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CONFLICT, MIGRATION, AND THE FLIGHT OF
HUMAN CAPITAL: THE CASE OF THE LOST BOYS
FROM SUDAN RESETLED IN PHILADELPHIA, AND
WHO STUDIED AT PENN STATE UNIVERSITY

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Synopsis:

Extant literature on conflict and the creation of streams of refugees, focuses mainly on refugee resettlement concerns, both for refugees as well as host countries, and the funding and resource provision involved. However, there is little discussion of the fact that, forced migration of refugees of conflict also amounts to the flight of human capital from the original economies of the countries of the refugees, which condition adversely affects development in those economies. This paper examines African conflicts and their accompanying refugee creation problem, especially the flight of human capital from the African economy, through the forced migration of sundry expertise from the continent.

Conflict, Migration, and the Flight of Human Capital: The Case of the “The Lost Boys from Sudan” Resettled in the US, and Who Studied at Penn State University

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Introduction

On April 1, 2001 the *New York Times Magazine* published an article by Ms. Sara Corbett, titled “The Long, Long, Long Road to Fargo, ND.” In short, the article recounted the harrowing story of about 17,000 Sudanese boys rendered homeless and parentless by the civil war in Sudan. It also detailed the boys’ lives in the refugee camps both in Ethiopia and Kenya, and how the US State Department agreed to resettle about 3600 of them in US cities. Since then various documentaries have been released on this story including “*The Lost Boys of Sudan*,” while the filmmakers have toured the country with some of the “Lost Boys” on speaking tour concerning the Sudanese Civil War. However, like Ms. Corbett’s article most of the stories and documentaries about the Lost Boys have focused mainly on their resettlement program by the US State Department, but have hardly touched on *how* the Boys have survived as refugees in the US fleeing a terrible war in their country of Sudan.

This article examines the resettlement experiences of the Lost Boys from Sudan resettled in Philadelphia and who later studied at The Pennsylvania State University, as refugees of the Sudanese Civil War. Through face-to-face interviews the article provides first-hand accounts of the hiatus that existed between the cultural orientation briefings given to the Boys in Kenya before their arrival in the US, and the realities they

confronted upon their arrival and how such realities have impacted their lives both in the US as well as with their families back in Sudan and Kenya. More importantly, the article introduces and discusses the side of the story of the Lost Boys and their resettlement experiences in the US showing their resilience in surviving as war refugees in America, which has been omitted by the numerous media reports and documentaries. It is made clear that this article is based on the second part of the Sudanese Civil War which flared up in the 1980s following the dissolution of the 1972 OAU Peace Accord by Nimeiri's government. It must be recalled that the Sudanese Civil War officially ended in May 2005 with the signing of the Peace Treaty between the Sudanese government and the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A).

The article was based on face-to-face interviews with sixteen of the Lost Boys from South Sudan resettled in Philadelphia and who studied at Penn State University, following the author's reading of Ms. Corbett's article in the *New York Times*. The objective of the face-to-face interviews was to capture the first-hand accounts of the story on how the Boys had survived since their resettlement in the US and whether their experiences of the realities of the US society had differed from their expectations before arriving in the country as refugees fleeing from war and death. It also contains an update on the status and accomplishments of the Boys after their graduation from Penn State 10 years ago. The story of the Lost Boys exemplifies the loss of human capital from Africa as a consequence of war and its creation of refugees across the continent. The initial face-to-face interviews were conducted on the Penn State University campus in 2008 while the Boys were students at the time. The exercise focused on the following questions:

1. What are your memories of the Civil War in Sudan and the refugee camp in Kenya?

2. Were you given any cultural orientation briefings on the American society and the people before leaving Kenya? If so, what kind of orientation were you given and by whom? What was the content of the orientation?
3. Have you found any inconsistencies between the orientation in Kenya and the realities of the American society since your arrival in the US? If so, what have been some of these inconsistencies? And what have been your reactions to them?
4. What have been your reactions to all the media coverage of your resettlement story in the US?
5. How have you survived as refugees in the US?
6. What do you think have been some of the major effects of African civil wars on the continent and its peoples both in Africa and at the international level?
7. What suggestions do you have for African governments – and the people – concerning civil wars in Africa and the growing refugee problem?

Responses to the above questions are discussed below but first, the article presents three major theories of conflict.

Theories of Conflict: Primordial, Class, and Eclectic

Conflict forms an integral part of human existence and associations, being a natural condition due to differences in human interests, perceptions, desires, ambitions and general dispositions. Conflict, therefore, occurs over several issues including social, economic, political, cultural and religious beliefs. The varying views on the causes and nature of conflict have led to several theories posing the same question: Why do human beings fight? The literature identifies three main conflict theories: the primordial, the class, and the eclectic.

