

“Helping Our People”:

The Role of Literacies in Mediating Community among Sudanese Refugees

Working Paper

Kristen H. Perry

University of Kentucky

Abstract

This paper illustrates the ways in which the literacy practices of southern Sudanese refugee youth transacted with issues of identity, community, and diaspora. Literacy mediated community through practices centered around schooling, religion, interpersonal communication, and community participation for these youth. Themes of orphanhood and community emerged in the study, illustrating the importance of literacy to Sudanese identity and to maintaining community in diaspora. The paper offers implications for literacy instruction in formal schooling for refugees.

“Helping Our People”:

The Role of Literacies in Mediating Community among Sudanese Refugees

This paper illustrates the ways in which the literacy practices of southern Sudanese refugee youth—the so-called “Lost Boys of Sudan”—transacted with issues of Sudanese community and identity for these youth. There are more than 17,000 southern Sudanese refugees living in the United States today (Bok, 2003); of these, approximately 1,000 live in Michigan, and about a quarter of Michigan’s Sudanese refugees come from the group known as the “Lost Boys”. These youth, primarily boys, were orphaned by the 20-year-old civil war in the Sudan, made a grueling journey on foot across Africa, lived for years in the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, and eventually were resettled in American communities. The purpose of this case study was to explore the various ways in which this community utilized and transformed literac(ies) into culturally meaningful practices by incorporating issues surrounding language, culture, community and identity.

Theoretical Framework

Literacy as Social Practice

Scholars working within the field of literacy have increasingly recognized the need to understand literacy as a phenomenon that is not solely cognitive; literacy is an ideological social practice shaped by social, cultural, economic, political, and ideological factors (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Barton, Hamilton & Ivanič, 2000; Street, 2001). Scholars who work within this framework of literacy as social practice recognize that literacy looks different among different people, in different places, and in different historical times. Context plays an important role in determining the shape of literacy in a particular community. In addition, communities—and the individuals that inhabit them—have multiple purposes and uses for literacies in their daily lives.

Identity and Community in Diaspora

Because literacy is a social phenomenon, issues of community and identity play important roles in shaping how individuals and groups take up literacy in their lives. These issues become complicated when cultural groups disperse around the world; this is especially true for young people, such as the group of orphaned Sudanese refugee youth described in this study, whose lives have been seriously disrupted by warfare, violence, and multiple migrations and relocations around the world.

Holland et al (1998) suggest that both individual and collective identities are closely linked to historical, social, cultural, and political influences: “persons and, to a lesser extent, groups are caught in the tensions between past histories that have settled in them and the present discourses and images that attract them or somehow impinge upon them” (p. 4). These socially-produced identities are “imaginings of self in worlds of action” (Holland et al, 1998, p. 5), and they are constantly being shaped and re-shaped. Maguire et al (2005) suggest that hybrid identities are becoming more common in our postmodern world. These hybrid identities reflect multiple affiliations as well as “individuals’ attempts to reconcile the past with their present new cultural environments....old and new cultural traditions, and ways of being in the world” (p. 148). This concept of hybridity also plays a role in current theories about the nature of the relationship between globalization, identity and diaspora (Brazier & Mannur, 2003). Hall (2003), for example, suggests that in relation to diaspora, cultural identity “is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being.’ It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture” (p. 236). This notion of hybrid identity is particularly salient for the youth in this study—young men who worked hard to

navigate their new lives as “Lost Boys” in the United States, but who also keenly felt the need to maintain a sense of themselves as “not-so-lost” Sudanese.

Like identity, which is closely connected with the social and cultural context, the concept of community is also complex, fluid, and dynamic (Hymes, 1996). Holland et al (1998) suggest that identity and community interact in what they term “imagined community” (p. 247).

Imagined communities are often those where community members may not be in direct social contact, due to distance or other factors, but which are held together by “a potent and effective sense of commonality, of membership in a categorical social body” (p. 247). Such a definition of community is particularly relevant for refugees and other diasporic cultural groups; it is especially so for orphaned refugee youth, who are not only separated from their homeland, but who are also without family. It is important to note, however, that even the concept of diaspora is rapidly changing, as both globalization and access to new technologies grow (Maguire et al, 2005). The term “diaspora” itself is problematic, suggest Braziel and Mannur (2003), often essentializing conceptions of homeland or ethnic identity (Braziel and Mannur, 2003; Ifekwunigwe, 2003). However, asking questions, across a variety of scholarly disciplines, related to diasporic experiences may help us to better understand the histories of various communities such as refugees (Braziel & Mannur, 2003; Radhakrishnan, 2003). This paper presents empirical data to support theories relating to identity, community, and diaspora.

