

# **“We Will Do it Our Own Ways”:**

## **A Perspective of Southern Sudanese Refugees Resettlement Experiences in Australian Society**

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## **DECLARATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The main purpose of my thesis is to understand, from the perspectives of Southern Sudanese themselves, their resettlement experiences in Australia, to provide knowledge about how their experiences of exile reshape their thinking of home, place, identity, gender roles, and traditional practices, to explore the extent of their resettlement and integration into Australian society, and to inform policy on the resettlement of refugees and the settlement services offered to them.

The thesis explores the range of interactions and relationships among Southern Sudanese and between them and their Australian hosts. It demonstrates how these interactions and relationships shaped and reshaped the Southern Sudanese sense of identity and belonging in resettlement in Australia. The thesis also provides insights into the relationships between the war that forced them out of their homeland, their flight, life in refugee camp or in exile, and how these affected their ability to resettle. To understand these, I have listened to how they described their lives before and during the war, while seeking refuge, and of their present and future life in Australia. From this I will show how they reproduce and maintain some aspects of their culture within the context of the Australian society, as well as how they are adapting to some aspects of life in that society.

In this thesis I also explore the concepts of place, home and identity. In order to understand these concepts and how fluid they are in the current transnational era, I follow Thomas Faist's (2000) thinking about the causes, nature and the extent of movement of international migrants from poorer to richer countries (also Cohen 1997; Kaplan 1995; Appadurai 1995). Faist in particular examines the process of adaptation of newcomers to host countries and the reasons why many migrants continue to keep ties

to their home or place of origin. These ties, according to Faist, link transnational social spaces which range from border-crossing families and individuals to refugee diaspora. In this, I argue that resettlement involves complex interactions between newly arrived Southern Sudanese and members of Australian society. These complex interactions include firstly an array of social interactions occurring between Southern Sudanese and the staff of support organisations delivering settlement services to them. I show how the Southern Sudanese perceived the services they receive vis-à-vis the staff's perceptions of Southern Sudanese as recipients of their services. Secondly they include various kinds of social interactions, relationships and networks among the Southern Sudanese and between them and members of Australian society through making friendships, home visitations, joining social and cultural clubs, and becoming involved in professional associations and churches which are predominantly Australian. I show how these social relations and networking are being enacted and maintained and/or fall apart over time. I ascertain whether these relationships have enhanced their resettlement or not. Thirdly, the thesis shows the impact of a shift in gendered roles and intergenerational conflicts between parents and children on family relationships and how these in turn affect their actual settlement.

This thesis is based on these themes and on the analysis drawn from detailed qualitative ethnographic research which I conducted over a period of fourteen months between January 2006 and March 2007 and from the literature. In keeping with the traditions of ethnographic fieldwork practices, I carried out structured and unstructured in-depth interviews and Participant Observation of informants during the fieldwork.

The subjects of this thesis are the Southern Sudanese refugees who resettled in South Australia and some staff of organisations which delivered settlement services to them. The fundamental questions which these ethnographic explorations attempt to answer are

how do the Southern Sudanese experience resettlement in Australian, interact with members of their host society, construct their identities in relation to their notions of home and place, and negotiate shifting gender roles and relationships in the family. I show how their previous life experiences in Southern Sudan, their plight, their flight from war, their life in refugee camps and/or in refugee settings in other countries, their personal socio-economic and historical backgrounds, have affected their resettlement in Australia. I also explore their current and ongoing relations with their homeland and other Southern Sudanese diaspora and show how this perpetuates their identity as Southern Sudanese.

I argue that success or failure in resettlement hinges mostly on the Southern Sudanese ability or inability to understand and speak the English language, their access to employment and stable housing, relationships with Australians, and the quality and quantity of settlement services which they access and receive. I assert that the interplay between/among these factors have combined to influence significantly the settlement processes and the extent of integration of Southern Sudanese into Australian society. Furthermore, I assert that these factors are inseparable and need to be examined and explained in relation to one another as they tend to be interwoven into the daily life experiences of Southern Sudanese.

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It almost seems impossible to me to avoid describing the doctoral degree journey I have made. Being a refugee from Southern Sudanese myself who has suffered so much from and has experienced decades of war, has been forcefully displaced several times, has lived in exile, and finally has resettled in Australia without resources (capital, social, financial etcetera), to be a student in one of the prestigious Universities in Australia and achieving this degree has been one of the daunting experiences of my life. I would like to thank the University of Adelaide Graduate Centre for granting me the scholarship

without which, as a refugee, I would not have been able to study and complete this degree. Being a refugee who has been deprived by war and related conditions of access to opportunities for enhancing one's life, my candidature has been throughout layered with personal, practical, academic and technological challenges as well as financial challenges at the conclusion of my candidature. However despite these challenges, I have arrived at the end of this academic journey. Thus I can gladly look back with pride and call myself a persistent good fighter. But like any other successful fight, it needs a reliable or unwavering training and trainers and in this case, stewardship and supervision. I am fortunate to be connected to Dr. Arthur Saniotis, former lecturer in the Discipline of Anthropology at the University of Adelaide by Sharon Lewis the Discipline of Anthropology's administrator. Sharon's single click of a mouse to distribute my resume to the teaching staff resulted in my getting to know Dr. Arthur who encouraged me to enroll in a PhD program in the Discipline and informed me about the availability of postgraduate scholarships at the University. He willingly showed me where the University of Adelaide Graduate Centre, which administers the scholarships, was located from where I later collected a scholarship application that resulted in my admission to the program. Dr Arthur then introduced me to Dr. Andrew Skuse, a senior lecturer in the Discipline who became my principal supervisor. Hence, as the saying goes, 'big things grow from little things'. Sharon's simple click of her mouse, thus sending out my resume, has brought me this far and for this I am indebted to her and Dr. Arthur.

As I have stated earlier, a successful fight needs reliable and unwavering training, stewardship and supervision. Hence, my greatest appreciation goes to my supervisors: Dr. Andrew Skuse and Dr. James Talyor. They have been academically very helpful, supportive, encouraging and accommodating. They guided me throughout all the stages

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## **DEDICATION**

I wish to dedicate this work to my late grandmother Miriama Poni commonly known by the name Ajwókó. Through her care, she had made me what I am today. She cared for me when my mother died when I was barely one and half years old. May you never be forgotten my grand Mom! I also dedicate this work to my wife Hellen Poni Anduga and my daughter Manuela Poni Wani-Kana.