The primordial theory on conflict assumes that groups – namely clan, sub-clan, ethnic, racial – constitute the principal actors in a polity around which cultural, economic, political, and social life is organized (Kieh, 2002: 10; Geertz, 1973: 259). Thus, collective action by each primordial group, which includes perceptions, beliefs and expectations, is structured by ethno-cultural specificities. Furthermore, within the inter-primordial

relations are hegemonic and subordinate groups with the former controlling the levers of economic and political powers. An important factor in the equation is that both groups have their respective agendas, ranging from a desire for political power to an interest in acquiring and retaining sizeable shares of the material resources of the country. More often than not, these agendas are achieved through the formation of alliances between hegemonic and a subordinate group. According to the theory, primordially based civil conflicts may be triggered by various factors, either singularly or collectively. For example, conflict may arise if the hegemonic group excludes the subordinate groups from economic and political opportunities (Auvinen, 1997: 178). This may assume the form of monopolization of access to cabinet posts and top positions in the military, and in parastatal enterprises by the hegemonic primordial group, to the exclusion of the subordinate groups. This situation engenders discontent among the latter groups, which most often leads to conflict.

Conversely, the Class theory on conflict, rooted in Marxism, argues that every society has an economic mode of production, which is the key to determining the status of the members of the society. That is, the mode of production determines the critical topic of allocation: who gets what? How much should they get? According to the theory, therefore, each member of society belongs to either the owning or the subordinate class. The propertied or the owning class determines the allocation and distribution of resources, while the latter – the subordinate class – comprises the petite bourgeoisie, the proletariat, and the peasantry. The central feature of the class structure is that it leads to exploitation, which determines the sources and the extent of class conflict (Boswell & Dixon, 1993; Kieh, 2002: 11). Thus, class conflict is the consequent of the development

of class consciousness by the subordinate classes, indicating that exploitation alone does not trigger conflict: the subordinate classes must become aware of their exploitation to wage class struggle. Conflicts, therefore, intensify as sub-classes increase awareness of their interests, and changes in their relative positions.

Finally, the Eclectic theory, advances the supposition that civil conflicts are produced by a confluence of factors, including political, cultural, economic, historical, social and external factors. Hence due to the complexity of civil conflicts, a single variable or factor is insufficient to explain the causes of these phenomena (Kieh, 2002:12). For example, according to Minear (1990) the Civil War in Sudan was an amalgamation of religious, racial, political and economic tensions, while that of Rwanda was mainly political, ethnic and class. Conflict therefore, can occur due to a combination of factors including poverty based on individual and regional disparities, which works as an inducement in persuading people to engage in violence. For instance, political conflict could be triggered by repression, human rights abuse, and the concentration of power at the political center. The lack of moral and ethical standards in the management of public affairs, and also discrimination based on sex, religion, ethnicity and socio-economic status have greatly contributed to the many conflicts experienced by Africans in the post-colonial era. The external factor, argues the theory, hinges on foreign powers meddling in African politics, as evidenced in Angola and Mozambique. The foundation for this external factor, however, has been the consequence of European colonialism on the African continent, exemplified by the Anglo-Egyptian condominium rule of the Sudan from 1898-1953.

The Sudanese Civil War: A Brief Overview

The Sudanese Civil War, which ended in May 2005, was referred to as the longest African civil war, spanning over a period of half a century beginning in the late 1950s following the country's independence in 1956. More importantly, the War reflected the many challenges and dilemmas facing post-colonial African states, as they struggle to build nations on the foundations of the colonial state.

According to Deng (2002), the Sudanese Civil War was a conflict of identities between the Northern and the Southern parts of the country. It was the iniquitous attempts by one group to gain immoderate advantage over a presumed rival under the pretence of enhancing national acquirements (Khalid, 2003). Like most African countries, independent Sudan was compelled to adopt the Westminster-developed Constitution on its Independence Day, January 1, 1956 since the interim government of Northern Sudan had no time to confect a Constitution that responded to the country's political and socio-cultural needs at the time. Furthermore, Sudan's socio-cultural infrastructure was unfit for the new political superstructures and the parties were equally not ready to reinvent themselves to confront the challenges posed by the ethos and conventions of democracy. The chief among these challenges were the principles of equality among citizens without discrimination on the basis of religion, ethnic origin or gender, and the overriding principle of accountability of leaders to their constituencies (Khalid, 2003). Sudan, therefore, was not allowed to mature into an inclusive civic state, comprising different peoples who could only be united in diversity.

It must be recalled that the ethno-regional division introduced by the Anglo-Egyptian condominium rule from 1898-1953, compounded the awareness of collective

differences in group power, advantages and opportunities in the Sudan. British officials implemented their “Southern Policy” which insulated the South from Northern commercial, religious, linguistic, and educational practices. However, this Policy led to political inexperience, economic neglect, and educational disparities in the South as the British failed to develop the South. For instance, at Independence the per capita income in the South was about half of the country’s as a whole. In addition, as of 1970 about 73% of the industrial establishments producing 66% of the value of products were located in the Northern economy, while no industrial activity was reported in the South (Rothchild, 1997: 216). Thus at independence, the country’s major infrastructures were concentrated mostly in the North, which greatly impeded any economic growth in the South.

