as subversive and rejected or repressed."<sup>71</sup> Due to limitations of space, I cannot discuss the body of academic literature on blackness in both the UK,<sup>72</sup> and the US,<sup>73</sup> that could instruct the development of such a discourse in future, which hopefully will be generated amongst Australians of African backgrounds.

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<sup>66</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminist Review* 30 (1988), 61.

<sup>67</sup> Nsubuga-Kyobe and Dimock.

<sup>68</sup> Nsubuga-Kyobe and Dimock (2002), 7.

<sup>69</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 1987, cited in Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West*, (London: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>70</sup> Sara Ahmed, "'It's a sun-tan, isn't it?': Auto-biography as an identificatory practice," in Heidi Safia Mirza, ed. *Black British Feminism: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997): 153-167.

<sup>71</sup> Magdalene Ang-Lygate, "Charting the space of (un)location: On theorizing diaspora," in Heidi Safia Mirza, ed. *Black British Feminism: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997), 180.

<sup>72</sup> Ang-Lygate; Brah; Paul Gilroy, *Small acts: thoughts on the politics of black cultures*, (London: Serpent's Tail, 1993a); Hall, 1996.

<sup>73</sup> Linda Martin Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender and the Self*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York: Routledge, 2000); bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992).

As was noted earlier, surprisingly little reflection has taken place alongside the endorsement of the doubly continent-wide label, as to how it further perpetuates stereotypes of Africa - which is itself an external label.<sup>74</sup> Brookes' critical discourse analysis of the British press on Africa, highlights language invoked to construct meaning with popular knowledge and belief.<sup>75</sup> Just as Simmel found that encounters interact with formed impressions, Brookes' work compels us to consider how language and labels do not exist in a vacuum, finding that "the cumulative effect of a homogenous selection of regularly occurring subjects is the construction of a stereotypical representation of Africa."<sup>76</sup> It is likely that this same homogenous stereotype can be found in the Australian-context.

### **Southern Sudanese - Australians**

*Labelling oneself and others, and contesting labels, are at the heart of group identities.*<sup>77</sup>

Comprising the largest group of refugees in Australia from the African continent, Southern Sudanese-Australians are a good case study of how refugee groups can be, and are, labelled. I would suggest that the challenges faced in labelling this sizeable group can inform future actions, particularly for small and emerging communities from Africa. While positing that convenience and lack of knowledge of pre-arrival experiences are the reasons for the use of 'African-Australian' as a shorthand label, I show below that it leads to imperfect descriptions on which policy frameworks are built. Thus more time and resources have to be invested at a later stage post-arrival to learn about the histories of new entrant groups and the diversity they bring with them. Such costs are often borne by communities themselves and social service organisations. This section is also strongly informed by my work in Southern Sudan and experience as a practitioner in the resettlement of Southern Sudanese refugees in Australia.

Refugees today are more likely to be the by-product of inter-ethnic conflict than conflict between nation states,<sup>78</sup> hence another reason for

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<sup>74</sup> Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 284.

<sup>75</sup> Heather Jean Brookes, "'Suit, Tie and a Touch of Juju' - The Ideological Construction of Africa: A Critical Discourse Analysis of News on Africa in the British Press," *Discourse Society*, 6:44 (1995), 462.

<sup>76</sup> Brookes, 465.

<sup>77</sup> Tariq Modood, Sharon Beishon, and Satnam Virdee, *Changing Ethnic Identities*, (London: Policy Studies Institute, 1994), 81.

why nationally-bounded labels may not adequately fit their experience. Certainly this is the case for Southern Sudanese refugees who were persecuted and had their human rights denied by the Khartoum-based Sudanese Government.<sup>79</sup> Practices carried out by the Sudanese government included the differential treatment of Southern Sudanese on the basis of their ‘non-Arab’ identity and racial inferiority as well as the under-development of South Sudan as a region. If the ‘Sudanese’ label had little, or no, positive meaning for Southern Sudanese in the past, South Sudan’s independence has confirmed that the Sudanese label will have no future relevance for its citizens both in South Sudan and the diaspora. Up to this point it may have been necessary for government bodies such as DIAC to employ the meta-label Sudan, to avoid any implied endorsement of the south’s secession from the north. But bureaucratic labels should not be repeated uncritically by social services even if they are dependent on government funding that operates within the limits of bureaucratic labels.<sup>80</sup> A similar scenario exists for Tibetan refugees in countries like America, who must list their country of birth as China despite it being their agent of persecution, because Tibet is not officially recognised by the US government.<sup>81</sup>

Scholars too, in some instances, do not interrogate their categorisation beyond repeating the Sudanese, Sudanese-refugee or Sudanese-Australian label.<sup>82</sup> Building on the link made by Zetter between labels and identity, I

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<sup>78</sup> Patrick Matlou, “Upsetting the Cart: Forced Migration and Gender Issues, the African Experience,” in Doreen Indra, ed. *Engendering Forced Migration: Theory and Practice*, (New York: Berghahn, 1999).

