

South Sudanese¹ Refugees and Youth: Complex Narratives of Gender, War and Diaspora

Introduction

The history of Sudan is one that has been overwhelmingly tragic not only for its instances of colonization and imperialism, but also for the incessant occurrences of war and internal conflict that ensued after independence from Britain. Beginning in 1955, Sudan was riddled with two separate civil wars that spanned over twenty one years resulting in the death and displacement of millions of Sudanese people -- those from the South were disproportionately represented as those who were displaced and targeted due to their resistance against the dominant north. These wars resulted for a number of reasons such as ethnic and religious tensions where the distribution of power left the south particularly vulnerable to the regimes of the north. In 2005, a Comprehensive Peace Agreement² was signed, which eventually led to the south formally deciding to separate from the north in 2011. As of 2011 the Republic of South Sudan has been recognized as the world's newest nation, however in addition to this new status, South Sudan has still been forced to deal with the repercussions of a history that has been tainted by war and trauma.

The resettlement of South Sudanese immigrants in the United States has represented an interesting relationship especially as most immigrants were accompanied by their young children who may not have been able to grasp the full severity of the conditions that shaped their new realities. However, despite not being able to understand the world that was falling apart around

¹ In this paper Sudanese and South Sudanese are occasionally used interchangeably. The experiences discussed throughout are unique to those of South Sudanese refugees whether it be before separation from Sudan or in the context of the new country by the formal name of the Republic of South Sudan.

² Agreement signed on January 9, 2005 by the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the government of Sudan. Was meant to end the second civil war and develop democratic governance countrywide.

them, these young children and youth are still capable of internalizing their experiences even if they may not have always had the language to articulate said experiences. Additionally, many families continued to expand to where there were children in the family who lived through their parents trauma and experiences- and their own- and then there were also children born in the United States who relied on the oral history of their family members to understand the circumstances for their existence. The experiences and history of South Sudanese refugees have been acknowledged and validated in many instances as can be seen by efforts to provide support and resources. However these attempts have not always been holistic in that the psychological impacts of war and displacement have not always been accounted for. There has also been a subsequent absence of transparency in pre-resettlement experiences which has resulted in youth being unable to ground themselves in a history that precedes a narrative centered on war and its impacts. In order to remedy this failure and to understand the experiences of South Sudanese youth and young adults in the diaspora, the specific experiences of trauma, violence, and displacement through the voices of South Sudanese women must be acknowledged to consequently reveal how their experiences have directly informed those of the youths and young adults in question.

Pre War Life

In discussing the experiences of South Sudanese women and youth, and refugees as a whole, it is imperative to avoid associating them exclusively with their interactions of war. To bring this group of individuals into conversation with the intention of only discussing their pain is to place them in a static position. To discuss Sudanese identity only in the context of their

suffering is to impose the idea that they are incapable of transcending the harm that has been a condition of their existence and to instead reinforce a narrative that has been grounded in violence. Within our contemporary society, the image of the South Sudanese refugee has been constructed to document the history of violence and struggle. This can be seen in a number of films such as *The Good Lie*³ and *The Lost Boys of Sudan*⁴ where the journey through refugee camps and the overall resettlement of Sudanese refugees to America is documented. This form of representation of the South Sudanese identity is one that requires further unpacking considering the way that the identity of the American born South Sudanese youth is constructed. Both of the documentaries mentioned above have maintained a narrative that is situated in the suffering of the Sudanese refugee. However they also manage to do exactly what this project seeks to avoid. These films have successfully based South Sudanese identity and history in their experiences of harm and underdevelopment which represent a liberal imperialist position. Throughout the film, there are multiples scenes documenting the experiences of displacement and the tragedies that occurred as a consequence of such violence. In both films the young refugees are situated largely in these images of war, famine, and poverty that they carry along with them through the refugee camps and eventually in the United States upon resettlement. Initially this depiction is valid in that it documents the history of the Sudanese refugees; understanding the circumstances of their existence is necessary to understand how they navigate the world. However even as they transition to life in the United States, their story is further rooted in those experiences as they

³ 2014 American drama film that follows the story of six siblings who have been displaced in south Sudan as a result of their village and families being massacred. The film follows the siblings as they travel between refugee camps, experience death and loss, and are eventually resettled in the United States.