In 1953 Ismail al Azhari became the first prime minister of Sudan and it was expected that he would seek unity of the country in terms of development strategies and political appointments. However, during the period of his rule from 1953-58 and particularly beginning in 1956 when the country became independent, Southern Sudan received only six parliamentary posts out of the 800 vacated by the British and the Egyptians. This situation caused widespread resentment against the Northern administration in the South both by the Southern politicians as well as the Southerners in general who then requested a policy of federalism. Furthermore, since independence Sudan’s economic development plans have religiously replicated the colonialist development strategy which favored the North, resulting in the underdevelopment of the South (Khalid, 2003). The Northern government’s inattention to the Southern concerns finally led to outbreak of violence ushering in the beginning of rebellion in the South.

The Southern request for federalism was rejected because the Northern government believed that “its disadvantages outweighed its benefits (Khalid, 2003: 81). Furthermore, the government asserted that the South could only be tackled through brutal Islamization and Arabization, which decision only served to rather intensify the conflict (Khalid, 2003). The Southern perspective of this Northern response was that the policy was tantamount to replacing British colonialism with Northern Arab hegemony.

Deng confirms this:

The South feels proud of their tribally rooted ethnic and cultural identity – which has survived Arab invasions for slaves – and are contemptuous of a race they consider bent on subjugating and humiliating the black race. They would rather take the Northern Sudanese for what they claim to be – Arabs. The fact that these Arabs deny their visible black African genetic origins is all the more reason to condemn them as renegades. The only unity that can be sustained on the basis of this duality is one founded on a diversified confederal coexistence” (Deng, 2002: 83)

In 1958 Abboud and his military junta ousted Azhari from office and ruled until 1964. During this period, Southern Sudan became a virtual colony of the North as merchant class, army and police officers, senior administrators, school headmasters were all Northerners in the South. Quranic schools were established in the South and a government decree also abolished Sunday as the day of worship in the South. In addition, the government expelled all Christian missionaries from the South in 1964. More so, repression and massacres led more Southern politicians to flee the country in vast numbers, including large numbers of Southern Sudanese. This action created the beginning of the first wave of the Sudanese refugee situation which grew from a calamity to catastrophe, with Southerners fleeing to Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, the Central African Republic and Congo (Khalid, 2003). At this point many Southerners concluded that their only salvation lay in the force of arms, resulting in the emergence of the Land and Freedom Army or the Anya Nya in September 1963. Politically, the position of the South

hardened leaning more towards secession from the North as a whole. The discovery of oil reserves in commercial quantities in the South, combined with its vast arable land with adequate rainwater and unexplored mineral resources believed to exist in abundance also exacerbated the tensions, as the South emerged as a potential source of national wealth, which the Northern government argued belonged to the state while the South rejected this claim.

In 1964, a popular uprising ousted Abboud's regime and ushered in the 2nd parliamentary democracy. However, this civilian rule only lasted until 1969 when it was ousted in a military coup in May of that year, led by Jaafar Nimeiri. In 1972 Nimeiri's government signed the Peace Accord mediated by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in Addis Ababa, which restored peace between the North and the South, demonstrating that it was feasible to achieve peace in the Sudan. The South began to see development programs during the period 1972-83 when secondary schools quadrupled and vocational education institutions were created for artisans and, a university was also established in Juba, the capital of the South. In 1983, however, renewed war broke out as the Southern Battalion 105 refused to be deployed permanently to the North by a government decree. The government thus ordered an invasion to quell the mutiny resulting in the Battalion fleeing to Ethiopia with its arms. Out of this mutiny, and also fed up by the difficult conditions created by Nimeiri in the South thus emerged Anya Nya II which later reconstituted itself to form the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement /Army (SPLM/A).

The vision of the SPLM/A was not to liberate the South from Northern tyranny but to create a new Sudan – one in which justice and liberty would strengthen the whole

nation (Khalid, 2003: 154). The new movement had John Garang as its leader. The result of the invasion order not only led to the fall of the 1972 Peace Accord but it also alienated the South from the North and almost officially launched the beginning of the second half of the War. In the North, the fall of the Accord made Nimeiri's political position rather untenable, with economic conditions worsening and sparking off demonstrations and strikes among workers. In his desperation, he imposed the Shari'a (Islamic law) hoping to appeal to the Muslim hierarchy of the North but this only served to further aggravate the conflict, as well as creating a rift between the Northern Islamic Front (NIF) scholar Hassan Turabi and Sadiq al Mahdi on one hand, and Nimeiri on the other. The two Muslim leaders felt upstaged by Nimeiri in terms of the introduction of the Shari'a and so began to fight to remove Nimeiri from office. More so, the South saw the Shari'a as a harsh legal system that not only violated their human rights but also their cultural and religious autonomy. This concern rather intensified their resolve to fight the Northern government for racial equality in the country.