<sup>79</sup> Johnson.

<sup>80</sup> Stephen Castles, and Ellie Vasta, “Introduction: Multicultural or Multi-racist Australia,” in Ellie Vasta and Stephen Castles, eds. *The teeth are smiling: The persistence of racism in multicultural Australia*, (New South Wales: Allen and Unwin, 1996), 9.

<sup>81</sup> Julia Meredith, “Tibetan Immigration to the United States: Engagement with Bureaucracy and the Limits of the Nation-State,” in E. M. Gozdzia and D. J. Shandy, eds. *Rethinking Refuge and Displacement: Selected Papers on Refugees and Immigrants Volume VIII*, (Arlington: American Anthropological Association, 2000), 66-86.

<sup>82</sup> See for example: Aniko Hatoss, and Terry Sheely, “Language maintenance and identity among Sudanese-Australian refugee-background youth,” *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 30:2 (2009): 127 – 144; Robert Schweitzer, Jaimi Greenslade and Ashraf Kagee, “Coping and resilience in refugees from the Sudan: a narrative account,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 41 (2007): 282-288; Jane Shakespeare-Finch and Kylie Wickham, “Adaptation of Sudanese Refugees in an Australian Context: Investigating Helps and Hindrances,” *International Migration*, 48:1 (2010): 23-46.

find that failing to interrogate broad labels not only fixes identity around convenient parameters, but makes it harder for new entrants to resist how they are labelled.<sup>83</sup> When new entrants are of refugee backgrounds, it is also important to consider how displacement and exile alters identity which can be influenced by factors within this period such as, where and how long they remain in countries of first asylum, and the status they are designated by host countries.<sup>84</sup> An optimal scenario would see those within bureaucracies learning from new entrants about their preferred labels, and social services supporting new entrants in their efforts to categorise back against imposed labels.

Would this indicate that Southern Sudanese is a more sensitive label for this group of refugees? Not within political discourses as commentators concur that the (Arab) north versus (Christian) south distinction of Sudan, is an oversimplification that harks back to colonial intervention.<sup>85</sup> Shandy's assessment, which I agree with, is that this dichotomy "glosses over much more complex social, historical, economic, and geostrategic processes that contribute to the framing of the conflict in Sudan."<sup>86</sup> In fact the situationally dependent attributes of religion, region and tribe hold much greater value in Sudan,<sup>87</sup> and "the south, though labelled as a racial and cultural unity is emerging as internally diversified and by no means clearly distinguishes from the north - racially, culturally or even religiously."<sup>88</sup> Whilst in exile, and after resettlement, the 'Southern Sudanese' identity intensified, highlighting Ang's suggestion of diasporic identity being a space of power expressed by claiming difference.<sup>89</sup> In recent literature, one finds the 'Southern Sudanese refugee' label is nearly as popular as "African-Australian;" only a few American scholars

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<sup>83</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (London: Verso, 1993b), 223; Nira Yuval-Davis, "Ethnicity, Gender Relations and Multiculturalism," in Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood, eds. *Debating Cultural Hybridity*, (London: Zed, 1997), 193.

<sup>84</sup> Harrell-Bond; Malkki; Aspasia Papadopoulou-Kourkoulou, *Transit Migration: The Missing Link between Emigration and Settlement*, (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Zetter, 2007.

<sup>85</sup> Francis Mading Deng, "The Identity Factor in the Sudanese Conflict," in J. V. Montville, ed. *Conflict and Peacemaking in Multiethnic Societies*, (Massachusetts: Lexington, 1990), 343-4; Idris.

<sup>86</sup> Shandy, 23.

<sup>87</sup> Nelson Kasfir, "Peacemaking and Social Cleavages in Sudan," in Joseph V. Montville, ed., *Conflict and Peacemaking in Multiethnic Societies*, (Massachusetts: Lexington, 1990), 366.

<sup>88</sup> Deng, 357.

<sup>89</sup> Ang, 11-12.

conduct their research with reference to tribal categories, mainly in relation to the Dinka and Nuer - the largest tribal groups in Southern Sudan.<sup>90</sup> The compendium to the AHRC report includes a response that speaks to this:

It really bothers me that police think all Sudanese people are the same and they all speak the same language...Sudanese. Well there is no Sudanese and our ethnic and cultural differences between us are actually really big. Dinkas are different to the Nuer, who are different again to the Bari or the Chollo. A bit more of an understanding of that might mean that they don't end up aggravating something or adding to a tension that might be there.<sup>91</sup>

Such a clear request must be responded to. Given that a strong Southern Sudanese identity was formed in exile, it is unfortunate that statistics used in Australia to determine Southern Sudanese-Australians may not include this group. This is because without comprehensive ancestry or language data, country of birth statistics are still the most reliable indicator for new migrant and refugee groups. For decades many Southern Sudanese refugees have lived, and been born in, countries of exile such as Egypt, Uganda and Kenya. Between 1997 and 2007 a further 3,984 and 2,623 entrants arrived from Egypt and Kenya respectively, most likely also of Southern Sudanese origin.<sup>92</sup> But these individuals may not be counted as such because only their country of birth is recorded, highlighting a serious gap in data collection methods. If data is predicated on categories that are not sensitive to geo-political realities, newly arrived communities may not be able to demonstrate their real numbers and spatial presence in Australia, which is essential information for community groups and social services especially when submitting applications for community development funding.