⁴ 2003 Documentary film focusing on the lives of two Dinka (one of Sudan's tribes) boys who have reached the United States as orphans after escaping the civil war. The film follows the journey to the refugee camps that up to 20,000 young south Sudanese youth were forced to embark on.

interact with the sponsoring organizations and charities. This creates a point of contention as the narrative of Sudanese refugees remains saturated with violence and displacement which fails to take into account the story and narrative that refugees are working to create on their own; a narrative rooted in community and building agency. This imposition and construction of an image of the Sudanese that is rooted in their suffering is a stereotype that many from the ‘third world’ have been subjected to as discussed by Chandra Mohanty in their piece “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.” Mohanty argues that “this connection between women as historical subjects and the representation of Woman produced by hegemonic discourses is not a relation of direct identity... it is an arbitrary relation set up in particular cultural and historical contexts” (Mohanty). Despite subtle differences in context, the subjection of Sudanese identity much like that of third world identities is one that is rooted in an image of suffering.

Not only does the popular representation of Sudanese identity in the media feed into a liberal imperialist position, it additionally feeds into a capitalistic agenda. When looking at the Lost Boys specifically, their life histories have been contextualized by suffering to “create conditions of accountability, which can push the poor and suffering into the capital driven folds of international NGOs, development interventions, and state initiatives, none of which may have been part of their original mandate” (Butt). This presentation of Sudanese identity is one that situates them in a position where they are seen as a population that remains at the mercy of outside agencies and charities to survive. This interpretation is specifically problematic in that it directly goes against Sudanese values that are rooted in autonomy and self sufficiency. A threat that can potentially rise from this specific representation of Sudanese identity is that it can work

towards the erasure of other facets of Sudanese identity and culture. Instead of attempting to preserve these cultures and create space for which to do so, the Sudanese is subjected to being of importance only with regards to their suffering, completely ignoring an identity that precedes tragedy. This essentially feeds into a capitalistic model because these entities such as NGOs are able to pride themselves in upholding the pillars of human rights work, all the while they are only focusing on issues that are surface level and lack a thorough understanding for the holistic support that this population could benefit from.

There have been different depictions of Sudanese identity many of which only acknowledge their being in relation to the circumstances they've been subjected to. This relationship to identity born out of circumstance is something that Nyalong Nhial, a twenty-eight year old refugee who came to the United States in 1993 with her mother and three older brothers, finds harmful in the attempts for healing and open communication between generations. An unfortunate reality for many young Sudanese refugees has to do with their memories of their homeland. For a number of reasons such as young age or being born into a war zone, memories of life before war simply do not exist. What Nhial brings into conversation is the constant push and pull that occurs in the mind where one is so consumed with the need to keep moving forward and suppress harmful memories to ensure their mere survival. Instead of being able to reflect and allow the memories to wash over them, Nhial and many others can reflect on how life before war is something that is talked about fleetingly and only addressed at surface level.

The image of Sudanese life before war has been complicated to construct in that the history and the country in itself has been seemingly born out of conflict and turmoil.

Engaging in discourse around pre-war life, although rare, is something that usually occurs among older Sudanese refugees and tends to bring with it a deep feeling of melancholy. Through an interview⁵ with Nyayak Duot, Nyalong Nhial's mother, she explains how before the wars broke out one of the main values amongst south Sudanese living in the villages was their ability to be autonomous and to provide for oneself and their family. Contrary to the dominant representation of the Sudanese refugee, Duot explains how before the war "life was beautiful," everyone had their assets (livestock), everyone was able to take care of their daily activities and did not have to depend on others to complete these tasks for them. According to Duot, life in the village was rooted in the ability to take care of and maintain one's household in addition to being able to provide for relatives whenever they visited, showing how they were always willing and able to take care of each other as an expression of familial ties. This inclination towards maintaining and building familial relations is rooted in how specifically the Nuer community within Sudan and the diaspora build and recognize community. These two lines of kinship are identified as: (1) *mar*⁶, which describes an actual kinship relationship between individuals which can be directly traced through a line of relatives and (2) *buth*⁷ which refers to relationships between lineage though actual links between individuals cannot be traced (Holtzman). However this soon changed as war broke out and south Sudanese were forced into a dependent position that was contrary to the values and practices of the culture. With the war came the emergence of a decline in the standard of life to which many had been accustomed. This degeneration in the quality of life brought with it issues such as starvation that the community was generally unfamiliar with. But now the region was now famished as many were forced to survive off of