On April 6, 1985 Nimeiri was removed from office while visiting the US and was replaced by Lt. Gen. Abd al Rahman Swar al-Dhahab. On June 30, 1989 Brig. Omar Hassan Ahmad Bashir assumed power through yet another military coup and immediately replaced hundreds of civil servants with the Northern Islamic Front (NIF) members, whose aspiration was the creation of an Arab-Islamic state in Sudan. The NIF introduced Shari'a which completed the polarization of the Sudan, as well as intensifying the Civil War, which also sparked off streams of Southern Sudanese refugees fleeing into Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, and other nearby countries. In the South, however, the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) provided an armed struggle

against the NIF's vision of an Islamic state arguing that its struggle was not for the secession of the South but the creation of a new secular, pluralistic Sudan, free of discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, culture or gender (Salih, 1994:197).

The search for safety for the thousands of Southern Sudanese refugees fleeing the War thus began the case of the 17,000 Sudanese boys who fled their war-torn country for safety in Ethiopia beginning in 1983, some of whom would later be resettled in the US and would come to be known to the Western media and aid workers, as the "Lost Boys from Sudan."

The Sudanese Civil War and the "Lost Boys."

On April 1, 2001 the *New York Times Magazine* published an article by Ms. Sara Corbett, titled "The Long, Long, Long Road to Fargo, ND." In short the article told the harrowing story of about 17,000 Sudanese boys rendered homeless and parentless by the civil war in that country. It also detailed the boys' lives in the refugee camps both in Ethiopia and Kenya, and how the US State Department agreed to resettle about 3600 of them in US cities. Since their arrival in the US documentaries and a movie have been released on their story, with the movie being titled "The Lost Boys of Sudan." The filmmakers have toured the country with some of the "Lost Boys," on speaking tour, allowing the Boys to recount their various individual experiences of the war and their eventual resettlement in the US to their captivated American audiences. Some of the Lost Boys attended US colleges, including Penn State University, where I had the opportunity

to interview them in connection with Ms. Corbett's newspaper article and their resettlement experiences in the US.

The various media reports and representations – including Ms. Corbett's report - evoked emotions of sympathy and empathy towards these helpless Sudanese boys made victims of a terrible war orchestrated by their own country's leaders. The media, which included Television, the Internet and newspapers, presented mainly the sorry plight of the Boys as well as emphasized the US government's generosity in resettling these African orphans in the US, while omitting the realities and details that faced the Boys in the US as refugees. It was commendable on the part of the US government, to accept the challenge of resettling some of these homeless and parentless boys in the US, apparently lost in the wilderness of war and in the deserts of Ethiopia and the Sudan.

The Lost Boys at Penn State confirmed to me in my interviews with them that about 17,000 Sudanese boys lived in refugee camps in Ethiopia from 1987-90. They built their own shelters, which housed about fifteen boys in a house and they practically survived by themselves. They had walked hundreds of miles from Sudan to Ethiopia, with the majority of them being of the Dinka and the Nuer ethnic groups. The aid workers in the camp had assessed their ages as between 8-18 years of age. The boys were able and allowed to settle in Ethiopia as refugees, because of the cordial relations that existed between the Southern Sudanese leader, the late John Garang and the Ethiopian leader Mengistu Mariam. However, in 1990, Mengistu was overthrown from office thus making it impossible for them to continue to settle in the camps in Ethiopia.

The SPLM/A therefore set up a camp in Southern Sudan run by Sudanese camp leaders, housing about 18,000 boys, and they stayed there for six months. In 1991, the

international aid organizations returned and decided to move the refugees to Kenya sponsored by the UN. Once again, some of the boys walked from Sudan to Kenya while the UN buses carried those too weak to walk. They endured attacks from the Sudanese government army, bandits and, in some cases lions. In 1992, they arrived at the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya set up by the UN but, according to the Boys interviewed, they built their own houses using UN supplied materials. The camp is located on an arid plain, 60 miles from the Sudanese border with Kenya. Ms. Corbett's article reports that "various psychologists" documented the group's extreme exposure to violence and death and concluded that about 74% of the boys survived shelling or air bombardments, 85% saw someone die, 92% were shot at, while 97% witnessed a killing (Corbett, 2001: 50). Based on the findings of the psychologists that visited the camp Scott Peterson, a journalist and the author of *Me Against My Brother: At War in Somalia, Sudan and Rwanda*, described the Lost Boys as "among the most badly war-traumatized children ever examined" (Corbett, 2001: 50).

The Kakuma camp, according to the Boys, housed refugees not only from Sudan but also from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Ethiopia and Rwanda. Again, since the camp was set in the desert - and like any other refugee camp life across the globe - the Kakuma camp was characterized by harsh conditions, including less water, less food, inadequate healthcare and clothing. The UN issued them with rations cards to receive food supplies every 2 weeks. The rations included corn, flour, lentils, oil, powdered milk, and sugar (though the latter was cut as the refugee population in the camp began to increase). Despite the harsh conditions of the Kakuma camp, the Boys insisted that Kakuma was not due to the failure or laziness of the Sudanese people but to

the war, because “the Sudanese are hardworking and productive people and Southern Sudan is fertile for good agriculture,” they said.

