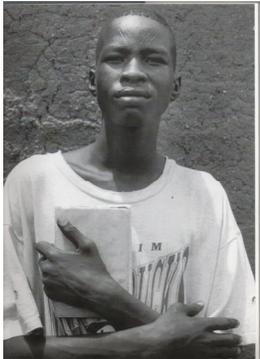


From Storytelling to Writing: Transforming Literacy Practices Among Sudanese Refugees

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- n *Ours is an oral tradition. My people told stories about the raids and slaves—they sang about slavery. But they did not write books or newspaper stories about their suffering. And they certainly did not file reports to international human rights organizations. That is changing, as Dinka refugees move to the West and organize.* (Bok, 2003, p. 249)



Who are the Sudanese in Michigan?

- n Refugees from southern Sudan (~1,000)
- n “Lost Boys” = orphaned youth, mostly boys (~200)
- n Languages spoken among the Lost Boys:
 - q Dinka/other local language
 - q English
 - q Kiswahili
 - q Arabic

Historical Context

- n Civil war in Sudan: 1983-present
- n Journey of the Lost Boys
- n Kakuma: Education in the refugee camp
 - q Free schools organized by UNHCR
 - q Languages: English & KiSwahili

Theoretical Framework

- n Sociocultural and sociolinguistic approaches to language/literacy (Barton & Hamilton, Gee, Heath, Hymes, Street)
- n Language/literacy practices are:
 - q infused with meaning and purpose
 - q Dynamic and malleable
 - q Shaped by social, cultural, historical, and political structures and forces

Theoretical Framework

- n “Narrative” encompasses a variety of genres and purposes (Ochs & Capps)
- n Narrative is a powerful form of sense-making (Johnstone, Wortham)
- n As cultural texts, narratives shape individual and communal identities (Bruner, Wortham)
- n Narrators position themselves in relation to families, communities, and world through narrative (Ochs & Capps, Wortham)

Research Questions

- n What were the roles of storytelling in the lives of the Lost Boys in Africa? What roles does storytelling play in their current lives in Michigan?
- n How have the Lost Boys transformed traditional storytelling as a result of their experiences as refugees?
- n How does storytelling, and its transformation, relate to issues of identity and community for this group of refugees?

Methodology

- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| n DATA COLLECTION: | n ANALYSIS: |
| n Participant observation | n Creation of data matrices to organize emerging themes |
| n Semi-structured interviews | n Transcription of interviews |
| q 3 focal participants | n Discourse analysis |
| n Artifact collection | q Narrative structure |
| | q Content/themes |
| | q Positioning |
| | n Triangulation across data sources |

Role of the Researcher

- n Tutor/mentor
- n Community board member
- n Recruitment of participants
 - q In-home tutoring
 - q Community events

Focal Participants

- n Chol (~19 years old):
 - q Attends private university (business)
 - q Community leader
- n Francis (~19 years old):
 - q Attends community college (pharmacy)
 - q Several jobs
- n Ezra (~26 years old):
 - q Attends state university (poli-sci)
 - q Deeply religious—community pastor

Findings: Variety of storytelling practices

- n Talk *about* storytelling
- n Enacted storytelling
- n Transformed storytelling
 - q Narratives whose purpose, audience, and medium were different from traditional storytelling

Findings: Variety of storytelling practices

- n Stories read/heard:
 - q Traditional stories/histories (community)
 - q Literature (school)
 - q Religious stories (church)
- n Stories written/told:
 - q Literature-type stories (usually school)
 - q Personal narratives
 - q Hypothetical stories/*irrealis*

Findings: Issues revealed through transformed storytelling

- n Three areas of transformation:
 - q *Who* stories are for
 - q *How* stories are told
 - q *Why* stories are told
- n Transformations reveal issues:
 - q Tension between orphanhood and community
 - q Tension between identity and positioning with community
 - q Storytelling as critique

Findings: Issues revealed through transformed storytelling

- n Traditional storytelling
 - q Storytellers: parents, community elders, teachers
 - q Purpose: education, preservation of history & culture, entertainment
 - n Learning about family/community is key
 - q Formal schooling: literature as subject

Findings: Issues revealed through transformed storytelling

- n Transformed storytelling
 - q Audience: non-Sudanese wider world
 - q Purpose: share experiences, persuade, critique
 - q Medium: speeches, printed texts, digital media
 - q Formal schooling: different opportunities to engage in storytelling

University Colloquium
September 16, 2003

Autobiography

My name is [redacted]. I am a Sudanese by nationality. My autobiography is a daunting story because of the largest civil war in Africa and the world. This war has dispersed many Sudanese people around the world. The war separated me from parents in 1986, and I have learned and experienced problems and many other consequences from it. I have seen many people dying, drowning and starving. I am a survivor of that war. In 1990 I escaped to Ethiopia, where I learned the life of being a child refugee in that country. I was lonely without my parents. There was a lot of sickness. In 1995, then things changed a little bit. I first attended school. It let me learn alphabetical letters, how to read, and how to write. Again, in this country, there was a civil war. That civil war forced us out again to run back to the Sudan in 1991. From that experience, I learned that I had to run from the enemy. From then, I experienced a lot of things. We were very hungry. There was no water or food on the way when we were running. We walked many miles, many thousands of miles, back in the Sudan. That experience impacted my life.

In 1991, the Sudanese enemies started bombing the displaced people in Sudan. That led us to run to Kenya in 1992. Again, I experienced the life of refugees. It is a hard life, because we were walking some miles to the Kenyan border. There we were welcomed at the Kenyan border by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). We were taken to a place called Kakuma Refugee Camp, where many refugees from Africa live. It is in the northern Kenya district of Turkana. The non-governmental organizations were starting to help the refugee women boys and girls from the Sudan, those who were without parents. In 1993, I started primary school. That was another learning experience. From there, I went to school until I reached Standard 7, then I sat for the examination. That gave me a certificate, which was my first achievement in my life. In 1996, I first attended Secondary school in Kenya. This continued until 1999, when I started my plans to come to the U.S.

In 2000, I came for asylum in the U.S.A. This led me to learn many things about culture and ideas, about different people, different environments, the different life from the refugees. Then in the U.S., I first joined [redacted] High School in Lansing. I learned about new students, a new school, a new system. I made many new friends, and did many activities in school. This school placed me in the ninth grade, but the next week they put me in the tenth grade, and the next week they placed me in the eleventh grade. That is where I stayed this year. In 2002, I graduated from [redacted] High School, and I experienced the second achievement in my life. I have my diploma from a U.S. school. In 2002, I was awarded a Presidential Scholarship by [redacted], and then I enrolled in [redacted] University. I learned about a new environment and the college system. That put me to the highest level. Finally, I am a second year student at [redacted] University, focusing on my career, learning a lot of things, targeting my goals.

Discussion: Important issues revealed

- n Why this transformation???
- q New context, new constraints, new affordances
 - n Orphans living in Western, English-speaking nations
 - q Desire to maintain Sudanese identity
 - q Desire to maintain Sudanese community
 - n Access to new media
 - n Influence of formal schooling

Implications

- n Print literacy and the information age seem to be contributing to storytelling's transformation
- n Sharing experiences through narrative can shape identity and help to build community
- n Storytelling connects local communities to the global community
- n Storytelling is a politically powerful tool