⁵ Interview translated from the Nuer language.

⁶ Brothers, sisters, parents, uncles, aunts, and cousins are all *mar*.

⁷ This kinship follows lineage and descent to uncover how and where the ancestries may have overlapped.

cooked grass. Duot states: “there are no hospitals, there are no homes to sleep in, nothing to eat, everyone’s stomach is eating itself from starvation, and there are no clothes to wear. The good life that we had before war no longer exists,” thus ushering in the new standard of life.

As we continue to move through this project and hear the experiences of Nyalong Nhial and her mother Nyayak Duot it becomes increasingly clear the salience of pre-war narratives and how these are often tied to those expressed when discussing resettlement and life beyond the refugee camps. Regardless of how vivid or vague the memories, the memories of life before war reveal the values that continue to be reinforced in specifically Nuer refugees. In addition to carrying on cultural values, these memories and their implications have also played a large role in shaping the trajectory of the lives of Sudanese youth and young adults.

Life in the Refugee Camps

The conflict in Sudan reached a peak in the late 1980s and early 1990s which resulted in a refugee crisis that led to an influx of southern Sudanese refugees moving into neighboring countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, and Uganda (Holtzman). Many Sudanese refugees traveled by foot and hid in the ‘bush’⁸ as they embarked on these dangerous and unpromising journeys across borders. Additionally, many families had experiences where upon arriving in these refugee camps they were faced with more challenges such as food insecurity and space. These issues that were not accounted for simply contributed to the continued displacement of Sudanese refugees, forcing them to pursue other camps that had adequate resources to offer them. Arguably, this constant movement and displacement that occurred overwhelmingly shaped the

⁸ Refers to dense African bush that was used for cover by many refugees as they trekked between borders.

lives of younger Sudanese refugees as many of their lives began in the camps resulting in a majority of their memories of Sudan being confined to those spaces.

Many families went from being able to provide for themselves and others to depending on direct handouts from outside agencies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Upon arriving in the first camp, Duot explains how because there was a lack of 'simple' things such as food, the quality of life easily began to decline:

“Back then the camps were able to provide you with food staples, you would be able to go back and prepare for your children and family and they had a regular schedule for this so you had to ration it out to last until the next distribution. And people would make alcohol to sell so they could have some money. Life was good but it was also rough especially if it was a camp where there were a lot of people there. When there's a lot of people they have to divide all of the resources and they run out more quickly, but it was good because we weren't exposed to the war. Instead the thing that was killing people was hunger because we simply didn't have enough to eat.”

The fact that Sudanese people were forced to depend on others represents one of the first factors that contributes to how displacement has further removed them from maintaining the values that they pride themselves on maintaining. Despite the geographical and cultural separation experienced by Sudanese refugees, it is interesting to see how Duot frames her experiences without focusing on what things they were losing. Instead what Duot does is frame her experiences and those of other refugees around what protections and advantages they experience as a result of them being in the refugee camps. This distinction and intentionality in the framing of narratives exhibited by

Duot helps to recognize how Sudanese refugees construct and explain their identity when compared to the identities and experiences that are often imposed upon them by virtue of their status as a refugee; often the imposed experiences of a refugee are rarely specific and relevant to the Sudanese context.