The UN also built schools up to the high school level in the camp. However, like the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa which continually encouraged its youth to not neglect their education during its Apartheid struggles, the Boys emphasized that the SPLM/A wanted them to be educated “for the future of Southern Sudan,” and so it suggested the idea for the camp schools to the UN, which the latter also accepted and constructed the Kakuma schools. This is indirectly confirmed by Ms. Corbett’s report: “The SPLA told us, your people are not alive, you better go get an education” (Corbett, 2001: 53). This indicated that the SPLM/A was not merely fighting a war but was seriously dedicated to educating its future generation. Again, they also wanted the children to be under the care and protection of the UN from the war, which contradicts most of the media accounts indicating that the SPLM/A was mainly interested in using the children as a pool of soldiers.

In 1999, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in collaboration with the US State Department recommended that 3,600 of the boys should be resettled in the US. This was due to the intense campaign by both UN and Western activists for the boys. The activists pressed the then Clinton Administration, which asked the various US states to accept some of the boys, and while some of the states agreed others refused. The activists and the aid workers/organizations thus created the term “The Lost Boys” for the Sudanese refugees in reference to Peter Pan’s posse of orphans. Thus 3,600 of the Boys were accepted and resettled in the US, and as stated above, some of those were resettled in Philadelphia and later studied at Penn State University. However,

it is interesting to note that the media never mentioned the presence of girls among the Sudanese refugees and yet, according to the Boys interviewed, there were hundreds of girls among them when they were moved from Southern Sudan to the Kakuma camp in Kenya by the UN. This raises the question as to why the media built the entire story around only the boys. Perhaps they found the girls' story unimportant to be reported – a blatant omission that warrants further investigation.

Preparation for US Resettlement: The Orientation in Kenya

Ms. Corbett's article reports that before their journey to the US, the Boys were given cultural orientation sessions by US personnel brought in from Boston to Nairobi, Kenya. However, according to the Boys a hiatus existed between the realities of the US society and the kind of orientation they were given in Nairobi. They stated that the orientation focused largely, on the US being a "good country, no war, rich, very good economy, peaceful, good people – and just simply that the US was better than Africa in every way." That is, the orientation personnel only said "positive things about the US and its people – as if no injustice existed in their society," they said. The Boys mentioned that the orientation curriculum centered on such legal topics as "underage drinking and violence" against which they were duly warned. They were also shown videos of nicely furnished American homes and they were told that they "will be given similar rooms in the US." Furthermore, they learned from the Boston teachers that the US was a "melting pot, where buses would take them to and from school and that at 18 years of age they would all find jobs easily. Those already 18 years old would find jobs right upon arrival in the US." They were also assured that because they were refugees "the US government

will give you money for your school needs up to the university level. And if you're hungry just show your Green Card to people and they will feed you.”

However, the Boys lamented bitterly during the interview sessions that the orientation personnel in Nairobi grossly misled them into “wrongful expectations about the US and its people.” They charged that they were misled on the availability of jobs in the US, and also of the prevalence of deep-rooted racism in the country against black people. One of the Boys remarked rather disappointingly: “I found no job in Philadelphia for two years due to racism, and yet those of us above 18 years old were asked by our host families to pay for rent.” Some of the Boys were also put into White homes where, according to them, they endured several racist remarks and yet “we were aware that those families were receiving \$500.00 per child or refugee every month from the government,” they charged. According to them, open racism based on the color of their skin was quite new to them and so they found it hard to understand or believe, since the orientation sessions never mentioned anything of the kind to them but mostly extolled the American people and their generosity.

In addition, the orientation failed to inform them that the US had people suffering from the HIV/AIDS disease. They bitterly recounted that in Nairobi the orientation officers had sternly cautioned them that any of the Boys having the disease would be quarantined in the US, which made them to believe that the disease was only found in Africa hence the Boys were going to contaminate the US society. Finally, they were quite embittered by the fact that they were not informed about the presence of homosexuals in the US society, because later upon arrival some of the Boys found out that they had been

placed in the homes of either gays or lesbians, of whom they had no prior knowledge and which issue was quite foreign to them in Sudan. One of the Boys remarked:

“I came from school one evening and found the two guys kissing in the kitchen and was shocked and thought I was dreaming or something. This is not done in Southern Sudan and after seeing them that way a few more times I asked them ... why? Why were they kissing and doing stuff a man would do with a woman since they were men? Well, they laughed and told me that they were “married!” I couldn’t believe it! I called two of my other Sudanese friends and one of them also reported the same but with two women he lived with so we both decided to move out and rent a room together which we did. But it was a strange experience and made me feel very uncomfortable around them – and especially in the kitchen! But the orientation never mentioned any of this to us so it was a real shock to us indeed.”

However, the Boys acknowledged that since being in the US they had actually learned of the homosexual practices in some parts of Africa particularly in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Nigeria and some other countries. But they insisted that Southern Sudan did not accommodate the practice though they were not so sure since some African countries had it. They strongly believed that homosexuality was “a Western influence which had spread to Africa but something which never originated in Africa.”

The Boys charged that the orientation officers had also failed to caution them against violence in the US in terms of mugging and gunshots. The Boys stated that some of them nearly got shot at work in Philadelphia while others had been mugged already.