Methodology

This study is situated within the larger Cultural Practices of Literacy Study (CPLS), a meta-study of literacy practices in different cultural communities (Purcell-Gates, 2007 et al, in press). Methods used in this study included: (a) participant observation; (b) interviews, including

narrative elicitations of literacy stories, values, and beliefs, as well as life-histories; (c) artifact and document collection and analysis; and (d) coding textual practices for social domains.

Role of the Researcher

I first became involved with the Sudanese community in May, 2002, when I began working as a paid tutor with a local social service agency after returning from two years in Lesotho, Africa as a Peace Corps Volunteer. As a tutor, I was officially paired with three Sudanese students, one of whom served as a focal participant in this study. However, due to the close-knit nature of the Sudanese community, I also found myself frequently volunteering as an unofficial tutor and community mentor for the roommates and relatives of my students. In this unofficial role, I have been called upon to help with various events such as driving members of the Sudanese community to doctors' appointments, helping them fill out job applications, providing limited technical assistance for computer problems, coaching Sudanese who are practicing for their drivers' licenses, or making phone calls to utility companies on behalf of the Sudanese. In December of 2003, Chol (a focal participant in this study) also asked me to serve as a member on the board of the newly-formed Southern Sudan Relief and Rescue Association, a local organization comprised of both Americans and Southern Sudanese who work together to help Sudanese refugees, both in the U.S. and in Africa.

My role as an academic tutor and community mentor was well established before this research project began, which allowed me to gain more genuine access to the literacy practices of the Sudanese community. While I am clearly not a member of the Sudanese refugee community myself, I have a legitimate role in that community through my work as a tutor and mentor. I was able to enter participants' homes for reasons apart from conducting research, and in return, community members often invited me to participate in community events such as graduation

parties, welcoming parties for newly arrived refugees, and the annual May 16th celebration, which serves as a memorial day marking the beginning of the current civil war in Sudan.

Observations

Throughout this study, I observed the environments within which the southern Sudanese lived, read and wrote. Formal observations occurred over approximately seven months, with at least two visits made per week. Observations typically lasted 1-2 hours. The majority of these observations occurred in the homes of focal participants, whom I visited as an academic tutor and community mentor. Some observations also took place during large-scale community events to which I was invited, such as graduation parties and Sudanese holiday celebrations. These observations involved noting texts, literacy events, participant structures of those events, and the language of the event and/or text.

Interviews

The CPLS semi-structured interview protocol guided both the observational phase of the research as well as the interview phase. Each focal participant was interviewed at least once; one participant was interviewed three separate times, while another was interviewed twice. I audiotaped and then transcribed each interview. The interview began with a narrative elicitation of what literacy means to the informant. The protocol asked about such things as current and past literacy practices, both in and out-of school, and texts read and/or written. It also asked about practices of people in participants' communities, family members, and so on. Informants were prompted by the mention of different purposes or domains within which texts may be used such as "at work;" "while shopping;" or "with your friends." The interview protocol also prompted thoughts of linkages among literacy practices encountered in school and those practices outside of school. Because much of the African context of participants' past lives was unfamiliar to me, I

often used question prompts that were not strictly part of the CPLS interview protocol in order to obtain important contextual information from participants. For example, I asked questions such as “What were shops like in Kakuma?” or “How did you find out about the opportunity to come to the U.S.?” I also completed a demographic survey with each participant.

Artifact Collection and Analysis

Whenever possible, I collected sample written texts that seemed representative of practices reported by informants. These artifacts were typically photocopied and returned to the owner, although I kept the originals in some cases, when appropriate. These texts were analyzed for what they revealed of significance in relation to the research questions and used to triangulate data sources for the final interpretations.

Coding for Socio-Activity Domain

Each textual practice observed or reported was coded into the socio-activity domain the practice seemed to mediate. CPLS defined *socio-activity domain* as a social activity that reflects social relationships, roles, purposes/aims/goals, and social expectations. Different types of literacy events—reading and writing activity associated with printed texts—occurred within these various socio-activity domains. Embedded within these literacy events were genre factors such as purpose and text which seem to co-construct literacy practices. These socio-activity domains are fluid, dynamic, and overlapping rather than mutually distinct. Although socio-activity domains may include common settings, that is not their defining characteristic. For this reason, CPLS does not view physical settings such as *home*, *school*, or *church* as domains by themselves. Because socio-activity domains are not static or mutually exclusive, my coding of textual practices could involve coding particular literacy events in multiple domains. For

example, a literacy event in which a student reads the Bible as part of an in-school ritual would have been coded within the social domains of *school* and *religion*.

