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## **Living between Borders: Transnational Marriage and US Resettlement Patterns in Sudanese Refugee Populations**

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LIVING BETWEEN BORDERS: TRANSNATIONAL MARRIAGE AND US  
RESETTLEMENT PATTERNS IN SUDANESE  
REFUGEE POPULATIONS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Anthropology

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Deirdre Patterson

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled  
LIVING BETWEEN BORDERS: TRANSNATIONAL MARRIAGE AND US  
RESETTLEMENT PATTERNS IN SUDANESE  
REFUGEE POPULATIONS

by

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

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August 2016

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## ABSTRACT

### LIVING BETWEEN BORDERS: TRANSNATIONAL MARRIAGE AND US RESETTLEMENT PATTERNS IN SUDANESE REFUGEE POPULATIONS

by Deirdre Patterson

Many South Sudanese refugees who have resettled in the USA have actively sought to maintain their unique cultural identity while simultaneously working to integrate into American society through the pursuit of formal higher education and successful careers. One of the most interesting developments within this population is the establishment and maintenance of transnational families. The process for marriage is economically tiresome and, due to strict immigration policies, often compels family members to live transnational lives. Systems of transnational marriage—often arranged by families—and married life allow Sudanese refugees living in the USA to continue important cultural practices, speak their native languages within their homes and communities, and to create Sudanese families. Despite the economic strain these efforts have on the relationships between husbands and wives, they can be culturally empowering to members of this community and their families that live elsewhere in the world. Even decades after resettlement in the USA, their ties to their homeland and to their people still remain top priorities in their lives. Efforts of resettlement and the attempts to continue cultural and social ties to their homeland despite time and distance are altering the role of family in Sudanese culture and the continuation of traditional cultural practices. The goals of this research are to describe and analyze the practice of transnational marriage and to examine the extent that resettlement in the USA is changing the structured gender roles in South Sudanese communities.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The refugees from Sudan first gained international attention in 1992 when tens of thousands of children, the vast majority male, poured over the border from what is now South Sudan into Kenya. In response, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) commissioned the building of Kakuma Refugee camp in the desert region of northwest Kenya. This population was labeled by the media as the Lost Boys of Sudan in reference to the classic story of Peter Pan and his gang of boys who lived and survived on their own without the aid of adults. Between 2000 and 2002, nearly 4,000 of these men resettled in the USA under refugee status, and have since developed well-rounded secure livelihoods as American citizens (McKinnon 2008).

The mass exodus of refugees in war-torn Central Africa and elsewhere is not new to the international world. In fact, the UNHCR and many governmental and nongovernmental organizations have been struggling with how to deal with large displaced populations since World War II, and have been continuing to do so in the 21st century. Most refugees that flee their homeland in fear of persecution are placed into refugee camps in a neighboring country. These camps are typically built to be temporary settlements, constructed of poor and inadequate materials, and provide its inhabitants with only the minimum of daily necessities. Generally, refugees living under these conditions are given three options: repatriation to their home nation, continuing to live inside the camp, or the comparatively rare option of third country resettlement under refugee status (Crisp 2005; Martin et al. 2005). The members of this specific community benefited from

third-country resettlement, and have since sought to both maintain their cultural identity and become leaders in their families and communities that they lost as children.

This study explored the role of transnational marriage practices in the South Sudanese community of San Jose, and the ways in which the migrants of this population were changing traditional gender roles within the family as a result of new social pressures and opportunities to adapt to standards of living in San Jose. Seeing that the women of this population were relatively “invisible” in the international media and resettlement system when compared to their male counterparts, these transnational marriages and changing gender expectations within the family after resettlement had the greatest social influence on the women within this small community. Furthermore, I discuss how the participation in these traditional marriage practices brought to a transnational scale has enabled the migrants within this community to reassert themselves as leaders both within their extended families and in Dinka and Nuer communities worldwide. The creation of these transnational communities has permitted South Sudanese migrants that have resettled in the USA to maintain their cultural identity, pass on their culture to their children, and to continue to be active participants in communities that are located a world away.

The South Sudanese men who resettled in San Jose as refugees constituted a transnational community because they actively engaged in social and economic practices that extended beyond the limitations of national borders. The participants in this study were actively involved in the lives of their loved ones living in South Sudan and elsewhere in the world while simultaneously living, working, and building networks here in the USA. They were a new type of migrant, people who have sought to redefine their identities to meet the needs of their families while continuing traditional cultural practices in their homeland despite the limitations of physical distance.

## **Objectives**

The primary objective of this study was to explore how resettled refugees not only held onto their cultural identity, but also how they recreated social relationships and communities on a transnational scale. I specifically sought participants who were either currently or formerly in a transnational marriage for an extended period of time. These intimate relationships enabled the migrants in this study to be members, and arguably even leaders, in South Sudanese communities in Africa while living and working in San Jose. These transnational relationships and commitments to transnational communities were not limited to husbands and wives, but often also included extended kin networks.

The second objective of this study was to explore how structured gender roles in South Sudanese culture have changed since resettlement to the USA. Living in the USA allowed, and even sometimes demanded, migrant women to obtain higher education and employment outside the household so that their families are not completely dependent on one income. Unfortunately, only two women were available to participate in this study, but their experiences were valuable and important to consider. Due to these limitations, this study also considered the perspectives of men and their beliefs on the roles and responsibilities of women, and how these roles within the family may be evolving to match the standards of living in the USA.

The participants of this study were all chosen because they met specific requirements based on their self-identification as members of the “Lost Boy” community in addition to their participation in various transnational practices. The men and women in this study all identified as South Sudanese, in addition to Dinka or Nuer, their tribal cultural identities. All of the participants, with the exception of one woman, had lived in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya at some

point in their lives, and maintained committed relationships with their extended kin networks present in multiple nations across the globe. They were all chosen for this study because they had participated in some form of transnational marriage, ranging from six months to eight years, with a goal of reconnecting with their traditional culture and becoming active members of their communities. These marriages across international borders enabled the men and women of this population to hold onto their homeland despite the lack of a physical connection, and thus promoted the continuation of family relationships and the perpetuation of their cultural identity.

### **Research Questions**

I designed this study to address the role of transnational marriage in the South Sudanese community of San Jose, and to examine the changing gender roles in this migrant population. In order to achieve this, I discuss the role of traditional marriage in South Sudanese culture, the experiences of resettlement, the changing gendered expectations of men and women to meet new standards of living in San Jose, and the formation of transnational communities through the support of family members who live elsewhere in the world. The following are the primary research questions I address in this study:

- 1) What roles do transnational marriages play in the continuation of South Sudanese culture after displacement and resettlement in the USA?
- 2) How have the gender roles between South Sudanese husbands and wives changed after migration to San Jose?

This research is important because it is not limited to South Sudanese refugees living in the USA, but in reality can be applied to help understand transnational dynamics of migrant and refugee populations more broadly at a time when many populations find themselves uprooted by

upheavals around the globe (Martin et al. 2005). In the 21st century, migrants often seek to maintain relationships with people in their homelands as well as roles in their home communities. These connections, which are often facilitated through the mass availability and affordability of technology like cell phones and the internet, have enabled migrants to maintain their cultural identity and their relationships with geographically distant family members. Additionally, this study has shown that even small migrant communities have the ability to create substantial transnational networks that have the potential to reach all across the world.

The Sudanese men in this study had all been living inside Kakuma since they were children, and in the early 21st century they secured the opportunity to migrate to the USA as refugees. According to Sara McKinnon (2008), this group of young South Sudanese men are recognized as one of the most successful refugee communities ever resettled in US history. Despite the fact that they came from cultures drastically different from the USA, many have found successful careers, pursued higher education, and succeeded in integrating their unique culture and identities into their new lives as American citizens. Since the members of this population have come to the USA, many have found ways to become reunited with their families that they lost as children, reinforce their cultural identities through marriage to a South Sudanese spouse, and become leaders in transnational South Sudanese communities.

The study of transnationalism is increasingly growing in importance in anthropological scholarship because migration, and the communication between migrants and their family members left behind in their homelands have grown to unprecedented levels in recent decades. The availability and affordability of fast travel options and communication technology have enabled migrants to develop and maintain strong communities that transcend international boundaries

and the limitations associated with them (Faist 2000). Many of the South Sudanese migrants living in the USA, much like various other migrant communities in the contemporary world, have committed themselves to the social responsibility of not only maintaining their unique cultural identity, but also ensuring the welfare of their family members that live elsewhere in the world (Luster 2008). Generally, this includes regular communication but also implies the sending of money for regular household expenses such as rent, food, and medical care.

Anthropological research on this population has often addressed the disproportional representation of the displaced South Sudanese girls and women in the refugee and third country resettlement system (Harris 2010; Jack 2010; Stark 2003). Unlike the boys in Kakuma refugee camp, the girls were often assigned foster families. Despite the fact that these girls represented approximately 15 to 25 percent of the refugee children inside of Kakuma, they were hidden from the public eye, and were significantly less likely to benefit from educational programs provided in the camp by various organizations (Harris 2010; Jack 2010). According to Amani El Jack (2010) and Deng and colleagues (2005), these girls were not only sexually vulnerable under the care of foster parents, they were also expected to provide unpaid labor within the household instead of going to school, and pressured to marry so that their families could receive a bride-price (Jack 2010; Stark 2003). Furthermore, less than one hundred of these girls—under three percent of the resettled population—were given opportunities to resettle in the USA under refugee status (Harris 2010).

Although the vast majority of South Sudanese refugees living inside Kakuma was boys, there were girls that were also living inside its walls despite the fact that they were largely ignored by both the refugee system and the international media. For these reasons, many anthro-

pologists have referred to this population as the Lost Boys and Invisible Girls (Garbaska 2014; Jack 2010). While the majority of South Sudanese men currently living in the USA came as refugees, the vast majority of South Sudanese women living in the USA came as the wives of these men (Garbaska 2014; Jack 2010). Despite the fact that these women are given little agency or opportunities to get an education, become independent, or resettle to the USA as single adults, immigration to the USA has opened up various possibilities that would not have been attainable otherwise.

Since resettlement, the South Sudanese men living in San Jose and elsewhere in the USA have regularly gone back to their home villages in their native country to become reunited with lost family members and to find South Sudanese wives that share their language and cultural identity. These marriages have been identified as transnational because the husbands and wives are separated between international and geographic boundaries for extended periods of time, ranging from six months to eight years. These men seek wives native to their homeland because these social connections allow them to become reintegrated into the culture and communities they lost as children. By participating in traditional marriage practices, and heavily relying on the expertise and commitment of their family members still in South Sudan, these men repositioned themselves as active members in transnational communities not limited to national affiliation or international regulations.

The traditional nature of marriage practices are modified in this community to fit the geopolitical obstacles the migrants had faced after displacement and resettlement. Since the husbands of this population lived and worked in the USA, they relied heavily on the knowledge and expertise of their elders and other family members to find them an acceptable wife, and to per-



form the traditional marriage practices in their place when they were unable to physically be present. Of the eight people in this study, one man and one woman were unable to actually attend their weddings due to the restraints of money and other commitments, so their families acted on their behalves and formalized the marriages. Due to the separation of family members between multiple international borders, traditional marriage practices within many South Sudanese families have been adapted to overcome the limitations of physical distance. These modifications of traditional cultural practices have allowed these men and women to maintain their cultural identity and to continue to be active members in both their families and in South Sudanese communities all over the world.

### **Review of Chapters**

In Chapter Two, I discuss the current issues and debates of transnationalism and gender roles in migrant communities. The first subsection, “Transnational Identities and Communities,” addresses the creation of bifocal cultural identities and the presence of transnational social spaces in the 21st century. Transnational communities are continually increasing in relevance in migration scholarship due to the mass exchange of resources and social commitments between migrant communities and the communities that they left behind in their homeland. The second subsection, “Evolving Gender Roles and Women’s Empowerment in Migrant Communities,” addresses both the role of South Sudanese women in their communities in the relevant scholarship, in addition to current theory pertaining to culturally identified gender roles and the influence of migration on their evolution.

Chapter Three is a brief but pertinent history of this population. This chapter traces the history of the population identified in the international media and anthropological literature as

the “Lost Boys of Sudan.” This review includes the history of South Sudan up to the civil war beginning in 1988 that led to the displacement of this group of young men and women who were at the time primarily children. The second and third subsections of this chapter addresses the issues that this population faced during their time in Kakuma refugee camp and their subsequent experiences during the processes of resettlement and integration into American society.

Chapter Four discusses the methodological tools, techniques, and procedures utilized in this study. This includes an explanation of how and why the participants of this study were chosen and the methods of data collection and analysis. Considering that the South Sudanese community in San Jose is extremely small, only eight participants were available, all of whom were chosen because of their current or past participation in some form of a transnational marriage at the time of this study. The consent letter and interview questions are also included in the appendices.

Chapters Five, Six, and Seven review the results produced in the analysis of the interviews and their implications on the South Sudanese community living in San Jose. These chapters are separated into three primary categories: the participation in transnational marriages in Chapter Five, the experiences of resettlement in Chapter Six, and the participation in larger transnational communities in Chapter Seven. All of these analysis chapters share common themes of participation in transnational practices, the influences of familial relationships, the evolving roles of gender in these transnational families, and the continuation of the migrants’ cultural identities.

As reviewed in the concluding chapter, this study has the potential to be expanded upon on a larger scale within South Sudanese communities in host countries like the USA and with

their families living in Africa who are also participants in these transnational communities. Future research on similar transnational practices has the potential to significantly influence future migration policies and the strategies of resettlement agencies to integrate other refugee communities.

## Chapter 2: Transnationalism and Evolving Gender Patterns

Transnational practices between migrants and communities in their homeland are becoming increasingly more common in the 21st century due to the dramatic advancement of communication technology in recent decades. These technologies, such as cell phone accessibility in even the most remote regions of the world, are making it possible for migrants to be participants in communities located in multiple countries. Furthermore, transnational practices are vital for contemporary refugees and are used as a way to maintain their connection to their cultural identity and roles within their displaced families and communities. According to the UNHCR, “one in every 122 humans is now either a refugee, internally displaced, or seeking asylum,” unable to identify with and connect to a specific geographic location to call home (UNHCR 2015).

Through the maintenance of strong kinship ties to communities not limited by location, migrants can become transnational citizens of global communities, participants in “transnational social spaces,” and facilitate in the exchange of ideas, networks, relationships, and resources (Faist 2000; Vertovec 2004). As migrants become active participants in multiple communities in multiple nations, they can develop what has been identified as “bifocal” cultural identities in which they understand and practice the appropriate customs and expected gender roles in multiple cultural contexts.