One final aspect of the Southern Sudanese refugee label that demands interrogation is the persistent inclusion of the word 'refugee.' Since Harrell-Bond's key text *Imposing Aid* critiqued representations of

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<sup>90</sup> Steven H Fox, and Mary S Willis, "Initiatory Mental Health Assessments for Dinka and Nuer Refugees from Sudan," *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 7:2 (2010): 159 – 179; Shandy.

<sup>91</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, "African Australians: Human rights and Social Inclusion Issues Project: A compendium detailing the outcomes of the community and stakeholder consultations and interviews and public submissions" (2010b), 127.

<sup>92</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics.

refugees as helpless victims in need of external assistance, countless researchers including Malkki have added their voice in support.<sup>93</sup> As the example discussed here shows, once applied the refugee label seems to adhere hard and fast, long after refugees have been displaced and resettled. Aidani's recent study of Iranians in Melbourne, Australia vehemently rejects the imposed label of refugee showing how it provides little meaning to personal experiences.<sup>94</sup> If the legal distinction has proved to be disempowering and inaccurate, one must ask why it persists even years after people have settled in a country, except to continually distance them as an 'Other.'<sup>95</sup> The case of the refugee label provides a valuable lesson for those who argue for the short-term convenience of the 'African-Australian' label over any longer-term consequences: some labels can be very hard to un-stick.

### **Conclusion**

*The word diaspora often invokes images of trauma and separation and dislocation, and this is certainly a very important aspect of the migratory experience. But diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure.*<sup>96</sup>

In this article I have shown that in the case of Southern Sudanese-Australians, the imposition of the label 'African-Australian' has privileged the convenience of a broad label over accurately representing a heterogeneous community. I have approached this by firstly setting out how labels operate in bureaucratic and academic domains and then using Census data to show who constitutes African-born Australians. The ineffectiveness of the 'African-Australian' label in general has been revealed through a critique of existing scholarly literature and various community sector reports. In doing this I have also raised the specific histories of racialising and stigmatising which we must be cognisant of in relation to the 'African' label. Turning to the context of Sudan, I have argued that a complex notion of identity has developed through conflict and displacement, and there is no consensus on how best to describe and label racially and culturally diverse Southern Sudanese communities. The overall effect of current labelling practices towards 'Africans' has been to obscure distinctions within and between new entrants of African

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<sup>93</sup> Malkki, 1995.

<sup>94</sup> Aidani.

<sup>95</sup> Kumsa; Zetter, 2007, 187.

<sup>96</sup> Brah, 193.

backgrounds in Australia such as Australians of Southern Sudanese origin, as well as perpetuate simplistic, negative representations of Africa as a homogenous entity. Certainly the labelling practices outlined in this article reflect a historical trend in Australia, and were commonly applied to earlier migrant and refugee communities. For ‘African-Australians,’ as was the case for many earlier migrant and refugee groups, convenient labels fixing artificial boundaries around new entrants have a flow on effect in the design of policies to assist new and emerging communities, how social services categorise clients and the assumptions made about needs. Powerful bureaucratic labels can set back efforts towards self-definition and identity transformation. Mis-representing and mis-labelling new entrants also denies their specific pre-arrival experiences which can lead to costly mistakes post-arrival.

If labels are rendered immobile and identities imposed by outsiders, then Southern Sudanese-Australians will be denied, yet again, the opportunity to determine how they are labelled and named. We must therefore “develop a language beyond the simplistic and often obscuring labels ... available to us”<sup>97</sup> in order to avoid restricting the identity of Southern-Sudanese Australians. If the warnings about the impact of labelling are ignored, Southern Sudanese-Australians risk being left in a perpetual state of refugee-ness or African-ness through labels that subsume their internal diversity. Solutions can come through existing spaces of dialogue that combine the resources of all communities and greater investment in learning about pre-arrival experiences.<sup>98</sup> Scholars, government bodies and social services need to also think critically about how they use labels for new entrants, conscious of their power in shaping more than just a name.

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<sup>97</sup> Jan Jindy Pettman, *Living in the Margins: Racism, sexism and feminism in Australia*, (NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1992), viii.

<sup>98</sup> Westoby and Ingamels, 1773.

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