After the observations, interviews, and artifacts were coded, I analyzed the codes for patterns. To do this, I created matrices that organized domain codes by language (English, Dinka, or Arabic) and by context (U.S. or Africa). I also used similar matrices to organize texts read and written in different languages and contexts.

Historical Context of Sudanese Refugees

The Civil War in Sudan

According to one participant in this study, “Sudan has never been a peaceful country.” There have been many internal wars in the Sudan; a major civil war began in 1983 when the southern Sudanese organized an uprising against the northern-dominated Sudanese government. This war was the result of centuries of deep ethnic and religious divisions. Northern Sudan is predominantly Arab¹ and Muslim, while southern Sudan is predominantly comprised of African tribes who are either Christian or animist. The country’s government is controlled by the North, and it has systematically worked to subjugate the African South by imposing Muslim *sharia* law, making Arabic the official national language, and turning a blind eye to the traditional practice of enslaving southern Sudanese (Bok, 2003; Deng, 1995). In 1983, the southern Sudanese rebelled against the atrocities of the northern-dominated government by creating the Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement and Army (SPLM/A), which has since engaged the government in a civil war. In January of 2005, however, the Sudanese government and the SPLM signed a new peace accord that outlines an agreement for power-sharing between the North and the South and that makes provision for an eventual election where the South may determine whether or not to remain part of the Sudan (Embassy of the Republic of the Sudan, 2005). At that time, many

Southern Sudanese expressed the hope that this accord will finally bring peace to the region. The sudden death of John Garang, the longtime leader of the SPLM and the newly-instated vice-president of Sudan, in an airplane accident in July 2005, along with a subsequent uprising of ethnic violence and the conflict in the Darfur region have since cast the peace process into doubt.

The war and its aftermath have completely devastated southern Sudan. Two and a half million people have been killed since the beginning of the conflict, and five million people have been displaced as refugees. Militias bombed, pillaged and destroyed villages and crops, slaughtered families, raped women, and captured women and children to be taken to the north, where they were kept as slaves and forced to convert to Islam (Bok, 2003; Yang, 2002). The conflict in Sudan caused a mass exodus of Southerners, many of whom ended up in the Kakuma Refugee Camp near Lake Turkana in Kenya.

The Journey of the Lost Boys

As a result of the war, tens of thousands of Sudanese children began a mass exodus from the south in 1987. The group was comprised mainly of boys for two primary reasons: First, boys fled their villages in reaction to news that the armies on both sides were abducting boys and forcing them to fight. Secondly, many young boys were away from home, tending to herds of animals in remote cattle camps, when militias descended upon their villages, destroying the villages and slaughtering their families (Yang, 2002).

These “Lost Boys”—so called because they reminded a journalist of the orphaned boys in *Peter Pan*—walked. They walked over 1,000 miles:

In the weeks and months of their journeys, traveling mostly at night to avoid being bombed from the air or captured by ground troops, lions were a constant threat. The boys began to form close-knit groups, a new sense of family following the loss of their own.

They traveled across Saharan desert, into jungles, over mountains and through swamps—all studded with land mines (Yang, 2002).

Only 7,000 of the original group survived to reach the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya in 1992 (Yang, 2002). These refugee youth lived in Kakuma for nearly a decade, residing with Sudanese foster parents or in group homes with other orphaned youth. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) opened schools, which all of the Lost Boys were able to attend. Beginning in November, 2000, the U.S. State Department began to resettle these refugees in the United States. Over 3,500 Lost Boys have been resettled so far (Yang, 2002), and the United States intends to continue resettling Lost Boys over the next few years.

Focal Participants: Chol, Ezra, and Francis

At the time of the study, Chol was approximately 19 years old. He was a member of the Dinka tribe, the largest African tribe in Sudan. After graduating from high school in 2002, Chol enrolled in a local private university, where he majored in business administration. Chol had gained a great deal of respect in the Sudanese refugee community, despite his youth. He was often asked to organize community events, and he was elected to serve as a representative to the Sudanese refugees' local governing board. This committee represented the community, mediated disputes, and organized community events.