One of the Boys recalled an incident at his place of work:

It was about midnight when I came out of the building to throw away garbage into the dumpster at the back of the building. Well, as I turned to go inside after throwing it into the bin I saw four men approaching me so I thought maybe they needed some help and I stood there and waited for them – to help them. Well, they took out guns and pointed them at me and asked me to go back inside and bring out all the money in the store otherwise they would pop me. Well, I thought they were joking so I told them to not waste my time because I was working and they could go somewhere else to play that joke. Well, one of them put his gun so tight against my head and swore at me and I heard the gun click and then I remembered pictures of the dying in Sudan when we were fleeing to Ethiopia and the gunshots, so I thought why should I die here in America, they told us there was no war here so why this? Then the guy noticed that my English wasn’t good so he asked me where I was from and I said Sudan and they all started laughing very hard but I was shaking! Well, they told me to never say “joking” again otherwise somebody

would pop me without asking questions and then they left me out there. I told it to the manager and he just became silent for a while and was happy that I was still alive but I learned my lesson. But you see, if the orientation officers had told us I would've been better prepared for this, you know. They didn't tell us."

One of them stated, "no one ever mugged me in Africa, but war is war and that kind of violence you can find everywhere in the world. But I was never mugged in Africa." The Boys concluded that for the most part they were told lies in Nairobi, particularly the fact that "everybody is rich in America." Interestingly, one of the boys in the film, *The Lost Boys of Sudan*, remarks that he would tell the orientation officers back in Kenya – if he ever saw them again- that "they told us lies."

The impressions arising out of the Kenyan orientation briefings not only affected the high expectations of the Boys before their arrival in the US but they have also created several "serious" family problems back in the camp in Kakuma and even in Sudan itself. According to the Boys, the refugees in the camp – and now their families in Sudan - have come to learn from the Kenyan orientation briefings that everybody in the US is rich hence they get angry whenever the Lost Boys in the US do their best to send them some money to assist them. One Boy stated rather angrily: "I sent \$150.00 to a family member and he wrote back telling me that I've become selfish because I sent such a small amount and yet they had been told that everybody was rich in the US." The rest of the Boys told me their own individual experiences with their families concerning this issue, which they said is still causing family problems particularly in the camp. However, they sarcastically recalled that one boy who had earlier accused them of being selfish by sending very little money to them, had recently arrived in the US from the Kakuma camp as refugee and had already called to apologize to them for his earlier remarks, because he had also come to find out that not everybody was rich in America and that they were all "told lies" by the

US orientation personnel in Kenya. This attitude prevailing in the Kakuma camp is not unique but one that pervades almost all African societies due to the nature of Hollywood movies watched by Africans and which makes them come to believe that all Americans are rich, since Hollywood does not portray poverty of any kind in their movies but affluence.

On the other hand, the Boys unanimously agreed that the orientation itself was “a good idea” but they strongly charged that it should inform the refugees that “problems are everywhere and that the US is no exception to the rule.” They contended that the refugees should be told that the “US is a tough country where you have to pay high rent, high taxes, and struggle – just like in Africa – to find a job.” They believe that this truth would “better prepare the refugees on what to expect rather than deceive them in their expectations.” Furthermore, they wanted the orientation officers to mention to them that “poverty is found in every country, including the US – as illustrated by the hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans,” which, according to them, greatly shocked them because they never thought such conditions existed in the US – except what they had seen and witnessed in Africa.

On the issue of education, the Boys responded that they were told in Nairobi that the US government would finance their education up to any level including university education but again, they had found out that it was not true.

They remarked:

Some of the Lost Boys were accepted to pursue various degree programs of study at Penn State University after graduating from high school in Philadelphia. However, they didn't know that they had to pay for their education at Penn State so they just went there based on what the orientation had told them in Nairobi. And when Penn State demanded their fees, well, they were confused and some had to drop out because they couldn't pay. At Penn State we receive the Pell and State grants, and the Penn State Opportunity Scholarship, which total about \$9000.00. We have to buy insurance, food, clothing, books and pay rent. So the money received is not enough and now each of us is in debt of

over \$30,000.00 in loans. This is why we're saying that the orientation should tell us the truth of what to expect before we get here."

The above experiences of the Boys clearly indicate that although the US government has done well in resettling some of the Lost Boys in the US, still the kind of biased orientation sessions being given to the refugees, need to be revised to reflect the realities of the American society to better inform and prepare them both mentally, emotionally and physically on how to adjust to their new home in the US. This would also ease family tensions and misunderstandings that may arise later in the refugee camps.

The Lost Boys' Reaction to The Media Coverage

My interview with the Lost Boys at Penn State both revealed the frustrations as well as the joys of their resettlement in the US. They were glad and "fortunate" to have been resettled in the US and very thankful to the US government and the people who welcomed them into their homes. More importantly, they were glad to be receiving "good education," but countered immediately:

Yes, we're happy to be here, but it is very complicated because the media is not asking *how* we have survived here in the US. We are still struggling – same as in Africa – and even there one has the support of family and community. But it's all because they gave us the wrong information at the orientation just to make the US appear better than Africa.