As a result of the war and displacement mentioned above, many Southern Sudanese became refugees in other bordering countries in East Africa, eventually leading to their resettlement in countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia. In attempts to understand the South Sudanese experience, youth and young people in the diaspora are most often exposed to oral histories from the perspectives of the males in the family. However, what this has done, albeit unintentionally, is muffled the experiences of Sudanese women. Most of the men in Sudanese families were tasked with either fighting on the frontlines or embarking on solo journeys, going by trial and error in order to arrive at one of the few camps that had the resources to completely alter the trajectory of their family's destiny. However the consequence of these family separations brought an overwhelming level of responsibility placed onto mothers who had to disregard any fears and anxieties they held in order to care for their children and ensure their safety and survival. The latter of the two scenarios mentioned above was the case for Nhial. Although Nhial was born in a refugee camp and only has vague memories, what remains vivid is the feeling of constantly being in transit and being exposed to varying levels of chaos and commotion.

Life in the refugee camps represents one of instability and constant movement where refugees are left to their own devices to ensure their survival. For Nhial, her mother was pregnant with her in addition to already having three sons, crossing borders to get to multiple different

camps. While they were embarking on their journeys, Nhial's father, Dep Tuany, made the decision to travel to Kenya alone in the hopes of being granted asylum. Once Tuany was granted asylum in Kenya he eventually was resettled in the states and began working through the bureaucratic red tape that was and continues to be the American immigration and refugee system to ensure the reunification of their family. When asked as to why she did not embark on the initial journey with her husband to Kenya, both Duot and her husband explain that the path from Ethiopia to Kenya was particularly dangerous for women and children as a result of the growing tensions between the two countries. Had Duot decided to travel to Kenya, she would have run the risk of being targeted simply because of her gender and could have been tortured or imprisoned in conditions that were far more dismal than those in the refugee camps.

Over the next three years, Nhial's mother placed herself in the direct line of danger countless times to attempt to cross the borders. At each border, Nhial's mother identified the natives, observed their mannerisms and phenotypic identifiers, picked up the local dialect or language, and would mimic them in order to be granted permission to cross through. These particular experiences of compounding labor whether they be physical or mental are often normalized for Sudanese refugee women such as Nyayak Duot. When discussing the role of gender and how it manifests itself within the family unit, Nhial explains how while women and girls are viewed as those needing protection and providing for, they are simultaneously held to another standard that requires them to provide for the family unit; in instances where the family is separated, the mother may also assume the role of both parents. What tends to occur however in the absence of a partner is the settling of an overwhelming pressure that leaves women with little to no outlets for expression and coping. In addition to having to adjust to life without her

husband, Duot still had to be a pillar of strength for her children as they continued to travel between Gambella, Itang, Torgach, and Addis Ababa⁹. Both Duot and her husband recognize that as a result of family separations, women found themselves alone in more ways than physical. The camps were plagued by unhealthy conditions that when paired with extreme hunger and starvation resulted in high rates of death for children specifically. Duot explains that women were tasked with maintaining the area of the refugee camp that the family was staying at. These responsibilities often entailed picking up and preparing the food and watching over the elderly and the children. This responsibility of watching over the elders and children-arguably the most vulnerable subjects during war- required women to ensure the overall health, wellness, and survival of their families.

In their article, “Families in Refugee Camps,” Holly Ann Williams discusses how the experience of the refugee within the camp is largely constructed and impacted by the life experiences that occurred as a part of the flight process (Williams). Williams further articulates the reality of many refugees in that during this time where refugees are existing in their new identities which are rooted in displacement, they experience disoriented social roles and “unfamiliar patterns of social organization” which also contribute to the loss of a childhood which is imposed on many youths.

Resettlement and Life Beyond Refugee Camps

For a majority of Sudanese refugees, life in the refugee camps spanned multiple years as the resettlement process was one that was particularly excruciating. One fact that many were confronted with was that not every camp had the resources or capacity to ensure a path to

⁹ Gambella, Itang, Torgach, and Addis Ababa represent Ethiopian cities and towns that often had refugee camps located there or represented areas that were heavily populated by South Sudanese refugees.

resettlement in countries such as the United States and Australia (Holtzman). Even after finding camps that had the proper humanitarian efforts in place to aid in the resettlement of Sudanese refugees, it was rare that an entire family was granted permission at once.