As members of South Sudanese communities in multiple nations, the men and women that have migrated to San Jose have adopted a more egalitarian perspective of the structured gender roles within and outside the family. Historically, the women and girls of the “Lost Boy” community have been ignored in the international media and the refugee resettlement system,

and have thus been identified as the “Invisible Girls” by migration scholars. Although the vast majority of South Sudanese women of this population came here as the wives of their male counterparts, migration has offered the opportunity for them to challenge traditional ideas of marriage and the role of the women within the family.

### **Transnational Identities, Communities, and Practices**

Transnationalism can be defined as the practice of social exchanges and connections across internationally recognized borders, transcending the limitations of national space for determining the realm of activities and the construction of self-defined identities of its participants (Vertovec 2004). The study of transnational activities and cultural perspectives is continuing to increase in relevance due to the dramatic advancement of communication technology and the reduced cost and time of traveling across the world in recent decades; these technological advancements permit migrants to have active lives in multiple communities that are not limited to geographic location or arbitrary national boundaries (Vertovec 2004). Many migrants and refugees have become active global citizens in which their careers, families, and social lives operate across internationally regulated borders. In order to become active transnational citizens, migrants must struggle with numerous issues, including identity, nationality, and integration into host societies. Transnational migrants often seek and maintain recognizable and familiar bonds with communities that share similar cultural values and create social and economic dependencies between communities in multiple nations.

The reasoning behind migration patterns has changed very little in the past few centuries; however, the modes and means have evolved to reflect modern global norms. Migration to a foreign nation is often associated with the pursuit of social and economic prosperity. Migrants typi-

cally must clarify their own identity by exploring their role in their new nation in relation to their country of origin; “they forge and maintain multi-stranded social relations together [with] their societies of origin and settlement” by maintaining symbols of their homeland (Stone et al. 2005:382). Common symbols of culture in a transnational community are the maintenance of a shared language, the sharing of home politics and history, the celebration of endogamy, and the idealization of their country of origin (Stone et al. 2005). Migrants in the 21st century are becoming much more capable of maintaining and recreating their culture and history when they migrate to a new nation because they not only create cultural communities in their host-nation but also remain active in social relationships in their homeland in ways that simply were not possible half a century ago.

The creation of cultural motifs that remind migrants and future generations about their homeland and their heritage enable migrant communities to continue simple cultural practices that reinforce their identity and the connection to the homeland they physically left behind. Motifs such as the creation of family stories, maintenance of their language, celebration of endogamy, and the idealization/nostalgia towards the homeland reproduce and preserve cultural identities (Stone et al. 2005:387). Elizabeth Stone and colleagues’ (2005) study on second generation transnational migrants living in the USA found that when parents stressed culture and identity beyond being an American, their children adopted these same values, even if these children had never been to their homeland. It is increasingly becoming acceptable to not be bound by national affiliation or expected cultural standards placed on individuals. Modern global citizens can self-identify as belonging to multiple cultures, considering themselves completely American and, concurrently, subscribe to the culture of the homeland they were taught to know, appreciate, and

love (Stone et al. 2005). Many second generation migrants who grew up speaking their native language and discussing family stories and the history of their homeland often feel compelled to continue their multinational/transnational practices and pass them onto the next generation.

Emotional connections to a faraway homeland that are successfully passed down to the second generation of migrants within a community are identified as “transculturalism” and viewed as an important subsection in the study of transnationalism. Transculturalism is associated with the “cultural aspects of belonging, emotions, and association” rather than the “material aspects of places, regions, and nation-states connected by social practice” (Richter and Nollart 2014:459). Many second-generation migrants grow up learning about their homeland without even setting foot on the soil to which their parents are so attached. The children of transnational citizens grow up knowing they belong to a diaspora; they might speak the language of their people and eat traditional cuisine, but they often have no direct attachment to a community in the homeland that is comparable to that of their parents (Richter and Nollart 2014).

Following the 1960s, the USA experienced an influx of migrants comparable only to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and similar to Canada, Australia, and much of Western Europe, the issue of assimilation versus integration has become quite controversial (Brunner et al. 2014; Pajnik 2007). Assimilation implies the conversion of culture and complete adaptation to a host society, whereas integration more specifically entails acquiring the ability to live comfortably in a host-nation without the necessity of abandoning native culture in the form of language, food, and other traditional practices. According to Lisa Ruth Brunner and colleagues (2014), there is significant disagreement among migration scholars as to what determines “integration” into a host-nation and what strategies promote successful integration by the migrant. The confu-

sion that develops between conflicting senses of cultural identity, national identity, and the pressures of assimilation often pushes migrants to seek communities with whom they share similar values, practices, and a cultural history that they can relate to and bond with in a nation where they are considered the minority. The formation of social bonds within their culture in a foreign land enables migrants to share cultural practices and maintain relationship patterns that remind them of their homeland (Ager and Strang 2008). Furthermore, the connection to “like-ethnic groups” promotes successful integration because migrants gain access to community resources and networks that would be unavailable otherwise.

The ability to acquire and maintain a meaningful transnational identity often requires several personal commitments, including active communication with a community in another nation, the preservation of important relationships, and the establishment of networks that link groups of people in multiple nations together. Thomas Faist (2000) identified a term that he called “transnational social spaces,” which he defined as the combination of relationships and networks that reach beyond the borders of nation-states. The communities that form within these social spaces require a “high degree of personal intimacy, emotional/moral commitment, social cohesion, and continuity of time” and are typically created through bonds of kinship and ties to communities in the homeland (Faist 2000:196). Transnational social spaces create a mutually dependent relationship of reciprocity and solidarity between the migrant and the community in the homeland (Faist 2000:193). The benefits of relying on these socially constructed and non-geographically bound “social spaces” are often a significant increase in economic and social resources that would be inaccessible otherwise.



Transnationalism in the form of active social and economic engagement has brought up new issues in migration studies related to concepts of citizenship, political affiliation, economic processes, and the organization of social spaces. According to Mojca Pajnik (2007), transnational activities and membership to communities that extend beyond territorial boundaries enable migrants to redefine citizenship in ways that are not limited national affiliation (Pajnik 2007). In this era of transnationalism, the seemingly concrete ideas of national citizenship and the limitations of political boundaries are being fashioned into a more culturally acceptable idea of global citizenship, where an individual is not bound by the constraints of ethnic discrimination, the increasingly arbitrary lines between countries, or the pressures to assimilate into a new culture while losing their unique cultural identity. Transnational public spheres and social spaces regard people as citizens of the global community rather than foreigners, outsiders, or nationals.

Connections to a homeland, such as through family and language, enable migrants to utilize a fluid cultural identity that is constantly being changed and molded as they adapt to their surroundings over time (Kofman 2004). As migrants adapt to new locations and new cultures, they acquire what has come to be known as “cultural bifocality” in which they understand and practice the appropriate customs and expected gender roles in multiple cultures, specifically their homeland and their current country of residence. Bifocality assumes that migrants not only learn the language of their new nation, but they are also able to create comfortable lives within their new community, while also preserving their unique cultural identity (Vertovec 2004). The continuing growth and acceptance of bi-cultural identities and transnational relationships globally is making the lines and definitions of citizenship and nationhood increasingly indistinct (Pajnik 2007).

The utilization of transnational citizenship spurred by the increasing complexity of migration and changing realities of belonging permit migrants to create new dimensions of family life, both in times of separation and in the process of family reunification. Many migrants come to a foreign nation in the hope of economic benefits and the aspirations of sending money home. Success in the host-nation often relates to financial security and the expectation of increased social mobility that they not only personally benefit from, but also help assist in the support of their parents, spouses, and children in their homeland (Pajnik and Bajt 2012; Zontini 2004). The exchange of remittances--the act of sending money, gifts, or services from one nation to another--is common in many transnational families and communities; often a vital source of income for the receivers (DeLugan 2011; Yeoh 2013). Remittances secure a binding relationship of economic dependency and mutual social connection between separated family members and displaced communities.

Marriage is a common practice many migrants rely on to reconnect to a culture that they feel they have lost while integrating into their new host-nation. Marriage reinforces the belief in a migrant's social identity, creates an intimate social bond with a homeland, and is an integral aspect of transnational communities. Transnational marriages are "highly variable" and, according to Lucy Williams (2010), can be used as a means to negotiate borders between families and how families can be reunited after migration. One specific type of transnational marriage that this thesis focuses exclusively on is the practice of finding a spouse that shares the same ethnic identity and language but lives in a separate country other than one's own. The bond of marriage, as discussed further in this study, becomes significantly complicated by geographic distance, the implications of citizenship, and commitments to families and communities that live elsewhere in

the world (Brunner et al. 2014). Marriage solidifies the social bonds during periods of separation within the family, transcending the boundaries between the host-nation and communities in the homeland.

The logical reasoning behind a transnational marriage is often a social obligation to family members. Men and women who migrate abroad might see it as their duty to continue their culture, language, and heritage despite being away from their homeland (Brunner et al. 2014; Williams 2010). Marriage is often an effective method of transplanting the culture of the homeland to their new country of residence. For the women and men agreeing to marry a virtual stranger who lives in a foreign land, it can provide an opportunity to migrate to a new nation, and to improve the economic status of their family that remain in their homeland (Beck-Gershiem 2007; Yeoh 2013). Transnational marriage, despite its uncertainties in the social relationship, provides the promise that the family in the homeland will be comfortably taken care of for years to come. To many sons and daughters, the ability to provide for their parents despite vast distances is an incomparable comfort that most likely cannot be found anywhere else, especially if they come from an impoverished nation.

A century ago, geographic distance and economic costs were the primary barriers that inhibited the development of meaningful relationships across borders. Although these are still factors in the contemporary world, the impact of these barriers has been significantly mitigated. In many cases, families and individuals alike can be active in everyday relationships while still being separated physically. The increasingly prevalent practice of transnationalism is diminishing the relevance of a migrant's sense of nationhood, citizenship, and community belonging. In ethnically heterogeneous nations like the USA, the sense of belonging stemming from these rela-

tionships contrasts with complete assimilation and is a mode of action that enables migrants to remember where they came from and who they are. Although the nation one comes from is important, national boundaries and institutions change regularly and may become insignificant from one generation to the next. However, a family's history, language, and cultural practices are pieces of identity that can be brought to a new nation, shared and maintained despite location or governing institutions (Stone et al. 2005). Modern transnational practices allow migrants to maintain their cultural identity easier by remaining integral members of their communities in their homeland.

### **Evolving Gender Roles and Women's Empowerment in Migrant Communities**

Migration, the exchange of cultural values, and new opportunities can open up new possibilities to migrant communities that might not have been accepted or easily accessible in their nation of origin. Many developing nations across the world lack the resources or political will to provide the general population with adequate education and the freedom to practice personal beliefs without the fear of persecution. While there are many inequalities in this world, women across the globe stand as the largest population who suffer from discrimination, human rights violations, and culturally endorsed subjugation (Nagengast 2004). Migration offers opportunities for many women to seek an education that might not have been available in their home nation, to have authority over their own body, to enter a relationship on their own terms, and to gain a voice in their future. The exchange of ideas about gender equality changes traditional ideas of marriage and allows women to negotiate gender roles in their own culture.

As a response to the international media attention on the mass exodus of young boys fleeing from what is now South Sudan, referencing them as the "Lost Boys," the girls of this genera-

tion, who were largely ignored in the media, have been labeled as the “Invisible Girls” in migration scholarship (Jack 2010; Grabska 2010). The term “invisible” refers to the “failure to recognize the experiences of southern Sudanese women and girls during processes of conflict and militarized displacement,” their subsequent experiences as protracted refugees, and the difficulties of navigating prejudices built within their own culture and the resettlement system (Jack 2010:20). In traditional South Sudanese culture, as in much of the world, women are second-class citizens in their own society and, as a result, their experiences of suffering during and after conflict have been largely ignored.

Gender equality issues are present in virtually every culture and every society in the world, and can range anywhere from unequal pay and access to jobs to laws and cultural practices that sanction the mutilation and murder of women and girls. In South Sudan, gender inequalities exist in the strict maintenance of gender roles in the family and community; consequently, there is a lack of opportunities for girls to gain an education when compared to their male counterparts and, subsequently, a lack of job opportunities for women outside the home (Jack 2010). Even within the chaotic makeup of Kakuma refugee camp, where thousands of small boys were expected to fend for themselves, the girls of this population were assigned foster families, and were expected to cook, clean, do laundry, and tend to small children (Jack 2010:21). These culturally-enforced, gendered commitments to their foster families and community significantly inhibited their ability to take advantage of educational opportunities provided by the UNHCR within the camp. Even though both girls and boys suffered from displacement and the loss of family, the girls suffered from additional disadvantages that would later influence their ability to be independent outside of their commitments to their families.

Jack (2010) argues that education plays a significant part in reimagining and recreating gender stereotypes and cultural identities because it empowers the next generation to redefine their role in society and to have more agency to determine their own future. Much of these gender expectations that are being reproduced through the education system developed under the British colonial system, which promoted patriarchy and the separation of work within the family. During and after the period of colonization in southern Sudan, missionaries aimed to provide a Western education to men and taught them to control “public affairs,” while they trained women for domestic life in a way that “rendered them invisible” (Jack 2010:22). Although this Victorian ideology is slowly changing in modern South Sudan, women are still expected above all else to be caretakers of the household. This system significantly reduces the probability that girls will gain access to an education, thus limiting future opportunities for personal success outside the household.

The process of integration and the influx of cultural information that migrants experience when they resettle into a new nation allow them to negotiate new standards of living through the lens of their cultural norms and expectations. The concepts of gender and gender dynamics significantly affect the formation and reconstruction of identities and communities, influencing migrants to imagine “new ways of being” (Burton 2004:775). Empowering migrant women to strive for an education, economic independence, and political participation encourages them to become equal members in their society (Stromquist 2015). Through the development of a bifocal cultural perspective as discussed previously, contemporary migrant women have had the ability to maintain their cultural identity in addition to forming more egalitarian gender roles within their families and communities. Furthermore, through the use of transnational relationships and

networks, gender equality established in the host-nation can be brought back to the homeland to help influence a much larger social impact on gender standards in their own culture.