According to them, the media only puts out "sensationalism" to sell but leaves out the truth behind it all. They mentioned that the media interviewed some of them in Philadelphia for only a few minutes and then "invented the rest of the story to show on TV to suit their own agenda." They reiterated that the media was only interested in the negative aspects of their journey and of their country and Africa in general, but not what happened exactly and how they had survived in the US. "The (US) government needs to

have better people to research into our resiliency in surviving here. The coverage so far has a big gap between myth and reality. The people need a better documentary to understand our issue than what the media has put out there,” they argued strongly.

They remarked rather pitifully that they had realized that the Western media did not “value Africa and its peoples – not only the Lost Boys.” For example, they recalled the fact that after the Katrina disaster in New Orleans, several African countries donated towards the relief efforts but the media never mentioned their names on TV except the European nations that contributed. Of course, mentioning the names of those African countries on world TV would have been a “disgrace” to the US, because it would have appeared that rich America was being supported by poverty-stricken Africa. In short, they concluded that the message of the media on the Lost Boys was to emphasize that “America was better than Africa in every way.” But they also commented that they’ve seen on US TV “hungry children in this country and that even in the streets of Philadelphia, white people have ‘begged us for money, while some US groups have also used our case to set up organizations to collect monies for themselves.” The media coverage of the case of the Boys thus mainly focused on the seeming sorry plight of their condition. On the other hand, it also appears that this apparently negative reporting indirectly elicited the compassionate sides of the American public to assist the Boys, which further goes to reinforce the hopelessness of African societies and their inability to be self-sufficient as well as live in harmony as one people.

When I asked them about the term the Lost Boys, they all reacted surprised and then fell silent. After a short while one of them responded solemnly:

“Well, I found it on the Internet and on TV, and they define us in their own way. They say you are a lost boy, they found you in a tree, and you have no parents due to war.”

Another added:

“Well, I don’t like it but there’s nothing we can do about it or to change it. They have made a movie out of it. In Uganda and Kenya they called us the “moving generation,” because they say we have no home.”

They explained that Kenyans referred to them as the “moving generation,” because it appeared that they had been cut off completely from the Sudanese society and their families. “We were alone and on our own and nobody wanted us or seemed to care,” they lamented. The Boys thus formed a community of their own by bonding with each other since the majority of them had lost either all or some of their family members to the war. Thus, in one sense they agreed that it appeared that they were a “lost” group of Sudanese and that being in the US had actually reinforced that to them even more.

In response to my question regarding whether or not they had benefited from the term the “Lost Boys,” one of them responded:

“Well, the name probably brought us here into the US, but I’m not sure. Maybe it’s helpful to those of us who are here and those who will come later.”

When I asked him to elaborate on his response he further explained that he thought so, because the term “Lost Boys” might have influenced people to pity them and accept them into their homes and countries. However, he added:

“But we’re now lost to our own culture and people. Maybe our people don’t know they call us Lost Boys, we’re not lost, and we’re Africans and Sudanese.”

According to one of the Boys, they were happy to be in the US but he resented the idea that some Americans – both black and white - perceived them as “humans not from this planet, due to their very dark skin color.”

He stated:

“Here (US) some people would come very close to inspect your body, as if you’re some unknown creature not from this earth, because of our very dark skin. Others will not stand beside us at the bus stop, and the preachers will always come to us in the bus line to talk to us about sin, evil and heaven. So, you ask, why not talk to the others also?”

When I asked them whether or not they were angry at the media’s attitude towards Africa, they all agreed that they felt ashamed when they came to understand the implications of the term, the “Lost Boys” but did not entirely blame the western media.

They responded:

We are not sure whether African governments know how this war - and other wars - has affected Africans and the continent...it’s terrible to say you’re African here (US) because it is like you’re from a backward continent.”

Another observed:

I think it’s a shame for Africa so they should find ways – our own ways - to resolve conflicts to avoid this shame.”

And yet another remarked:

Maybe they (African governments) don’t know how they are seen over here in the media. If Africans are able to commit such atrocities on their own people, it allows others to find it easier to call them primitive, savage and backward...African governments should find peace for their own people to end this dependency on other countries. We should learn to live together as one people. Southern Sudan is very fertile and we’re not hungry at all there, but now the war has allowed the media to look at us as hungry. It is not good.”

Finally, and with a unanimous resolve, they all reiterated their call for African leaders to find a way to stop the wars. One of them said,

“The people here (US) know about Africa through wars shown on TV, also AIDS and other things that will help the media companies but hurt Africa. We did not know this before.”

The Boys were quite bitter and angry with their own African governments; they believed that African governments engaged in conflicts for political and financial benefits: “they

do not think about the consequences of those conflicts on the people and the continent,” they said. They charged vehemently that African governments need to educate themselves to know that the external powers that sell them the guns and other weapons to kill their own people rather benefit from their senseless wars both in monetary gains and the destruction of Africa’s image within the international community. “The more Africans fight each other, the more the Western nations sell those weapons to them for huge profits while Africans starve, as if they cannot grow food to eat,” they charged. “Without wars there would be no refugees and we would not be Lost Boys in America.”