The process for refugee resettlement can and should be critiqued considering how it lacks a holistic approach for providing support to refugees with helping them properly integrate into a completely new environment. Data and research shows that upon becoming settled into American society, Sudanese refugees have goals and needs that often times remain unmet. This failure has been documented in “A View of Sudanese Refugee Resettlement Through Nebraska Print Media” by Mary S. Willis and Constance J. Fernald. In this study the most commonly cited unmet need or goal is war and trauma related, meaning that this is something the Sudanese refugee community recognizes as a service they need, but of course this can be complicated in a number of ways. To further bring this into conversation, Nhial explains that there are a lot of older Sudanese who hold a lot of trauma and hold the most vivid recollections of their experiences back in Sudan, however upon arrival their main concern is assimilation into the American culture. Unfortunately, when paired with the lack of healing spaces, this can result in the suppression of trauma that results in them holding onto their pain that leads to a disconnect in the diaspora. This disconnect can be seen in the way that despite Sudanese parents and older relatives’ attempts to incorporate and spread their authentic cultures and traditions, they leave out a historical genealogy that can provide those living in the diaspora with a better sense of their identity and who they want to become.

The question that can then be raised is how can the merging of cultures to create a stable identity come about for Sudanese youth and young people living in America? In order to

accomplish this integration, Duot argues that integration requires something much deeper than knowing the journey and sacrifices that took place in order for many Sudanese youth to have a life in America today:

“the kids born here do not know the life in the refugee camps, they can not grasp it. The kids that are born here can not understand or know because they were not in the refugee camps, and if we don’t tell them the conditions there- how they are desperate, they are hungry, they barely have clothing, they have no homes, they have no school. But they can only know this because it has been told to them. If you took them there they would see the conditions, but for those who have never been there, their parents have to tell them these details. Even now when we know they are really struggling back home we tell you and your siblings that they need our financial support because they are struggling and that is how American born kids know this, if they were to go there they would immediately notice the differences.”

According to Duot it is one thing for American born Sudanese to be aware of the conditions that created their reality. The deeper and more significant importance lies in what Sudanese youth and young people living in America do with their privileges and how they live consciously- of themselves and of those still remaining in the camps and villages. What is interesting to see is how despite having been forced to take on varying levels of responsibility herself, Duot reinforces the importance of telling a story of origin while simultaneously informing future generations of how they can and should incorporate themselves into the growing storyline. What Duot does through these measures is ensure that future generations of South Sudanese remain connected to

the narratives and experiences of South Sudanese identity that do not paint them as static beings who only become relevant in terms of war and displacement. as only victims of war and displacement.

According to Madeline Tempny in their piece on “What Research Tells Us About the Mental Health and Psychosocial Wellbeing of Sudanese Refugees,” there has been increasing research which points to the fact that “mental health care is an important priority for refugees once basic material needs are met” (Tempny) however within the context of older generations of Sudanese living in the diaspora, there is a contradiction that becomes apparent. For many in the Sudanese community there is a desire to assimilate into American culture however at the same time certain resources such as therapy have been stigmatized. This stigmatization introduces a contradiction in that therapy and all other mental health resources have begun to be regarded as something strictly American and at this point it then becomes undesirable to participate in this facet of ‘American culture.’

In looking critically at the experiences of resettlement and life beyond the refugee camps we can observe how South Sudanese identity is maintained in the United States. What this also reveals is how as a result of living with the conditions and circumstances of their existence, South Sudanese as a whole navigate the world around them differently in comparison to their other counterparts.

Conclusion(s)

Often the story of South Sudanese refugees are rooted in their experiences of war and trauma. These histories are important to understanding how South Sudanese in America navigate the world around them. However these histories also inform how they are to transcend and move

past these histories. Through the interviews and additional research, it becomes clear that the ways South Sudanese refugees share their story is framed differently compared to how they have been reproduced through different platforms such as media and academia. Additionally, the way that South Sudanese youth tell their stories of origin to describe their aspirations are often informed and shaped by the histories and cultural values that they remain exposed to.

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