In 2002, anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod published a very influential article entitled “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” in response to the escalating media attention on the treatment of women in the Middle East, particularly in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime. The desire to “save women” from their own culture was a standard justification for colonization in the past, by the British in South Asia, but also under many other colonial systems such as Algeria under the French (Abu-Lughod 2002). She argues that this claim of needing to save a population from themselves is ignorantly used as a justification for an unwanted and unneeded colonial intervention. Her underlying argument is that the persecution of women in the Middle East is a result of specific systems of power and the actions of individuals, not a cause of the Islamic or Afghan culture.

Abu-Lughod’s argument is that the oppression of women is unique to the particular political and social circumstances of the population being criticized. In her example of the Taliban in Afghanistan, she argues that the violence against women is not determined by Arab or Persian culture or by Islamic religious beliefs, but rather was one of the many crimes against humanity that members of the Taliban committed against their own people (Abu-Lughod 2002). Continuing this argument, I argue that much like racial discrimination, all women are systematically disadvantaged in this world, despite their race, religion, ethnicity, or nationality. Although the degree of this disadvantage varies highly across different cultures, women in general are given significantly less agency and rights to determine their own destiny when compared to their male counterparts.

Like many other scholars that have studied the agency of the women of the population identified as the “Lost Boys,” Barbara Stark argues that “while the boys were lost - and then found- the girls were forgotten” (Stark 2003:275). The presence of girls in this population (with approximate numbers ranging from 10 to 25 percent according to Harris) in Kakuma refugee camp is documented; however, they were significantly less likely to benefit from the resources provided by the international community when compared to their counterparts the “Lost Boys.” According to Stark, unlike the men of this population, South Sudanese refugee women were perceived by the refugee and resettlement system as requiring sponsors, or host families, when given third country resettlement to nations like the USA. Stark argues that women often did not get the opportunity to resettle in the USA because it was extremely difficult to find host families, their “plight was unknown” to the American public, and their existence as a recognizable population was lost when they arrived inside of the refugee camp and were absorbed into their foster families (Stark 2003). While all the children who flooded into Kakuma were identified as “lost,” only the girls of this population have been labeled as “invisible.”

Migration and the ability to continuously adapt evolving cultural perspectives enable women to question their place in society and the legitimacy of structured gender roles. The utilization of transnational practices and established networks in both the host-nation and the homeland allows migrant women to not only develop equality within their culture, but also actively work to empower other women who remain in the homeland. One specific organization, the South Sudan Women’s Empowerment Network, is a human rights advocacy group comprised primarily of Sudanese women who have resettled in the USA and works on an international scale. Their objective is to “achieve economic, social, [and] gender equality, and a healthy soci-



ety inclusive of human rights for all South Sudanese women” (South Sudanese Women’s Empowerment Network). This organization is taking advantage of the creation of the now independent state of South Sudan to help women still in the homeland actively determine their role in society. They preach women’s empowerment by promoting the benefits of “education, income-generating activities, [and] access to welfare and health care,” and teach women how to become leaders in their community (Erickson and Faria 2011:635).

Migration to a new nation with new cultural expectations often requires both men and women to question traditional roles within the family. For example, the cost of living in the San Francisco Bay Area is too high to live off a single income, thus pushes both men and women to work outside the household in order to successfully support their family. Other conditions like the lack of extended family to help with household duties, and the need to gain higher education in order to earn a decent wage forces both husbands and wives in migrant families to redefine their role within and outside the household. Through the adaptation of their new cultural identities as transnational citizens, women are able to alter socially constructed gender roles and take a more active role in their own lives, their families, and their communities. The experience of integration into a culture that places less of an emphasis on gender boundaries and restrictions, allows women to become equal members of their society and leaders of social equality in their communities.

### Chapter 3: Trauma, Refuge, and Resettlement

The nation of Sudan has experienced a continuous stream of violence, primarily between citizens within its national borders, since it gained independence from the British in 1956. Since 1956 there have been several civil wars where men, women, and children alike were physically and socially targeted because of their ethnicity and religion (Laki 1996; Natsios 2012). The war that displaced the men and women of this specific population began in the late 1980s when the Sudanese government under the rule of Sadiq al-Mahdi began targeting South Sudanese civilian populations (Natsios 2012). The vast majority of people that escaped from mass persecution were children, boys and girls who were forced to walk nearly one thousand miles from Southern Sudan to Ethiopia and finally to Kakuma refugee camp in Northern Kenya (Eidelson and Horn 2008). Despite the fact that over two decades have passed, the majority of these refugees still live in a camp. Even though South Sudan officially became an independent nation in 2011, it is still politically unstable and unsafe for the refugees living outside of their home nation to return.

Due to the high percentage of the South Sudanese refugees living in the USA who have attained a degree of higher education and/or are employed full-time, this population is viewed as one of the most successful in American history (McKinnon 2008). Since resettlement in the early 21st century, these men and women built new lives in the USA, while also reestablishing connections with their lost homelands and reuniting with family members. Despite the fact that many of these men and women today no longer consider themselves “Lost” and have grown up to be well-established adults, their narrative as the “Lost Boy” community is internationally recognized. However limiting this phrase can be, identification as a “Lost Boy” enabled members of

this populations to raise awareness about the current struggles in South Sudan, and to build transnational networks that bring resources and social connections to their communities that live elsewhere in the world.

This chapter is a brief history of what the men and women in this refugee population have undergone in their lives. The first subsection, “Conflict in South Sudan,” explains the history of Sudan, including the historical reasoning behind the racial tension between the north and south, government supported campaigns to violently unify the country, and the southern resistance movement. Although there has been violence in Sudan since its independence, the war that erupted in the late 1980s and early 1990s displaced this specific population. The second and third subsections in this chapter discusses life in Kakuma refugee camp, and the experiences that these men and women had when they resettled in the USA under refugee status. Due to the unique age demographic of this group and high profile in the international media, the experiences of this population are well documented, and are important to understand in this study. Their experiences of identifying as South Sudanese and as members of the “Lost Boy” community are directly related to their history, their current transnational practices, and the continuation of their traditional culture despite being separated from their homeland for the majority of their lives.

### **Conflict in Southern Sudan**

Historically, the people of North and South Sudan have identified very little with each other aside from their shared colonial history and centuries worth of economic and ethnic tension. Northern Sudanese populations typically claim ties to Arab ancestry, practice Islam, and have benefited greatly from the British and Egyptian colonial system in terms of education, development, and political representation. Southern Sudanese populations are much more likely to

claim pride in their African identities, and typically practice a combination of traditional Dinka/Nuer religion and Christianity (Laki 1996:7). Sudan attained independence from the British in 1956; however, conditions of independence gave virtually all political power and authority to the majority population in the North, despite constant pleas from Southern representatives for equal representation in the newly established government (Laki 1996:8-10). For the next several decades, Southern Sudanese tribes were denied representation in the government, banned from forming political parties, and were given little to no opportunities for economic, social, or political development.

From 1958 to the late 1960s, the Sudanese government actively campaigned to homogenize the nation through forced Arabization under the militarized regime of Major General Ibrahim Abbud, who overthrew the fragile democratic government in 1958 (Natsios 2012). The Abbud regime sought to crush the Southern freedom fighters through intimidation, forced conversion to Islam, and the torture of South Sudanese who failed to identify as Arab or Muslim. In the mid-1960s, the national government forcibly expelled Christian missionaries from the country, destroyed countless churches, and built mosques across the nation to replace them in the attempt to unify the country through the spread of Arab culture and Islam (Laki 1996; Natsios 2012). Southerners formed many small political organizations throughout the south and engaged in various guerrilla assaults and uprisings in what is known as the Anyanya Revolt. Their stated goals were to attain equal representation in the national government and the right to self-determination, both of which were consistently rejected by the Northern Sudanese and the national government (Laki 1996:13).

By 1983, two primary Southern resistance groups emerged: the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and its civilian arm, the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM); both were organized and run by General Dr. John Garang. Garang advocated for a multi-ethnic heterogeneous state in response to the campaigns of forced Arabization; he argued that Sudan was composed of many ethnic, racial, and religious groups that deserved to be recognized by the national government (Natsios 2012). In the late 1980s under the rule of Sadiq al-Mahdi, the Sudanese government began taking a severe approach to destroy all resistance militias with a powerful military that was financially supported by Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, Saddam Hussein of Iraq, and Honsani Rafsazani of Iran (Laki 1996:16-17; Natsios 2012). In the search for hidden guerrilla soldiers within the civilian population, and in attempts to forcibly recruit child soldiers, the Sudanese government began a campaign of mass murder of South Sudanese civilian populations (Natsios 2012:74-77). Hundreds of thousands of people were either internally displaced with no governmental assistance or fled nearly a thousand miles to refugee camps in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda. Despite the current independence of South Sudan, there continues to be high degrees of ethnic, political, and religious tension in the region (Johnson 2014). Consequently, a huge proportion of Dinka and Nuer populations, native to South Sudan, still continue to reside in regional refugee camps or have migrated to Western nations under refugee status.

### **The Lost Boys, Invisible Girls, and Kakuma Refugee Camp**

Several books written by South Sudanese men and women recount their experiences of conflict and trauma-induced displacement as children (Dau and Akech 2010; Deng et al. 2005). These narrative accounts are important records because very little was written about these militarized attacks on civilian populations. These books, told from a variety of perspectives, tell similar

stories of flight from gunfire, starvation, attacks from various wild animals, and deadly diseases. Each South Sudanese child encountered death in every direction on their desperate journey to refuge in Kenya. Many of these accounts describe a period of relative stability once inside the walls of Kakuma, where the vast majority eventually ended up. Many of these child refugees lived in makeshift tents and ate only one cup of porridge a day, but they were also given the opportunity to pursue an education (Dau et al. 2010). It was through this education in makeshift schools sponsored by the UNHCR that many of the boys became fluent in English and were able to attain high school educations, which would come to significantly help their eventual resettlement in the USA and pursuit of a college education.

Kakuma was established by the UNHCR in 1992 in response to the estimated 12,000 to 20,000 Sudanese minors who were flooding over the Sudanese-Kenyan border in search of refuge from persecution (Eidelson and Horn 2008; Harris 2005). Many of these children had traveled from several refugee camps in Ethiopia where they had spent up to three years in safety until Ethiopia broke out in its own civil war (Dau et al. 2010). According to Roy Eidelson and Rebecca Horn (2008), the opportunities to live beyond meeting the basic necessities of life was, and still is, extremely limited in Kakuma due to the restrictions established by the Kenyan government. Policy dictates that all refugees must live inside the refugee camp, they are not allowed to have animals, they are unable to grow crops in the arid environment, and they are prohibited from being employed by the various organizations in the camp (Eidelson and Horn 2008:2). Many people generated an income through small businesses (if money was sent from family members living abroad), exchanging food or clothing, or by becoming a volunteer in exchange for a menial incentive (Dau et al. 2010; Eidelson and Horn 2008).

The invisibility of the girls inside the refugee system is a common critique that many scholars have brought up in response to how the UNHCR treated boys and girls differently inside the camp, how many of them were overlooked during the resettlement process, and how their existence as part of the “Lost Boy” community has been ignored in the international media when compared to their male counterparts (Harris 2010; Grabska 2010; Jack 2010; Stark 2003). According to Anne Harris (2010), roughly 3,000 girls arrived in Kakuma in 1992 (approximately 15 to 25 percent of this population), but their records disappeared into the refugee system. The girls of this refugee population were placed into foster homes within the refugee camp, providing a combination of unpaid labor within the families, in addition to substantial bride-prices to displaced families (Harris 2010). In many cases, the girls who were adopted into families became unpaid servants who were sexually vulnerable and could be married off when they reached sexual maturity.

Martha Arual Akech, coauthor of *Lost Boy, Lost Girl: Escaping Civil War in Sudan* (2010), recounts not only the trauma experienced while fleeing from Southern Sudan, but also the insecurity she felt while living in Kakuma. While her future husband was working his way towards a high school degree, she felt compelled to stay within the household until all of her chores were completed for the day. She claims that “the families we Lost Girls were staying with didn’t encourage us to go to school anyway. They would rather us stay at home and work for them. And besides, an education wasn’t something a Dinka girl had been taught to value” (Dau et al. 2010: 109). Furthermore, this girl at only the age of fifteen was constantly afraid that she and her twelve year old sister would be married off by their foster parents. According to Barbara Stark (2003), because the families who had girls received a bride-price, many girls were arranged

into marriages by their foster families in violation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Martha Arual Akech and her younger sister finally came to the USA by secretly applying for resettlement and fleeing from their foster parents before they could be married.

While it is true that all of the children of this community suffered immensely during their time in Kakuma, the presence of the boys was known to the United Nations and the international media. They were granted open access to an education, and when the time finally came, they were actively recruited to apply for third country resettlement. Between 2000 and 2002, the USA received a total of 3,276 boys (97.4%) resettling under refugee status, and only 89 girls (2.6%) (Harris 2010:45). The best chance for the girls to leave Kakuma like their male counterparts was to get married to a South Sudanese man who had already been resettled.

The experiences within Kakuma and various other refugee camps in the Kenya/South Sudan region are a crucial component of the story of this specific refugee population. It was in these places that the South Sudanese children first found refuge from the constant attack on their lives. Although many individuals within this community were resettled to places like the USA, Australia, and Canada, the majority of South Sudanese refugees still live within a refugee camp. As a result, many families and friends are split between South Sudan, Kenya, Uganda, and various countries across the world. Distance between family members and the inability to return home to South Sudan has created the need and desire to form and maintain relationships between loved ones.



## **Resettlement to the USA**

One of the most interesting accounts of South Sudanese refugee resettlement to the USA is written in *The Lost Boys of South Sudan: An American Story of the Refugee Experience* (2006), a book written by Mark Bixler, a resettlement agent. Bixler recounts his experience of working with four South Sudanese men who had flown from Kakuma to Atlanta under refugee status. He helped many of these men not only find jobs and a home, but also taught them common tools used in the majority of the world. Within the first few weeks in the USA, these men had to learn about light switches, toilets, bathtubs, dishwashers, and refrigerators. To many Sudanese coming to the USA, these were things that they had learned about in the resettlement training provided to them in Kakuma, but actually learning to use them was the first of many hurdles that they would come to face while integrating into American society. This book traces the experiences of four Sudanese men, who had spent at least half of their lives in a refugee camp, through their journey to careers, their pursuit of higher education, and their transition from refugees or foreigners to well established members of American society.