This sentiment is shared by Ilunga Ngandu and Fidellis Swai:

It is unfair that the burden and the consequences of the criminal activities of the warlords should be borne by their populations, neighbors and the international community while the culprits continue with their destructive work – unpunished (Ngandu & Swai, 2003: 12).

Again, they warn that Africa will be unable to achieve its Millenium Recovery Plan aimed at reducing poverty and addressing the HIV/AIDS pandemic and embrace good governance, if it fails to:

Show to the rest of the world that it has come of age as a mature continent on the world scene. And if it fails to be conscious of the humanitarian catastrophe afflicting its many refugees and internally displaced persons living in sub-human and appalling conditions in areas of war (Ngandu & Swai, 2003: 12).

According to the Lost Boys, African governments need to realize that the world is “advancing rapidly in science and technology and development but Africa is being left behind” due to wars and bad government.

My Second Interview with The Lost Boys in 2016

In July 2016, I had the opportunity to follow up briefly with 5 of the Lost Boys that I had originally interviewed back in 2006. They informed me that the remainder of the Boys had moved to other parts of the country, but none of them had returned to live in South Sudan. According to them, 10 out of the 16 Boys I had interviewed earlier had obtained their Master's degrees in various fields, including IST, ICT, CMPSC, Business, Public Health, Public Administration & Urban Planning. They were also very excited to announce to me that one of the Boys was just about to graduate from Medical School, as Pediatrician, while another was obtaining his Law degree focusing on refugee issues. Three others are now Associate Directors with the Vanguard Company while another was working with the US Government in DC, in the State Department, on refugee issues in Africa.

Current Status of The Boys & The Desire to Return to South Sudan

In terms of immigration status, all the Lost Boys I interviewed have become Naturalized US citizens. However, in 2013, five of them returned to South Sudan hoping to assist in the country's development after it gained its Independence in 2011, based on the academic degrees and work experience they had acquired in the US. However, one of them remarked solemnly:

They didn't want us, and we were shocked. Everybody is making money from the rebuilding of the country, but I don't think that they care at all about the people. I'm not sure what Salva Kiir (current President of South Sudan) is doing, but he seems out of touch with the people in the street, only concerned about his power and his pocket, I guess. They didn't want us there, and we felt disappointed. They have rather employed a lot of foreign workers from Europe, the US and Canada, and we don't understand why they have done that. Even Kenyans have been employed there, but not us, South Sudanese. So why did we fight against Bashir? I don't understand.

Another stated:

If I go back again, I would have to sleep with my AK-47 beside my bed, because South Sudan is very unsafe now, and very dangerous, and very corrupt. It is sad that now we have our Independence, but we're still fighting among ourselves. During the war, my mother was able to hide us in the bush and we watched her being raped and killed, and my father was also murdered at this time, so I don't really need to go back there, it's very painful. Now all the politicians have the money. And USAID and other countries have put a lot of money into South Sudan, but there's no development going on there for the people. We have degrees and new knowledge to help the country but they didn't want us, so we returned to Philadelphia. And now I plan to get married soon and have children. John Sr. already has 4 children, 2 girls and 2 boys.

Conclusion

The resettlement experiences of the Lost Boys in Philadelphia presented above echo for the rest of African refugees resettled across various cities in the US and other countries. Africa appears to be the poorest of all the continents of the world – and even among the rest of the developing world - but it also accounts for about 50% of the world's total refugee population. Why is Africa, after half a century of independence, producing refugees, instead of development and improved lifestyles for its peoples? The international community now complains of “compassionate fatigue” in providing resources in assistance to Africa and its peoples from preventable man-made problems, which have forcibly turned millions of Africans into desperate refugees in exile, created artificial hunger for millions, and further deepened the intractable underdevelopment problems of the continent. According to Vasu Gounden, Editor of the *Conflict Trends Magazine*, 33% of African countries have contributed to the refugee phenomenon in Africa, resulting from poverty, political strife, religious fundamentalism, virulent ethnocentrism, nationalism, and a crisis of governance (Gounden, 2003: 2). This

situation, he concludes, is untenable and anathema to the vision of an African Renaissance in the 21st century.

Today, almost all the so-called “Lost Boys” in the US have become US citizens and achieved academic and professional successes, and now living and working in the US - a huge loss of human capital to the South Sudanese society and economy and, the continent of Africa as a whole. As Amara Essy and Ruud Lubbers correctly point out: “a nation’s youth is its best investment and asset... the state of a nation’s youth determines the future well-being of that nation” (Essy & Lubbers, 2003: 3). African governments, therefore, must strive to create peace for their people which, in turn, will lead to social and economic development on the continent by avoiding the loss of much needed human capital through refugee resettlement programs outside the continent as it occurred in the case of the Lost Boys from Sudan resettled in the US.

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