To the international community they are known as the “Lost Boys,” as the children who survived despite all odds without their parents by their side. Even though it has been several decades since they first became the Lost Boys, they, unlike the characters in Peter Pan, actually did grow up into fully functioning adults. The South Sudanese who resettled in the USA and elsewhere in the world have faced significantly more crises of identity than would be experienced by a typical migrant. A study by McKinnon (2008) conducted on the South Sudanese men living in Phoenix, Arizona discovered that many of the South Sudanese men dealt with conflicting concerns of self-identifying as a “Lost Boy.” Many of the participants argued that although

they might have lost their home, culture, and family in the past, the label is no longer applicable because they have since been reconnected. The “Lost” in Lost Boys ignored how far they had come in their lives since they became adults: establishing meaningful relationships, reconnecting with lost family, and transitioning into well-educated members of American society.

According to McKinnon (2008), these South Sudanese men and women were one of the most successful resettled groups of refugees in American history. In Phoenix, 90 percent of the South Sudanese refugees were employed full-time, compared to the national average of 55 percent for all refugees across the USA. In addition, the vast majority were attending community colleges or universities and were, for the most part, self-sufficient. McKinnon argues that their success is due, at least in part, to the public awareness and their ability to tell their narrative and to show as a community how far they have come (McKinnon 2008:405). Their story as not only refugees but as “Lost Boys,” a term that is internationally recognized, is distinct, and one that thousands of South Sudanese migrants living in the USA can participate and share as their own.

Despite the difficulties of cultural integration, many South Sudanese migrants resettled in the USA were presented with new opportunities to reconnect with and build their families that until the mid-2000s was inconceivable. The efforts of family reunification, of finding their loved ones that they had lost as children, were among the first steps to finding Sudanese wives and to reestablishing a genuine connection to their culture. Parents and community elders are essential participants in Dinka and Nuer marriage customs, and getting married without the participation of their family was inconceivable to many of these refugees. Reconnections between parents and their now adult children resettled in the USA created interesting family dynamics and it was common for the resettled South Sudanese men to take on family financial responsibilities be-

cause of their availability to many of the resources that the USA had offered. According to Tom Luster (2008), reunited sons and daughters frequently send remittances to their Sudanese family members for medical care, food, housing, and education expenses. Family reunification allowed for the formerly “Lost” Boys to benefit from their social customs, such as a traditional marriage, and allowed for family members to benefit from the influx of resources available to these men and women who have resettled outside of Africa.

The men and women of this population have found ways to combine their traditional Sudanese cultural practices with the standards of living and social expectations of life in the USA, and have thus become model migrants. After decades of displacement, the South Sudanese men and women living in the USA have built strong cultural communities, allowing them to create transnational networks between the USA and South Sudanese communities in Africa and elsewhere in the world. Resettlement has opened opportunities for members of this population to become reconnected with their communities and the homeland that they were torn away from as children, and as a result have become active transnational citizens, bridging their communities still in Africa to their new life in the USA.

## **Conclusion**

South Sudan has experienced decades’ worth of trauma, violence targeted at the civilian population, and tremendous uncertainty in terms of the political and social stability of its citizens. Currently, tens of thousands South Sudanese men, women, and children live outside of South Sudan, whether in be in a neighboring country like Kenya or other nations across the globe. They bring with them experiences that they can share among themselves, within the community that they built between each other, and are asked to tell their stories within their host

society. Sudanese refugees have had to find a balance between celebrating their traditional culture and successfully integrating into their new community; many chose to find this balance of identity by working on becoming reunited with their lost family members, and by creating a new Sudanese family here in the USA by finding a Sudanese wife or husband that shares their native language, culture, and heritage.

Their shared story of war and displacement is in no way unique to this specific population. There are currently millions of people living within refugee camps and countless more internally displaced within their own nation who face the constant fear of attack. What is unique about these South Sudanese men and women is the fact that their story has gained international attention. There are several movies, documentaries, biographies, and narratives that document their story. Their openness and ability to share their story with an international community has not only allowed these men and women to become both model resettled refugees but also be tied to both the USA and South Sudan through the maintenance of transnational lives. The narratives and relationships that these migrants maintain have allowed them to hold onto the beliefs in their heritage and to fight to reconnect with the families that they lost as children.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of transnational marriage in South Sudanese families living in San Jose and explore the ways in which the gender roles in this community have changed after resettlement. Through interaction with this community, I came to realize the importance of marriage, family, culture, and heritage that they had placed on their daily lives. The emphasis on the importance of marriage and family beyond the individual was the inspiration for this project. Marriage was not the only transnational practice that this community participated in, but it was one of the most significant and the one that had the greatest impact on South Sudanese women. For these reasons, I designed this study to collect data about the continuation of traditional marriage practices, the efforts to maintain transnational marriages, and the formation of transnational relationships and communities. To do so, I employed ethnographic interviews in the participants' homes, focusing on family relationships and dynamics within the household.

During each interview, I interacted with the families and maintained simple non-structured conversations with the participants, enabling me to learn a lot about their relationships with other members of the community and discuss how their situation compared and contrasted with other families' experiences and decisions. These discussions helped me modify my interview questions as I learned more about this community. Each interview discussed the participants' role in what I have identified as "transnational communities" through the participation in traditional marriage practices in Africa, the maintenance of important family relationships, and the building of the marital relationships across international borders. I ethnographically coded the transcripts

from these interviews into common themes that represented the variety of experiences that the participants had discussed. The participant consent forms and the three different interviews can be seen in Appendices A, B, C, and D.

### **Participant Selection and Recruitment**

Unfortunately, the availability of eligible participants was extremely limited. Although there are several large and culturally active South Sudanese populations all across the USA, the high cost of living in the San Francisco Bay Area forced many of the men resettled here between 2000 and 2002 to leave the state. Many of the Sudanese men who used to live in San Jose have moved to much larger Sudanese communities in Nebraska, Arizona, and Utah. Consequently, the Sudanese population in San Jose was dwindling at the time of this study, leaving only men who were not supporting their entire families here, families in which the husband had a very secure and well-paying job, or families in which both the husband and wife worked. Due to these limiting factors, I used what Jeff Johnson (1990:27-28) described as a purposive sample, common in anthropological studies, in which the participants were selected based on their cultural identity and experiences with transnational marriage.

Each participant was chosen for an interview because of their role and participation with local non-profit organization Hope with South Sudan. With the exception of one woman, all the participants were either currently or formerly on the Board of Directors at the time of this study. In total, there were eight participants: six men and two women. Two couples were married and living in Santa Clara County, two men's wives had recently moved to Arizona, one man's wife had resettled in Australia, and one man's wife lived in Uganda at the time of this study. All the interviews, with the exception of one, were recorded and later transcribed. These interviews were

conducted in a combination of public and private spaces including the homes of the participants, a Barnes and Noble, and a local coffee shop. Each participant was asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix A) that highlighted their rights, the risks and benefits of participation, and provided a list of potentially useful resources for questions and concerns.

## **Interviews**

I used semi-structured interviews as my method of data collection. According to David Fetterman (2004:38), semi-structured interviews provide a “comparative and representative purpose” and facilitate the collection of data that can be coded based on common themes. These interviews ensured that each participant contributed to the outlined themes, while also allowing them to provide more detail or discuss something that they found pertinent to the study that was not yet mentioned.

I separated these interviews (see Appendices B, C, and D) into six primary sections. It should be noted that the women’s interview contained one additional section addressing their life after resettlement. I modified these questions as necessary based on the participants’ specific experiences and prior discussions within their own family and with other community members. For example, one couple was separated twice during their marriage, once when they originally got married, and then again nearly a decade later. I gave each participant the opportunity to lead the discussion, which left room to bring up unique, valuable experiences that would have otherwise gone unnoticed.

I designed the interview questions to assess the following variables: how these couples became married, how much they participated in traditional practices, their reliance on family members living abroad, money and communication issues during periods of separation, and the

processes of family unification in the USA. Many of the questions were intentionally broad and allowed participants to discuss what they believed was important to the topic. This was a standard open-ended interview, which allowed the participants to provide as much information as desired and for me to probe with follow-up questions as necessary (Turner 2010).

**Analysis**

I inductively coded all interviews conducted for this study into three primary themes: the experiences of getting married, the practices of being a participant in a transnational marriage, and the efforts to maintain a South Sudanese identity. According to Margaret LeCompte and Judith Goetz (1982), the creation of categories for coding is the first step of analysis in ethnographic research in order to organize the collected data in manageable units. I later subcategorized these themes into subthemes outlined in Table 1 below and discussed in chapters five, six, and seven as shown in the table below.

These themes were based on commonality and the progression of each of the participant’s marriages during and after periods of separation between husbands and wives. In the analysis, I attempted to portray a broad range of experiences of transnational marriage and other practices in this population.

Table 1: Themes

<b>Chapter</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Sub-theme</b>
5	Transnational Marriages	Getting Married Financial Responsibilities Communication within Marriage
6	Resettlement and Cultural Adaptation	Resettlement/Migration of the Family Changing Cultural Values and Gender Roles
7	Maintain Cultural Identity and Building Communities	Speaking Native Language after Resettlement Supporting Family Abroad



I considered all three of these themes broad categories of the participants' experiences that needed to be further broken down into the sub-themes outline in the table above. As mentioned previously, these marriages were the most obvious transnational practice that this community participated in, and was the most influential social practice on the women in this study. I define transnational marriage as committed intimate relationships that reach beyond the borders between nations; their initiation and perpetuation are facilitated by the continuation of practices and the emergence of communities that are limited by geographic location. I believe that this phenomenon can be at least briefly explained in the first theme by exploring how the participants got married, how they undertook the financial responsibility for supporting their spouse living in another nation, and how they communicated with one another to build and maintain their relationship. The second theme explores what these families underwent to unite their loved ones in one nation and how the dynamics within the family changed after they migrated to the USA. Finally, the third theme aims to explore the broader implications of transnational practices through the formation and maintenance of cultural communities in the USA and in their homeland. I believe the practice of transnational marriage is one of many ways this community engages in transnational relationships and that it has broader significance beyond the immediate family.

## **Conclusion**

Although the number of participants eligible for this study was limited, the eight men and women that invited me into their homes to share their experiences were all active participants in not only transnational marriages but also transnational communities that linked their host-nation to their homeland. Their experiences were very different but held common themes of traditional

marriage practices, stress and struggle to build a marital relationship, adaptation to a new culture, and bridging their heritage to their new lives in San Jose.

The interviews allowed me to understand how the members of this community maintained active transnational lives, how the dynamics within their families had changed since resettlement, and why family and culture were so important. All participants held varying beliefs regarding the cost and benefits of a transnational marriage, but they all similarly engaged in transnational marriage practices as means to maintain a connection to their larger families and communities elsewhere in the world.

In the analysis chapters below, I describe the varying experiences of these individuals and families. By ethnographically coding the transcripts of the interviews, I was able to categorize the experiences of each individual, identify the most important themes, and discuss that variation in experiences and beliefs of the participants.

## Chapter 5: Living Transnational Marriages

The men and women who participated in this study all identified as Dinka or Nuer and, with the exception of one woman, all lived inside Kakuma refugee camp for almost a decade. During this study, Mary and Paul lived in Santa Clara where they were raising five children ranging in age from thirteen to a newborn baby. Paul had a Master's degree in Business and Mary had a part-time retail job while trying to complete her nursing degree. The second couple who participated in this study, Elijah and his wife Ariel, had two small children; he worked full-time as an engineer while Ariel worked full-time from home raising her children. Michael and Jacob were brothers who had been working in management for several years; during the time of this study, both of their wives had moved to a larger South Sudanese community in Arizona and were unavailable to participate. Mathew and Aaron, also brothers, were the only two participants in this study whose wives lived abroad. Aaron's wife lived in Uganda at the time of this study, and tended to his parents and their three children. Mathew's wife lived in Australia, raised their two children, and went to school part-time.

The marriages between these couples incorporated a combination of traditional and transnational practices that had been built upon and adapted by these individuals to match their needs and those of their families. This chapter discusses three primary attributes of the beginning stages of these transnational marriages: the process of getting married, the financial commitments incurred during separation, and the means of communication between husband and wife during the period of separation. I argue that marriage practices among the participants in this study have been adapted to meet the restrictions of separation from their families, but have in

general maintained their traditional roots. Despite the variety of personal experiences in this population, their commitment and dedication to their families remained a top priority in their lives. Through marriage, the men and women in this community were not only able to build new families, but also to strengthen existing families and unify communities in their homelands.

### **Process of Getting Married**

The experiences of getting married among the participants were extremely varied, but held common traditional themes such as the acceptance of the potential spouse by the family, the negotiation of the bride-price, and the ritual ceremony concluding the agreement of marriage between husbands and wives. Although many of these marriages were arranged by the family members, some participants fell in love with their husbands or wives as children while they were inside Kakuma refugee camp. Despite the various ways that many South Sudanese men and women met their future spouses, the decisions for marriage were ultimately up to the discretion of the families and the acceptance of their respective communities. Traditionally, families negotiated the terms of the marriage, extensively researched family backgrounds, and then conducted large ceremonies that could last days and in which several bulls and goats were ritually slaughtered. Due to the transnational circumstances in which these marriages take place, many participants of these events adapted their traditional practices to meet their physical restrictions, and relied heavily on the experience and commitment of their family.

It was common for the South Sudanese refugee men in this study to go back home after they had been reunified with their family to begin to look for South Sudanese wives. In one instance in 2009, Elijah, a young Dinka man, went back to his home village for the first time since he was a child. While examining pictures of the community with his sister, she pointed to a

woman that she claimed should be his future wife. Two years later, when he came back to specifically find a wife, he sought out this woman, knowing that his family already approved and encouraged their marriage. He subsequently organized a meeting between his friends and her friends. Traditionally, the potential husbands and wives were expected to attend these meetings but were not allowed to say anything. The family and friends of each party acted as representatives and negotiated the terms of the marriage and the bride-price on the couple's behalf. The engagement was agreed upon during this first encounter and they were married within two months.

Two men in this study met and fell in love with their future brides while they were still living in Kakuma. Before resettlement, neither couple was married by their families yet, but they committed themselves and their resources to their future spouses. Paul and Mary were separated in the resettlement process while she was pregnant with their first child, who was coincidentally born on the day Paul arrived in San Jose. He managed to bring them both to the USA within six months and then went back years later to formally conduct the marriage ceremony. According to Mary, "after I came to the US, he came back [to Kenya] to finish the marriage because I was not able to go. My sister acted as me in my [wedding] to take my place." Similarly, Matthew found his future wife in Kakuma and, after he had already resettled in the USA, facilitated her relocation to Australia due to their lenient immigration policies when compared to the USA. It was not until years later when he was able to afford the bride-price that he came to his parents. "I told them this was the girl that I had to marry but that it was their choice. If they did not like her, I would have no choice and would have to abandon her." Matthew's experiences showed that, despite a very serious commitment to the woman he loved, the decision for marriage was ultimately up to the discretion of his family.

As illustrated by Mary's experience above, families within these communities often did not require the physical presence of either the bride or groom during the marriage process. Many of these men and women relied heavily on the experience and commitment of their families to act in their best interests. In two cases, participants were unable to attend their own weddings due to financial restrictions, commitments to school or work, or, in the case of Mary, the need to take care of small children. Jacob, however, was the only participant in this study who did not meet his wife before his wedding. His wedding took place in South Sudan in 2007 while he was still in the USA, and his family subsequently took his new bride to live with other family members in Uganda. It was not until months later when he was finally able to meet the woman to whom he had committed himself. Jacob claimed that "my family told me, 'This is your wife and you are now married.' I had no choice." Although these men and women knew their future spouses in various ways before marriage, the common factor in all their experiences was the role of their families.

Considering that four out of the six men in this study of barely knew their future brides before their marriage ceremony, it was typically the duty of the family to adequately research the potential spouse's family history in order to ensure compatibility and the possibility of a happy marriage. These four men claimed that their fathers, uncles, and older brothers undertook the responsibility to make sure that their wives came from good families and would be good wives and mothers in the future that successfully tended to the needs of the entire family. Aaron claimed that while he was in the USA going to school, he requested that his uncle search for a wife that at the very least could read, write, and handle the family budget. Although his family did not understand why, he claimed that "she had to be able to read her child's medication and handle the

spending budget for the family. I [could not] be responsible for a person that is completely reliant. It would be too tough on me.” The need to find a “good” wife and mother ensures the success and wellbeing of the entire family, because ultimately they all rely on one another. Although reading, writing, and arithmetic were not traditional qualifications of a “good” South Sudanese wife they were necessary skills to a successful life in the 21st century.

Although the negotiations and even the presence of the bride and groom varied significantly among the participants, all of their weddings were conducted by the families of each party and similar rituals were held in their honor. In addition to the exchange of the bride-price in the form of cattle, the families and the community also came together to celebrate the union. According to Elijah, “four bulls are killed: one for the women on the groom’s side, one for the men on the groom’ side, and then the same for the bride’s side of the family.” In addition, many goats were also slaughtered for the event, and thousands of dollars were spent on beer and soda for the families. Elijah said the slaughtering of the bulls symbolized the finality of the marriage agreement between the families, similar to signing a formal contract. Violating agreements after these events, such as the provision of incomplete bride-prices, can lead to violence between families, but is typically settled by the community elders.

Even though many of these men had only relatively recently returned to their home villages since they were children, they committed themselves to a traditional marriage for both the social wellbeing of their families and as a way to reconnect with their lost homeland. Marrying a Sudanese woman, despite the costs of a transnational marriage, ensured that they could pass on their culture to their children and reintegrate themselves into a community in South Sudan by reestablishing strong family ties.

## **Financial Responsibilities**

There were many financial commitments that the men in this community undertook in order to find and subsequently support their wives abroad. These commitments included but were not limited to the payment of their bride-price, the costs of resettling their families in the USA, and the economic responsibilities they assumed for not only their spouse and children, but also their in-laws who still lived abroad. The cost of these numerous responsibilities to their families was one of the primary reasons that these transnational marriages were maintained between international borders for several years. Resettlement to the USA changed the expectations that their respective communities had of these men, and because they were perceived as having endless resources, they were expected to fund more than they were actually capable.

In traditional Dinka and Nuer culture, the groom's family exchanges a certain amount of cattle agreed upon by the families for a bride's hand in marriage. According to Michael, only a few decades ago the unwritten rule for the bride-price was around thirty cows, plus the bulls and goats for the ceremony. One of the consequences of resettling in the USA was the assumption of wealth, and therefore the need to pay much higher bride-prices. "For someone like me who comes from the US and went to college, people assume that we have money, so marriages cost more" based on the expectations of the elders and the community. When asked how much they paid in bride-price, participant's answers ranged from 60 to 120 cows. Michael estimated that his marriage cost about \$60,000, a sum that he, his brothers, father, and uncles contributed to.

Although none of the men in this study had to take out loans to cover these expenses, all of the participants in this study saved for years and relied on the combined wealth of their families. To the men and women in this community, when considered over the course of a lifetime,



the benefits of the relationship outweighed the initial costs. Marriage united families and communities, and provided much needed social support to the families that were separated by vast distances.

After marriage and before resettlement was even a possibility, brides in this study moved to South Sudanese communities in Kenya and Uganda to live with other family members. It was during this time period of separation, ranging anywhere from six months to eight years in this sample population, that the men financially supported their wives, their children, and their extended family. They utilized resources like Western Union to wire money electronically on a regular basis to help their families abroad pay for rent, food, and various other necessities. They typically sent anywhere from US\$200 to \$600 per month to their wives; total amounts often depended on exchange rates, the estimated cost of living, and the number of people that they had to support. During this period of separation between husbands and wives, the cost of resources sent abroad, and the amount spent on regular trips to and from Africa to visit their families, were all viewed as only a fraction of the cost it would take to completely take care of their families in San Jose. One of the reasons that San Jose had such a small South Sudanese population compared to elsewhere in the country was because once these families decided to completely to resettle in the USA, they often looked for less expensive places to live like Phoenix, Arizona or Lincoln, Nebraska which had significantly larger Dinka and Nuer communities.

Mary's experiences of being the supported wife while she was still in Kakuma and her then fiancé was in the USA completes the picture of how the money was obtained once it was sent, and how it was used to support her and her family living in the refugee camp at that time. She claimed that in 2002, "there was a Western Union in Kakuma but if it was not in service I

would have to go to Nairobi, but that was another transportation cost that I would have to spend.” Once the money was finally attained after the long trip from Kakuma to the Kenyan capital city, she would use the money to support herself, her infant daughter, her mother, and her five siblings inside the camp. Mary said that friends and neighbors often heard when she received money and she felt compelled to help them with her limited income. “Everyone in the camp did not get enough from the UNHCR. At the very least people needed to buy oil to cook the lentils that we received as rations.” To many of the participants, the money sent abroad did not just go to immediate families, but typically also to their extended families, and often their friends and neighbors too.

According to the six men in this study, the perceived inability to take care of their entire families financially was the primary deterrent preventing them from bringing their wives and families to the USA. Although many of these men earned more than they would be capable of in their communities in South Sudan, the cost of living in the San Francisco Bay Area was so high that it became difficult for them to support their wives and children on a single income. For the four men who did not have their wives in San Jose at the time of this study, all chose to live in shared apartments in order to cut down on the costs of living here so that they could better support their families elsewhere. Two out of four of these men helped their wives move to Arizona where the cost of living was much lower, but the husbands themselves remained living in San Jose at the time of this study in order to provide an income to their families. Two men had yet to unite their families in the USA: Michael’s wife had been living in Uganda after eight years of marriage, and Matthew’s wife had been living in Australia after seven years of marriage.

Financial resources were the primary impediments to the unification of these transnational families. Sometimes the separation was only for six months, but it was not uncommon for it to last years. The costs of unification, especially in San Jose, was often viewed as unattainable by the participants in this study; for these reasons, only two out of the six of the families studied had both the husband and wife living in San Jose, and only one of those couples were able to live on a single income. As a result of these financial restrictions, the remaining participants found new ways to continue their cultural practices and maintain their financial commitments to their families despite its costliness and difficulty by engaging in long-term transnational practices.

### **Communication between Husbands and Wives**

Long distance relationships are stressful for many people, especially when husbands and wives live in different countries, raise their children separately, and experience their daily lives without physical connections. To alleviate this stress, the couples in this study relied upon other ways, beyond the tactile, to sustain their relationship with each other. Within the last decade, cell phone technology grew exponentially and became available in even remote locations. The men and women in this study relied heavily on a relationship formed over cell phones and other similar means of communication. Although their loved ones often could not be there to physically experience the events in their lives, phones allowed families to develop their relationships and for the couples to inform each other of daily happenings. Interestingly, of the four men who did not live in the same city as their wives at the time of this study, every one of them said they spoke with their wives every single day. Despite the cost of international calls, cell phones were a lifeline that enabled these couples to stay connected with one another despite time and distance.

Many participants mentioned that they always had international calling cards on hand. Although these become very costly over time, they allowed husbands and wives to communicate pressing issues within the family. Aaron spoke about his wife living in Uganda, “I try to call every day to make sure everything is going ok. Also, she can call me anytime she has a problem and can tell me what is going on.” To Aaron, this need for communication was extremely important because his wife did not only tend to the needs of his children but also his parents that lived with her in Uganda. Communication between this couple ensured that both Aaron and his brothers were fully aware of their parents’ wellbeing, and enabled these men to be active members in their families and aware of the issues that concerned them.

Constant communication is relatively simple in the 21st century, but it was not always as easy, especially for the couples that got married earlier. In 2002, Mary and Paul were separated between Kakuma and San Jose and were left with limited opportunities to communicate with one another and support one another in the earliest stage of their marriage. They had to be patient and trust in one another that Mary would take care of their infant daughter, and that Paul would regularly send money when it was needed. Mary claimed that “sometimes we talked once a month, and sometimes it would be three months between speaking. Sometimes I would have to travel to Nairobi where they had services and I could talk to him twice a day or so.” During this time, both Mary and Paul said their marriage was stressful because they were unable to be there for one another, neither physically nor emotionally. Due the fact that cell phones in this part of the world were easily accessible and more affordable at the time of this study, transnational marriages became a little easier to maintain.

## **Conclusion**

The men and women in this study participated in various forms of traditional South Sudanese marriage practices, all of which were adaptations that were shaped by their current circumstances. Some men found their future wives while still living in Kakuma, and for others their future wives were found for them by their families still living in Africa. Due to the time and financial restrictions that these couples endured, it was not uncommon for either the husband or wife to not be physically present during the marriage negotiation and ceremony. The men and women in this community relied on the experience of their families still living in South Sudan, and sometimes Kakuma, to find them a spouse that would bring them happiness and prosperity in the future.

Similar to the modern adaptation of the traditional South Sudanese wedding, resettled South Sudanese men have found ways to have a traditional marriage while often separated by thousands of miles, through the utilization of information and communication technology that became more common at the turn of the 21st century in Kenya and Uganda, where many of their wives lived during periods of separation. Communication over cell phones enabled the men and women in these transnational marriages to become active members in each other's lives and to stay aware of family issues and needs.

The husbands and wives in these communities often chose to be separated because they believed in general it was for the benefit of the family. In order to maintain a connection with their spouses, the men and women in this community relied heavily on cell phones and phone cards to keep up to date on family matters and the needs and desires of the people they loved.

Although most participants claimed that they spoke to their spouses every day during the time that they were separated, this was dependent on the technology available and their social circumstances. Aside from expensive and infrequent international trips, and prior to the unification of family members, communication over cell phones was often the only contact between husband and wife. Through the use of these mobile devices, these couples were able to create and maintain marital bonds through a mutual commitment to their families and their desire to stay connected to their culture despite being separated from their homeland.

## Chapter 6: Resettlement and Cultural Adaptation

The process of unifying these transnational families was typically complex, often strung between the US refugee resettlement system and the complications of adapting to life in the USA. For the members of this population who had already brought their entire families to San Jose or elsewhere in the USA, their stories detailed processes of innumerable forms, fees, and interviews lasting for months and culminating in the final unification of their loved ones and family members. In response to the demands of life, including but not limited to the cost of living, resettlement changed the gender expectations of the husbands and wives and enabled each participant to hold varying perspectives on the acceptable roles of men and women inside and outside the household. Most of the participants in this study discussed a mixed perspective on conservative and liberal gender roles within the family. I argue that this was a result of developing bifocal cultural perspectives between traditional South Sudanese cultural values and values acquired in the USA in order successfully resettle into American society. Since participants were active transnational community members, their identities, values, and social environments were not limited to one single culture or geographic location; these social experiences in multiple nations pressured these migrants to adapt to both life in the USA and in South Sudanese communities in Africa.

This chapter is separated into two subsections that outline the experiences that these migrants had when resettling to the USA, specifically the immigration process and the evolving gender roles that developed after resettlement. The process of family reunification typically included multiple applications filed through US Citizenship and Immigration Services, several in-

terviews, medical examinations, and in cases of couples with children, DNA tests. Furthermore, migration challenged both the men and women of this population to develop bifocal perspectives on cultural standards and gender roles. Although the members of this population actively participated in many customary Dinka and Nuer activities, such as a traditional marriage, once they were in the USA these couples faced new cultural expectations, opportunities for social advancement, and economic restrictions pushing them towards more egalitarian gender roles within the family. Each man and woman in this study held varying views of the roles of men and women both inside and outside the household, which resulted in a mixture of liberal and conservative perspectives.

Cultural and economic pressures to learn English and to get a job outside the household pushed these couples to modify traditional roles within the family. In addition, new opportunities offered to these women, such as the potential to get an education, enabled them to not only better provide for their immediate family but also help their husbands support their families still living in Africa. The conditions of life in San Jose created an environment in which spouses worked together inside and outside of the household in order to support loved ones abroad. As a result, traditional gender roles became more fluid based on the experiences of the participants during and after resettlement.

### **Coming to the USA**

Although each participant in this study chose different points in their lives to unite their families in the USA, all shared similar experiences of what the resettlement process was like. In general, the women in these marriages moved to Nairobi, Kenya and applied for a fiancé visa, rather than a greencard, due to the lack of official documentation in traditional marriages; this



visa grants the incoming migrants 90 days in the USA to get legally married to a US citizen. This process included a series of long lines, medical examinations, background research, and interviews. Additionally, the longer the couple waited to resettle and unite their families in the USA, the more complicated the process became because they typically had multiple children and also had to provide DNA tests to establish that they were the parents. The ease of resettlement was highly dependent on the couple's knowledge of the US immigration system and their ability to meet all the requirements in a timely manner.

Paul was the first resettler among the study participants to bring his wife to the USA. Paul and Mary were married shortly before he was resettled in the USA because they were going to have a child. He was forced to leave his family in Kakuma while he benefited from the resettlement process. He claimed that "the process was only for the Lost Boys, so when the opportunity for resettlement came, you could not say that you had a girlfriend or a wife because they would not take you." After a year of saving in order to afford to support his family in San Jose, he communicated with his resettlement agency, Catholic Charities, and discussed his options to bring over Mary and his newborn daughter. Fortunately, they decided to marry in both the traditional fashion and legally with the Kenyan government. This meant that they had a marriage certificate that many other couples in this study lacked, and his family obtained green cards within six months.

Seeing that Paul had just recently resettled in San Jose, Mary had to travel back and forth from Kakuma to Nairobi by herself in order to undergo the immigration process. Mary claimed that:

“we needed to do interviews, and they needed to know your background. They asked questions about who you are, whether you are married, and they look at your family history, and whether you have any medical issues. Then you have to wait two or three months and go in for a second interview and another physical exam.”

Once the process was completed, Mary and her young daughter flew to San Jose by themselves to be welcomed by Paul, who now had an apartment and a stable income.

After marriage, all of the wives in this population lived in a neighboring nation like Kenya or Uganda during the period of separation in order to transfer their cases to nations with more lenient processes for emigration to the USA when compared to South Sudan. They often lived in comfortable living situations with family members within a large Dinka or Nuer community during the immigration process. For most of these couples, this intermediate phase in their marriage took place in Kenya because they were familiar with the government and the experiences of being a South Sudanese refugee within that nation. However, it was precisely for these reasons that Aaron decided to bring both his wife and entire family to Uganda.

“Back then Uganda was different. Kenya was one of the most corrupt governments. Before, I could not go anywhere in Nairobi without having to bribe someone. Uganda was much more flexible.”

At the time of writing, Aaron’s wife was still living in Uganda after eight years of marriage. Although he had yet to go through the process of filing for a fiancé visa, he was well aware of the costs, the extensive process, and all the official steps that were expected of him.

Elijah’s experiences of bringing his wife Ariel to the USA were simple when compared to his peers. From marriage to the point in which his wife obtained a fiancé visa, the process took roughly six months and two trips to Kenya. He claimed that his wife moved from South Sudan to Kenya in 2011 because the US embassy in Nairobi was known for having more lenient immigra-

tion policies when compared to South Sudan. The two biggest components of the process were a standard medical examination and an interview that aimed to prove that they were at least common law married. Elijah chose to come back to Kenya months after he had originally gotten married because his new wife spoke little English and he needed to act as a translator during the interview. He claimed that once they finally got the interview, it took no more than ten minutes to prove their partnership. He brought with him plenty of pictures of their traditional wedding in his home village in order to prove that they were culturally married. However, this was only accepted as proof of an engagement because they were unable to provide a legal marriage certificate. With a fiancé visa, his wife was able to live in the USA for 90 days, during which time they had to get legally married in the State of California and apply for a green card.

One of the many realities of transnational marriages among these couples was that the longer they waited to unify the family in the USA, the more complicated and costly the process of immigration became. If they waited to start the process until they could afford to support their families here in the USA, it was likely that the couple would begin to have children as time went on. Of the five men that did not immediately start the application process after they were married, all had children before their wives had come to the USA. At the time of resettlement, all participants except Elijah had children born in either Kenya or Uganda, and Matthew had two children born and living in Australia. Depending on whether or not the father had become a US citizen at the time of birth, the child may be considered a US citizen also. Either way, the proof of parentage became extremely costly and required multiple DNA tests in addition to the resettlement process required for the wife. Jacob claimed that the entire process cost around “\$2000 for her visa and then about \$7000 for all of my children, because you have to order the DNA ma-

terial here and then mail it there.” Jacob said that every time he went back to visit his wife, he would file the paperwork in order to get his children US passports, so that the process was simplified by the time he was ready to move his family to the USA.

Aside from the economic factors associated with the high cost of living in San Jose, the primary barrier preventing the reunification of these transnational families is the expensive and time-consuming process these men undertake in order to resettle their wives and children in the USA. In order to complete their family’s resettlement applications in a timely manner, all of these men needed to be aware of what to send their loved ones, what had to be filed, and what they might need in order to successfully prove their marriage in an interview. The process itself was complicated and required the efforts of both husbands and wives to prove the validity of their marriage to the US government and to ensure the unification of their family in San Jose or elsewhere in the USA.

### **Evolving Cultural Values and Gender Roles**

Despite the desire to maintain traditional family roles by seeking to marry a person that shared their culture and heritage, the South Sudanese men and women that resettled to the USA had been pressured to adapt structured gender roles within the family in order to accommodate the high cost of living and the limited social resources available in San Jose. Traditionally, in Dinka and Nuer culture there was a clear separation of the roles and responsibilities between husband and wife, often defined by proximity to the household. However, after resettlement to the USA, these families were faced with new opportunities for the social and economic advancement of the family, and, under social pressures, often abandoned traditional divisions of labor. Resettlement and adaptation to life in the USA had enabled the families in this study to

maintain a hybrid cultural identity, benefiting from both a continuation of their traditional practices and the opportunities for gender egalitarianism within the family.

According to the four men in this study that began their relationships after they had already moved to San Jose, they decided to marry South Sudanese wives because these women would be more likely to understand their cultural values and beliefs in marriage and their commitment to their family. Jacob claimed that “if you are Sudanese and were born in Sudan, you have to marry a Sudanese wife to share the same experiences and the same ideas.” Family to these men is a significant part of their lives; this not only includes their parents and siblings, but also their aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews. Members of these families communicated regularly and were responsible for one another’s successes in life. A few participants mentioned the responsibility of sending money to their families and claimed that they believed their family commitments would need to be justified with American wives, but were tacitly understood when they married Sudanese women.

Mary argued that the men who came back home to South Sudan solely to find wives wanted to become reunited not only with their families, but also with their ancestry and heritage. Participating in the same style of traditional marriage that they witnessed as children and committing to wives that valued their culture and traditional practices was invaluable and worth maintaining transnational marriages temporarily. To the men and women in this study, separation was only a fraction of their entire marriage. Marrying a Sudanese spouse significantly increases the chance that their children would grow up speaking their native language, learn the oral histories and stories of their homeland, and perhaps even one day consider going to South Sudan. However, if any of these men were to marry an American woman, their connection to their

homeland would likely deteriorate as their lives became more centered on their experiences in the USA and less around the Sudanese community from which they would be separated.

Although marrying Sudanese wives gave these men an opportunity to be active members in a South Sudanese community, living in the USA exposed both the men and women of this population to new ideas of gender roles in the family. Traditionally in Dinka and Nuer communities, men tended to the duties outside the household, such as minding cattle, hunting, or fishing. It was traditionally the responsibility of the woman to take care of the immediate household by cooking, cleaning, gathering firewood, and looking after children. Although these gender roles were still present within the families in this study, each man and woman had varying beliefs in the roles and responsibilities of both husbands and wives. These evolving beliefs in gender roles within the family were partly a consequence of the social need to adapt, but were arguably also an effect of social hybridity between South Sudanese culture and American expectations.

One of the interesting aspects of traditional gender roles in South Sudanese culture that Aaron discussed was that women were responsible for the family budget. According to him, a financially responsible woman who understood how much money needed to be saved and how much to buy in food and other necessities, was a basic qualification for a good wife and mother. “We trust our women on their judgement on how to budget everything. Even if she makes a mistake, you trust her to fix those mistakes.” The relationship between men and women in South Sudanese culture was not as patriarchal as would be assumed based on the structure of gendered roles within the family. Many of these men argued that it was difficult to discuss gender equality because both husbands and wives were mutually responsible for the success of the family. They

trusted one another, discussed possible opportunities for social advancement, and mutually decided on the best paths for everyone.

One example of fluid dynamics between the roles of husbands and wives in the household were Mathew's experiences of everyday life when he and his wife were reunited, either here in San Jose or when he visited her in Australia. Although housework by the man was frowned upon in South Sudan, he claimed that he often helped his wife cook and clean the dishes when the need arose. He said that they worked together as a team to support one another, whether it was through financial support or social support inside the home. Matthew's wife was also going to community college in Australia, while virtually being a single mother to their two children. To Matthew's family and many other families in this study, education offered the opportunity to advance the social wellbeing of their entire family. Many of the husbands in this study agreed that if there were an opportunity for their wives to go to school, taking into consideration the financial costs and the need for childcare, they would take it.

Although these men said that they would support their wives if they wanted to go to college, half of the wives of the men in this study spoke little to no English, and their lives remained centered around the household and the people in their South Sudanese community. The primary barrier that these young women faced once they immigrated to the USA was the fact that they had multiple small children and were unable to attain the resources to learn the local language and to operate independently outside the household. This could possibly be a result of the husband's lack of willingness to contribute to the household work or the lack of desire by these women to break traditional gender roles within their families. On the complete opposite end of the spectrum is Mary, who had five children and since arriving in the USA had nearly earned a

nursing degree while working part-time at a local retail store. Both Mary and her husband agreed that higher education, despite the challenges involved, was the key to social and economic success.

To these families, engaging in a transnational marriage was the cost of wanting to reconnect to their heritage and cultural identities. The men that participated in this study all agreed that they specifically wanted South Sudanese wives because they desired someone who understood their cultural values and the traditional roles of marriage and family, in addition to the responsibilities of husbands and wives. However, despite the assumptions of a traditional marriage, the adaptation to new standards of life in their host nation has facilitated the evolution of gender roles within their marriages, both within and outside the household. By developing a bifocal perspective of the cultural expectations of husbands and wives, these migrant men and women were able to hold onto what for them were the most important aspects of their cultural practices, while optimizing the opportunities for economic and social advancement in transnational contexts. The changing expectations of gender roles and responsibilities within the household were a result of social pressures to adapt to standards of living in USA. Due to the high the cost of living in the San Francisco Bay Area, these families needed multiple household incomes, the formal higher education of its family members, and thus a more flexible structure of responsibilities within the household.

## **Conclusion**

The length of time that the family unification and resettlement process took was often dependent on the citizenship status of the husband, the timely completion of medical exams, the ability to provide a marriage certificate, and how quickly after marriage the couple began the ap-



plication. In general, the application process took between six months and one year, and cost these families thousands of dollars. The difficulties faced during the period of separation were perceived as being worthwhile in order to gain the eventual benefits of the marriage.

Marriage to a person who identified with a similar culture, and in this case, a respect for the traditional practices and roles of the family that was present in South Sudanese culture, was actively sought after by the South Sudanese men that resettled here approximately fifteen years ago. Ultimately, marrying a Dinka or Nuer woman ensured that they could reconnect with their homeland, pass on their culture and language to their children, and become active transnational citizens in both the USA and South Sudan, or elsewhere in the world. As a result of uniting their families in the USA, these couples encountered both opportunities and pressures to change previously clearly defined gender roles. Opportunities for the women who came here included the ability to obtain an education and have the ability to provide for their families in ways that were not limited to their household.

The changing roles of husbands and wives were subtle and could only be interpreted by the difference between what the participants claimed were traditional gender roles and the expectations that they held for both themselves and their spouse. All participants agreed that in traditional Dinka and Nuer culture there was a clear division of labor, defined by proximity to the household, and argued that both husbands and wives were equally responsible for the welfare of the family. The aspect of this discussion that varied considerably between the participants was what they believed should be the role of husbands and wives inside and outside the household for their own families. Some husbands mentioned the desire to help their wives complete household duties, while others were very clear that they believed this type of work was not their responsi-

bility. Likewise, some husbands expressed the need and desire for their wives to work and go to school, while others chose to move to places in which the cost of living was much lower so that their families would be able to sustain themselves on a single income. I found that when the need came, the men in this population altered their personal beliefs about traditional gender roles when they perceived it was necessary for their families. Since there were only two women in this study, it was difficult to assess what influences women in this population to challenge gender standards within their households. I believe that these women remained the primary caretakers of their families, but worked outside the household and sought an education when both the husband and wife viewed it as necessary to the economic advancement of their entire family.

As a result of these couples' willingness to develop a more liberal perspective of gender roles within the family, the men and women in this study began to mutually benefit from various opportunities now available in the USA. For these women, obtaining an education allowed them to take a more active position in the social and economic advancement of their families. As they adapted to new standards of living in the USA, these couples learned how to both hold onto their cultural identities and work together as a team to build a future for their families here in the USA and back home in South Sudan.

## Chapter 7: Maintaining Identities and Building Communities

Marrying South Sudanese wives after resettling in the USA enabled the men in this study to not only continue traditional cultural practices such as speaking their native language, but also to become active members in transnational communities. By returning to their families in South Sudan and making new social connections with their extended families, the participants in this study became transnational citizens in communities that were facilitated by cultural and familial affiliations rather than geographic boundaries. These ties ensured that members of these communities that resettled in the USA or elsewhere outside of South Sudan could maintain their South Sudanese cultural identities while anticipating passing these practices on to their children growing up outside of their homeland.

This chapter discusses how migrants in this community sought to maintain their cultural identity and relationships with extended family members still living in Africa. Due to the limited size of the South Sudanese community in San Jose, many families chose to raise their children in large communities, both abroad such as in Kenya or elsewhere in the USA. Choosing to live in a large Sudanese community encouraged the children of the participants in this study to speak the language of their homeland outside and inside the household and to therefore become members of this transnational community. Additionally, financial support of family members living abroad was perceived as one of the most important transnational practices and social commitments in which members of this community participated. Members of these families were responsible for each other's welfare and successes in life, despite being physically separated from one another for years at a time. These social commitments to their family members living elsewhere in the

world helped the men and women in this study become leaders in transnational South Sudanese communities and advance the social wellbeing of their entire families.

Being members of a transnational community helped people who left their homeland to hold on to the culture that they were taught as children, to pass it on to the next generation, and to promote the social and physical welfare of their families and communities living elsewhere in the world. Simple everyday transnational practices and the perseverance to continue to use their native language allowed members of this community to not only maintain their South Sudanese cultural identity but also to promote the social wellbeing of their families. These practices allowed the men and women in this community to maintain their South Sudanese identities despite living outside of their homeland for decades, and to continue to financially and socially support their loved ones living abroad.

### **Continuation of Native Language**

In many ways, language was the closest connection to home that the participants in this study had to their culture. The increasingly high cost of living in San Jose was a principle reason many of these families chose to move out of California; the children of the families who had stayed had little incentive to learn the language of their parents as it became socially irrelevant in this shrinking South Sudanese community. Several couples in this study had already moved or were in the process of moving outside of California in search of a larger South Sudanese community and a significantly lower cost of living. These practices encourages their children to value the culture of their parents and as a result become potential members of a transnational community. The ability to speak Dinka or Nuer enabled these children to speak with their families still

living in Africa and to maintain transnational relationships that their parents have built since re-settling in the USA.

Failing to pass on their native language to their children was one of the many anxieties these couples faced after migration. Living in a small South Sudanese community provided little opportunity to speak Dinka or Nuer with other children and this ultimately became impractical to not speak English, even within the household. Mary believed her children were

“dominated by the other people around them. They go to school and play with other kids that speak English. They just hear Nuer in the house. For me, I think I failed because I tried and they were not interested in it and I just didn’t care. I didn’t force [our children] to learn Nuer. My oldest daughter can understand it but she has to reply back in English.”

Despite the presence of Nuer or Dinka in the household, these migrant families were struggling to pass on their native language because they had few opportunities to speak it outside the household. Failure to speak their native language fluently could eventually lead to additional problems as these children grow up, including an inability to speak with their families still living in South Sudan. A disconnection from their native language separated these children from the heritage and culture their parents were attempting to preserve.

Mary and Paul were one of the few couples living in San Jose that had no intention of leaving the area, despite the declining use of Nuer and limited opportunities for that to change. Paul said he began to notice his children’s increasing disinterest in speaking Nuer a few years ago. Since then, he brought back books and language teaching tools from South Sudan whenever he took a trip back home. Both Mary and Paul highly valued an education for all of their children, and also believed this education should include the ability to read and write Nuer. Since there were no cultural institutions in the region to help them with this task, both Paul and Mary

pushed their children to speak Nuer in the house and to read children's books written in their native language.

The presence of a community of people that spoke the native language of this population and shared their culture was one of many variables that these families considered when deciding where their children should grow up and for how long. Jacob said that he wanted his family to live in Kenya for several years because he wanted them to be around other Dinka children, to be cared for by Dinka elders, and to grow up learning his culture. He did not believe this type of community was available in the USA, and especially not in San Jose. He recently moved his entire family to Arizona where there was a large Dinka community. He claimed that "they have church sermons and Sunday school held in Dinka, and they can speak their language to other children their age." Language, culture, and community are arguably intertwined, and being a member of a large South Sudanese community in the USA would allow these children to learn the culture of their parents.

The maintenance of language enabled these migrants to hold onto their culture and avoid complete dissolution of their cultural identities as they integrated into American society. Michael claimed that knowing and understanding one's own culture was vital to personal success later in life. He said, "it's your history, it's you. It helps you to know who you are and also gives you the ability to learn who you are. If you do not know this you are lost." Passing on their culture and their South Sudanese identity to their children was exceedingly important to many of these participants. Respondents often placed importance on having the ability to speak to family members still living in Africa, but it was also viewed as being much larger than any one individual. Being Dinka or Nuer was their identity, it was what they felt they could hold onto when living in such a

diverse region such as the San Francisco Bay Area. Having the ability to speak to their elders, even if they may never set foot in South Sudan, was seen as being key to knowing who they were and thus being able to better understand the world around them.

One of the many questions I asked of each participant during their interview was whether they would like their children to return to South Sudan one day. This question was difficult to answer and was something they said they had been struggling with for the majority of their lives. Bringing their children to their homeland at this point in their lives would be intentionally bringing them to a war zone. Many participants claimed that they would like their children to return to South Sudan one day in the future, but ultimately it would be their choice. Although many participants could not imagine moving their families back at present, they did anticipate bringing them to visit once the violence in the region settles down. Going home, even temporarily, would mean that this generation could meet their entire families, learn to practice traditional customs, and value the same transnational communities in which their parents were active members.

Living in small South Sudanese communities like the one in San Jose introduced a new set of troubles after migrants completely moved their entire families to the USA. It became difficult for these families to teach their children to speak fluent Dinka or Nuer because of the variety of English influences that their children grow up with. These difficulties became one of the many incentives to move to larger South Sudanese communities, like ones in Arizona, so that their children could grow up in communities and with other children that also spoke their native language and shared their culture. To these families, having the ability to speak their native language was vital to understanding and maintaining their cultural identity. However, because passing this practice onto their children became increasingly difficult, all of the parents in this study

were pursuing a variety of options so that their children could know their families in Africa, value their traditional culture, and be members of a transnational community.

### **Supporting Family Members Abroad**

The support of family members living abroad and the building of transnational communities was a common theme that all participants took part. According to these migrants, community and family were extremely important in South Sudanese culture and the success or failure of one individual was often portrayed as the success or failure of the entire family. For these reasons, the South Sudanese migrants living in the USA not only actively searched for communities that shared their cultural identities but also took responsibility for the wellbeing of their family members living elsewhere in the world. The members of this community living in San Jose provided both economic and social support to many of their family members living in Africa in order to improve the standards of living for the entire extended family. This social and economic support through the use of technology such as cell phones and computers made maintaining family relationships fast and efficient, and arguably simplified the process of building and maintaining transnational communities.

All participants discussed the importance of family and community in South Sudanese culture. As discussed in chapter five, the experience and knowledge of community elders were crucial to the wellbeing of families. Despite decades of displacement and separation from family members, the social commitment to their entire family was emphasized as a key responsibility.

When asked why he sent money to his brother in South Sudan, Michael stated:

“If I have the power then I have the obligation to help other members of my family, community, and other people in the world. By helping to send kids to school and influence their lives, you make a difference. This is part of my responsibility



as part of the community to help them. You have to help your family because they are part of you.”

Participants in this study often recognized an obligation to ensure the wellbeing and success of both their immediate and extended family members. Considering that these migrants made significantly more money than their relatives living in Africa, they often sent money to cover various expenses such as rent, food, and school tuitions. This commitment was viewed as natural to many of the South Sudanese in this study and, as mentioned in chapter 6, it was one of many reasons why these men wanted to marry a woman from their own culture, because this responsibility was viewed as necessary.

Communication over cell phones was often the only way these families were able to contact with each other when they were separated for months or even years at a time. Since all of these participants had various family members living in South Sudan, a country that was experiencing frequent and violent conflict, regular communication was perceived as vital. Mary, like many other participants, mentioned missing or deceased parents and siblings that were lost to this ongoing war.

“It’s hard. Some of my family right now I don’t even know where they are and haven’t since the problem happened in my hometown where the government went in and did an attack. My aunts and my sisters and brother all had to run. We don’t know where they are or even if they are ok.”

Members in this community dealt with war and displacement for much of their lives and knew that their family members living in South Sudan faced danger every day. For these reasons, regular communication between families was often about more than ensuring economic and social stability, and was crucial in keeping families together.

The South Sudanese in this study overcame the limitations created by the physical separation of family members by using cell phones and similar communication technology to maintain a presence in families and communities in South Sudan and elsewhere in Africa. Nearly all participants mentioned that they always had international phone cards on hand and talked to family members living abroad on a daily basis. Communication was not limited to husbands and wives, but also often included parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and various other members of their kin network. Much like the transnational relationship between husbands and wives discussed earlier, these relationships were dependent on regular communication through cellphones and the transfer of money through systems like Western Union. The social and economic support exchanged between family members built a mutually beneficial transnational relationship between those that resettled in the USA and those living in South Sudanese communities in Africa.

Aaron was the only participant in this study whose wife and children were still living in Africa and, over the years, he learned to use the social relationship with his wife to tend to the needs of his mother and father living in Uganda. Each month, Aaron sent money to his wife so that she could support the wellbeing and health of his parents in addition to her parents living in Uganda. He claimed that he and his wife worked together as a team, doing a part that the other could not do due to their physical, economic, or social limitations. “She cooks for them, helps them with their medication and many other things. In return, she has the advice and experience for helping the family from our elders.” Even though they were separated physically, Aaron and his wife maintained a traditional relationship between aging parents and their children where everyone was responsible for the ones they love, and ensured their health and wellbeing. He said

that he often called both his parents and his wife's parents just to make sure that they were happy, living comfortable, and were provided with all the financial support that they might need.

Like many other members of this community, Aaron's contributions to his family went beyond immediate necessity and often extended to future hopes and aspirations for all family members. When asked what role he played in his family living in Africa, he claimed that he was funding the primary and secondary educations of his nieces and nephews so that in the future they could be self-sufficient and less dependent on his resources. "I currently support five. If I just give them money then they won't do anything, but an education will give them a future." Other members in this community, like Mary, Paul, and Elijah, were financially supporting multiple children through their education so that the next generation of their family could be more economically stable in the future.

Due to the social and financial commitments to their families that lived elsewhere in the world, the men and women in this study became active transnational citizens who built sustainable communities that were not limited by geographic boundaries, national affiliation, or economic restraints. Through a cultural understanding of social obligation to support family members when possible, each community member was able to bring strength and stability to the family. This social responsibility extended beyond providing money to ensure economic stability, but also included regular communication between family members living in multiple countries. Many participants in this study considered themselves leaders in communities in South Sudan or elsewhere in Africa because they were actively involved in the wellbeing and future successes of their entire family.

## **Conclusion**

Language and familial relationships were significant components of the lives of the members of the South Sudanese community living in San Jose. Despite the small size of this community, these men and women were making grand strides to reconnect to their culture on a daily basis. One of the hardest obstacles that many of these young families faced was the difficulty of passing on their native language to their children and to future generations of South Sudanese Americans. Creating a family with people that shared and valued their culture and language partially enabled them to do this, but their children's lives were dominated by American culture outside and often inside the household. Many families moved elsewhere in the USA to larger South Sudanese communities, and others continued to try to teach their children their culture and language by using books and other teaching tools. Enabling their children to speak the native language of their families and to value their traditional practices prepared these children to one day return to South Sudan if they chose to do so and to become participants in the transnational communities built by their parents.

These practices, including the marriage to a South Sudanese spouse, enabled these migrants living in San Jose to maintain their cultural identity by being able to pass on their native language to their children and build transnational South Sudanese communities. By going back home and reconnecting with their family members and assuming responsibility for their families' future successes and wellbeing, these migrants became leaders in South Sudanese communities both in the USA and abroad. The social ties to transnational communities were enabling these migrants to pass on their cultural identities, native language, and connection to their homeland to their children and future generations.

## Chapter 8: Conclusions

The study of transnationalism is becoming an increasingly important topic of study in the fields of migration, displacement, and resettlement. Transnational practices have grown to unprecedented levels in the 21st century because of the many upheavals that have driven people across borders, as well as the simplification and low costs of communication, the sending of remittances, and long distance travel that has become available worldwide. These practices enable migrants to redefine the boundaries of cultural and national identity, and to prioritize their families and communities over their national affiliation or geographic location (Faist 2000; Kofman 2004; Stone et al. 2005). Practices such as the transnational marriages discussed in this study have enabled the South Sudanese refugees living in San Jose to maintain their cultural identities, and to play active leadership roles in their families and communities in Africa, while also integrating into American society.

South Sudanese refugees that have resettled in the USA became widely discussed topics in social science literature and popular media. Their story is significant because they are specifically identified as a population that lost all connection to their homeland as children, yet as adults they have managed to reconnect with their families and cultural identities while simultaneously developing successful lives in the USA. Resettlement to cities like San Jose enabled these men and women to create communities that have extended to a transnational scale and created opportunities to share their newly established networks and resources with their families living in South Sudan or refugee camps like Kakuma. Marriage between resettled men and women still living in Africa was only one of many transnational practices in which this commu-

nity participated; however, it helped facilitate the perpetuation of smaller but significant practices like sending money and the continuation of their native languages. These marriages enabled South Sudanese migrants living in San Jose to actively participate in communities both in the USA and elsewhere in the world.

As seen in this study, many of the traditional marriage practices were adapted by the South Sudanese community living in San Jose to meet the restrictions of distance between members. The most obvious of these adjustments was the initiation and maintenance of a marriage between physically separated husbands and wives, but also included the traditional roles within the family, communication between community members, and the financial and social support of family members living abroad. The men and women who participated in this study relied heavily on the availability and affordability to regularly communicate with one another, in addition to being able to quickly send money when it was needed for everyday expenses and family emergencies.

## **Discussion**

The mass spread of people who identify as South Sudanese in recent decades has aided in the adaptation of traditional cultural practices to meet the challenges and opportunities of transnational livelihoods in the 21st century. The practice of traditional marriage in Dinka and Nuer cultures traditionally bonded communities together and often involved the active participation not only of the men and women engaging in marriage, but also their entire families and extended kin networks. Participation in traditional marriage practices in South Sudan and in other communities around the world enabled the migrants living elsewhere to engage in community events and maintain their reliance upon and commitment to their families. Due to the transna-

tional nature of the South Sudanese community in San Jose, the marriage practices between these men and women changed to accommodate the physical locations of the participants. This not only included the extended separation between husbands and wives, but also the potential absence of either spouse at their own wedding, and the changing roles of husbands and wives, both within their marriage and within their families.

Communication between husbands and wives and the sending of money were made possible by the availability and affordability of transportation between continents and the ease of communication facilitated through cell phones and similar contemporary technology. During the periods of separation, these couples relied heavily on these technologies to maintain active relationships with not only each other, but also with their children and other members of their family. These family members relied on this distant communication interspersed with periodic trips to South Sudan, Kenya, or Uganda in order to maintain healthy family relationships that ultimately helped the members of this population living in San Jose to hold onto their cultural identities and traditional values.

The cost of these transnational marriages, aside from the obvious periods of separation, included the financial expenses that these couples incurred while the men saved to pay for their substantial bride-prices, supported their wives and children in Africa, and attempted to tackle the immigration process filled with interviews, fees, forms, and tests. Furthermore, three out of the six men in this study chose to maintain this transnational relationship with their wives in Kenya or Uganda for a period longer than one year due not only to the complicated immigration process, but also because of the high cost of living in San Jose and their inability to adequately support their families. Ultimately, these participants believed that the initial costs of the relation-

ship (e.g., the bride-prices and stress of separation) were justified and that these relationships were worth maintaining across borders due to the perceived financial costs of living in the USA. According to the men whose wives were living abroad, their marriages were invaluable and enabled them to pass on their cultural practices to the next generation, while separation was only temporary and therefore worth the strain that it would have on the relationship.

The justification to undertake these financial commitments to their families and future spouses was directly linked to these migrants' ties to their homeland. The formation of social bonds within their own cultures was often sought out in migrant communities so that they could "maintain their familiar patterns of relationships" and continue to value their heritage (Ager and Strang 2008:178). The economic costs and emotional strains between husbands and wives during periods of separation were anticipated before marriage and justified by the perceived benefits of the relationship. In return for the financial and emotional costs of the transnational relationship, the South Sudanese men living in San Jose reasserted themselves as members of their communities and families in South Sudan, in addition to finding spouses that valued their culture and heritage that they lost as children.

Connections to a homeland, such as through family and language preservation, enabled migrants to utilize a fluid cultural identity, simultaneously bounded between the cultural expectations of the homeland and their host-nation (Kofman 2004). The development of bifocal cultural identities enabled migrants to preserve their unique culture while developing new ideas of identity in their new communities, thus maximizing the benefits for both individuals and their communities. These adaptations to cultural identities empowered migrants to challenge the definitions of national identity and nationhood by creating and maintaining active transnational communities



and networks. As seen in this study, the South Sudanese Americans living in San Jose led active lives in both their families and communities present in multiple nations.

Through participation in social practices, such as marriage, and the establishment of relationships and networks that extended beyond the limitations of national borders, the South Sudanese Americans living in San Jose actively built what Faist (2000) identified as “transnational social spaces,” or transnational communities. These social spaces have permitted the migrants in this community to be actively involved in the lives and wellbeing of their loved ones living a world away, and continue to value their cultural traditions while establishing new lives in the USA. The (re)establishment of these networks and relationships that were strung between the USA and South Sudan, or elsewhere in the world, enabled the members of these displaced communities to reclaim their identities and redefine what it meant to be a migrant or a refugee.

There were a variety of push and pull factors that encouraged both men and women to redefine the traditional gender roles within the family and to alter their perspectives on what it meant to be a good husband or wife, father or mother. Despite the traditional expectations of women working within the household, Mary, one of the two female participants, found ways to do this in addition to going to school and working to financially support her family in a way that limited to her role as a caretaker. At the time of this study, Mary had almost completed her nursing degree, all while working part-time at a local retail store and caring for her five children. The experiences of Mary in this study suggest that women worked outside of the household and sought higher education principally because they wanted and needed to financially provide for their families.

The changing roles of South Sudanese women were largely influenced by the experiences of immigration through the development of bifocal cultural perspectives in addition to the stresses of adapting to American life and its standards of living. Although the perspectives and experiences of women were limited in this study, the evolving gendered expectations of South Sudanese women were directly addressed by the men of this population. Men discussed the traditional roles of women in Dinka and Nuer culture in addition to how these expectations have changed in their families after immigration and integration into American society. In general, these men expected their wives to be caretakers of the family, but their roles outside the home in terms of employment and education were changing in accordance to the needs of the family. Due to the high cost of living in San Jose, these migrants were pushed to adapt and change their expectations of roles within their families, so that they could comfortably benefit from their traditional cultural values and new social values acquired in San Jose.

The connection between transnational marriage practices and evolving gender roles is the fact that these cultural factors are giving the women of this population agency and the ability to determine their own future in the same ways as their male counterparts. The “invisibility” of the girls and women of this population is well documented, but just as the “Lost Boys” are no longer lost, the “Invisible Girls” are becoming increasingly more visible. Although the vast majority of South Sudanese women resettled to the USA as wives rather than independent individuals, they were changing the standards of gender roles in both their own communities and in South Sudanese culture in general.

I would like to expand this investigation into future studies that focus primarily on the experiences of South Sudanese women, ideally in a significantly larger community. As shown by

the South Sudanese Women's Empowerment Network, an organization primarily composed of South Sudanese American migrant women, immigration to the USA and elsewhere in the world can empower the women of migrant populations to question culturally constructed gender expectations and the roles of both men and women inside and outside the household. Through engagement with strong transnational networks, these migrants, who have developed bifocal perspectives on gender norms, can directly influence the roles of women in their homeland who share their cultural identities. By expanding this research, further theory can be developed that aims to recognize and understand the roles that women play in these transnational communities.

Once these couples became united in the USA, many chose to move elsewhere in the country for two primary reasons. The first was that these couples were often unable to support their families in San Jose or elsewhere in the San Francisco Bay Area, where the cost of living was unaffordable on a single income. The second reason that many of these families moved outside of California was the fact that they desired to be members of a larger South Sudanese community than was available in San Jose. During the time of this study, two of the male participant's wives lived in Phoenix, Arizona, specifically because there was a significantly large Dinka community. Likewise, Paul mentioned once considering moving his family to Lincoln, Nebraska, because it was known for having a large Nuer community. Moving to these communities permit the South Sudanese migrants living in the USA to provide their children with a more public cultural environment where they would be able to speak their traditional languages and engage in other cultural practices with children their own age.

In addition to the attempt to pass on their South Sudanese cultural values to their children, the men and women in this migrant population actively supported family members living in

South Sudan, Kenya, Uganda, and elsewhere in the world. The support of their family members was viewed as their social responsibility because the success or failure of any family member was perceived as the success or failure of the entire family. This financial support was not limited to paying for rent, food, and medical expenses, but more importantly also included supporting family and community members through formal education. Two participants mentioned that funding the education of all the children in their kin network acted as an investment for the future of the entire family.

Engaging in transnational marriage practices played a significant role in being active members and leaders in South Sudanese communities elsewhere in the world. Their relationships and commitments to their wives reinforced a mutually dependent relationship between the men living in San Jose and their family members living in South Sudan, Kenya, and Uganda. A traditional marriage in the South Sudanese context was virtually impossible without the support of the family; likewise, marriages in Dinka and Nuer culture were contractual relationships between families, often used to build social capital and ties within and between communities. By participating in traditional marriages arranged by their family members still living in Africa, the resettled men living in San Jose asserted themselves as members of a community transformed to a transnational scale.

## **Conclusion**

Transnational migration and the accessibility of maintaining meaningful transnational relationships with loved ones living abroad have grown considerably in the 21st century. Due to fast, simple, and affordable technologies, migrants from diverse cultures can maintain close relationships and be active members in communities thousands of miles away. The formation of

transnational communities, like those in this study, is built from a perceived commitment and responsibility to kin networks, cultural traditions, and the desire to pass on traditional cultural values to children and future generations (Kofman 2004; Stone et al. 2005). The men and women of this population actively sought to be leaders in communities in South Sudan while working to integrate into their new communities in the USA. The migrants of this population had learned to develop a bifocal perspective of cultural standards, built between continuations of their traditional cultural practices, while also adapting to the expectations of living in the USA.

These transnational marriages and various other transnational social practices are giving migrants the agency to negotiate borders between families and to reunite their communities after migration (Williams 2010). Migrants living in small cultural communities, like the South Sudanese community in San Jose, can rely on the intimate bonds of kinship and the perpetuation of their cultural practices across international borders to maintain their cultural identities and their roles in their families and communities in their homeland. These practices are redefining what it means to be a migrant or a refugee, and are enabling people from all over the world to be active members in communities that are not limited by geographic location or national boundaries.

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## Appendix A: Consent Form

### Request for Your Participation in Research

Title of the Study: Living between Borders: Transnational Marriages and US Resettlement Patterns in Sudanese Refugee Populations

Name of the Researcher: Deirdre (DeDe) Patterson, anthropology graduate student at SJSU  
Advisor: Dr. A.J. Faas, SJSU Assistant Professor

Purpose: I am researching the role of transnational marriages in Sudanese communities in San Jose, and the difficulties of resettlement and integration into American society that the Sudanese women face as they immigrate to the US. I am interested in: 1) how marriages are arranged and maintained when the husband and wife live and work in separate countries 2) the efforts that are made to bring family members to the US, and 3) how women's roles as wives and mothers have changed after resettlement in the US within Sudanese communities.

Procedures: My research will be collected through personal interviews that discuss the role of marriage during the process of resettlement, evolving gender roles, and the efforts made to integrate and succeed in American society.

In order to ensure accuracy, I will ask to use a voice recorder during the interview. You have the right to deny the use of this recording device if you feel the need. All records of the interviews will be available for my use only, and will be destroyed one use after this research study is completed.

Potential Risks: This project might draw attention to the personal difficulties that couples face within their marriage, and personal issues faced in the community. All identities will remain anonymous in every written record aside from this consent form. The final document will be distributed to the board of directors at Hope with South Sudan, and will be published by the SJSU Anthropology department website and at the SJSU library.

Compensation: There will be no compensation for this project.

Participants Rights: Your participation is completely voluntary. You may refuse participation for any reason and without any negative feelings from SJSU or Hope with South Sudan. You have the right to skip any question that you do not feel comfortable answering. This consent form is not a contract, and you hold the right to withdraw from the study at anytime. There is no penalty if you choose not to participate.

#### Questions or Problems

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study, please contact DeDe Patterson by phone (805) 357-8237 or by email at dpatterson258@gmail.com.
- Complaints about the research may be presented to Dr. A.J. Faas, Assistant Professor at SJSU at (813) 846-6666 or by email at aj.faas@sjsu.edu.
- For questions about your rights or if you feel that you have been harmed by participating in this study, please contact Dr. Pamela Stacks, Associate Vice President of the Office of Research, San Jose State University, at 408-924-2479.
- If you feel you are in need of counseling services as a result of personal circumstances or your participation in this study, please contact the ACT Mental Health Counseling Center at (408) 287-2647 or by visiting [www.actmentalhealth.org](http://www.actmentalhealth.org).

Signature

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to be part of the study, that the details of the study have been explained to you, that you have been given time to read this document, and that your questions have been answered. You will be given a copy of this consent form, signed and dated by the researcher, to keep for your records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix B- Women's Interview

### **Marriage Process**

- 1) How old were you when you got married?
- 2) How did your wedding take place?
- 3) Who were the people involved?
- 4) Were you separated from you husband at any point during your marriage?
  - 1) How long? Why?
- 5) How often did you husband come visit you while you were abroad?

### **Financial Restrictions**

- 1) Did your husband pay a bride-price?
- 2) Where did this money come from?
- 3) How did you support your children while you were separated from your husband?
- 4) Who provided financial support? How?
- 5) During separation, where did you find social support?

### **Communication**

- 1) How did you communicate with your husband while you were separated?
- 2) How often?
- 3) How often do you communicate to family and friends in Africa?
- 4) What does this social connection mean to you?

### **Immigration Process**

- 1) What was the process of coming to the USA?
- 2) Was this stressful?
- 3) What were you most excited about when you came to the USA?
- 4) What were your living circumstances like when you first got here?

### **Cost/Benefits of Transnational Relationship**

- 1) What do you think are the benefits of having a transnational relationship?
- 2) Why do you think Sudanese men living in the USA seek a Sudanese wife?
- 3) How does the long distance affect your family?

### **Changing Family Values**

- 1) What was your first job like in the USA?
- 2) Was it difficult to have a family and work to support them?
- 3) Is your role as a wife and mother different than it would be if you were living back in South Sudan?
- 4) Why did you pursue an education?
- 5) How has this helped you and your family?
- 6) What are your career dreams in the future?
- 7) Do you think that Sudanese women coming to the USA have better opportunities for education and careers than they would in South Sudan?

8) Are gender roles in Sudanese families changing? Why?

**Cultural Values/Language**

1) Do you consider yourself part of a community in South Sudan?

2) How often have you visited South Sudan since you have resettled in the USA?

3) Do you want your children to be fluent in Dinka/Nuer?

4) Would you want them to return to South Sudan in the future?

## Appendix C: Interview for Men with Wives in the USA

### **Marriage Process**

- 1) How long were you in USA before you began looking for a wife?
- 2) Why did you want a Sudanese wife?
- 3) Who were the people involved in your marriage?
- 4) What was the process of getting married?
- 5) How long were you separated from your wife?
- 6) How often did you come visit her?
- 7) Did you rely on family and friends to help support her?

### **Financial Restrictions**

- 1) How much did you pay in bride-price?
- 2) Where did this money come from?
- 3) How did you support your wife and children while they were living in a separate country?

### **Communication**

- 1) How often did you communicate with your wife?
- 2) How did you communicate?
- 3) How often do you communicate to family and friends in Africa?
- 4) What does this social connection mean to you?

### **Immigration Process**



- 1) What was the process of bringing your wife to the USA like?
- 2) Was the application process stressful?

### **Cost/Benefits of Transnational Relationship**

- 1) What do you think are the benefits of having a transnational relationship?
- 2) Why do you think Sudanese men living in the USA seek a Sudanese wife?
- 3) How does the long distance affect your family?

### **Cultural Values/ Language**

- 1) Do you think that Sudanese women coming to the USA have better opportunities for education and careers than they would in South Sudan?
- 2) Are gender roles in Sudanese families changing? Why?
- 3) Do you consider yourself part of a community in South Sudan?
- 4) How often have you visited South Sudan since you have resettled in the USA?
- 5) Do you want your children to be fluent in Dinka/Nuer?
- 6) Would you want them to return to South Sudan in the future?

## Appendix D: Interview for Men with Wives outside the USA

### **Marriage Process**

- 1) How long were you in USA before you began looking for a wife?
- 2) Why did you want a Sudanese wife?
- 3) Who were the people involved in your marriage?
- 4) What was the process of getting married?
- 5) Where is your wife now?
- 6) How often do you come visit her?
- 7) Do you rely on family and friends to help support her?

### **Financial Restrictions**

- 1) How much did you pay in bride-price?
- 2) Where did this money come from?
- 3) How do you support your wife and children while they are living in a separate country?

### **Communication**

- 1) How often do you communicate with your wife?
- 2) How do you communicate?
- 3) How often do you communicate to family and friends in Africa?
- 4) What does this social connection mean to you?

### **Immigration Process**

- 1) How do you plan on bringing your wife to the USA?
- 2) Is the application process stressful?

### **Cost/Benefits of Transnational Relationship**

- 1) What do you think are the benefits of having a transnational relationship?
- 2) Why do you think Sudanese men living in the USA seek a Sudanese wife?
- 3) How does the long distance affect your family?

### **Cultural Values/ Language**

- 1) Do you think that Sudanese women coming to the USA have better opportunities for education and careers than they would in South Sudan?
- 2) Do you consider yourself part of a community in South Sudan?
- 3) How often have you visited South Sudan since you have resettled in the USA?
- 4) Are gender roles in Sudanese families changing? Why?
- 5) Do you want your children to be fluent in Dinka/Nuer?
- 6) Would you want them to return to South Sudan in the future?