Ezra, approximately 26 during the study, also was a member of the Dinka tribe. He attended the local state university, where he majored in linguistics and public policy. He also simultaneously took courses at the local community college. Ezra was deeply religious, and he sometimes served as a pastor in a local Christian church, where he occasionally performed services in the Dinka language. In the Kakuma Refugee Camp, Ezra was trained as a Bible translator, and he worked with a team to translate parts of the Old Testament into Dinka—

activities which developed his interest in linguistics. Ezra also used his linguistic and writing skills for community development. For example, Ezra not only taught primary school in the refugee camps, he also was part of a team that wrote the first primary school textbooks in Dinka, and he successfully wrote a grant proposal to fund a library at his church in Kakuma.

Francis, approximately 19 or 20 at the time of the study, was from the Madi tribe, the smallest African tribe in the Sudan. Francis attended the local community college, where he majored in pharmacy. Francis told me that he also enjoyed auto mechanics courses, explaining that he wanted to keep his job options open. Like many of the Sudanese refugees, Francis worked at a variety of jobs—including McDonald'sTM and an auto dealership—in order to pay for college and for his car.

Transactions and Mediations: Literacy and Community

Four key socio-activity domains contextualized literacy practices among this group of Sudanese: (1) participating in formal schooling, (2) using religion/spirituality, (3) relating interpersonally, and (4) participating in community. Although the fourth domain specifically addresses community, each of these domains is community-oriented in focus, particularly those domains relating to schooling, religion, and interpersonal relationships. Participants in this study have even transformed some aspects of schooling—typically a highly individualistic pursuit in the U.S.—into a community-oriented domain; for the participants in this study, individual schooling has become part of a duty to the larger Sudanese community, particularly to those left behind in Africa. In the following sections, I will describe the important ways in which literacy and community transacted in various contexts for the Sudanese youth. Table 1 lists examples of types of texts read and written by participants in the Kakuma Refugee Camp and in Michigan.

Insert Table 1 about here

Literacy and Community: The Kakuma Refugee Camp

Literacy mediated community in many ways for the participants during their lives in the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya. Despite the fact that participants reported limited access to printed texts and to writing materials in the camp, literacy nonetheless played an important role in some community activities in Kakuma, particularly in the areas of religion/spirituality, interpersonal communication, and community organization.

Religion plays a central role in much of southern Sudanese culture. There is a close link between southern Sudanese religious beliefs and identity, regardless of whether those religious beliefs are Christian or traditional animist (Deng, 1995). Approximately 20% of southern Sudanese identify as Christian (Bok, 2003), and most Sudanese refugees in Michigan strongly identify themselves with a local Christian church. Churches in Kakuma served many important community functions—functions that were often closely related to literacy. For example, churches in the camp offered the only opportunity for local language literacy instruction. As Chol explains, “In the school, they taught us English and KiSwahili. At church, they taught us Dinka, not English.” Ezra also explained that some churches in Kakuma had small libraries that were used to support religious instruction, local language literacy instruction, and also the formal instruction that occurred in the camp’s schools. Before he left Kakuma, Ezra successfully wrote a grant proposal that provided funding for one such library that was attached to his church.

For the participants in this study, obtaining community information/news and participating in community organization were important parts of life in the Kakuma Refugee

Camp. Refugees in the camp not only were displaced from their homelands, but for the orphaned youth in particular, they were separated from their immediate and extended families and other loved ones who were left behind in Sudan. In addition, many community members left the camp as part of resettlement programs in the U.S., Canada, Australia, and Europe. Finding a way to keep in touch—or to re-establish contact—with family and community members scattered across the globe provided an important impetus for many literacy activities in the camp. Chol explained that an important literacy routine for many refugees in Kakuma was to check the Red Cross' information board in the camp, where letters from displaced family members or other significant community information (e.g., updates on the peace negotiations) was posted:

I go there because maybe my brothers in Khartoum, maybe they send letters to Red Cross. So, you go there every day and check. Maybe someone sends you a letter . . . it's the only means of communication with people around the world.

Participants explained that although only government officials and NGO workers had access to the Internet in the Kakuma Refugee Camp, refugees sometimes traveled to Nairobi to use the Internet or to make phone calls. Indeed, I observed participants reading emails from friends in Kakuma on several occasions in Michigan. Often these readings were a community affair, with several Sudanese gathered around the computer or with the recipient reading the message aloud.

Although many of these literacy activities centered around attempting to contact loved ones or on passing on important information, activities in this social domain also involved active community organization. Some refugees wrote for the local news media while in the camp. Ezra said that he frequently contributed to the *Kakuma News Bulletin*, where he “was just expressing myself on some issues that I think are pertinent to the community.” He also worked together with several other community members to produce the first Dinka textbooks for primary school

children. Chol explained that community organizing also occurred on a much larger scale in Kakuma, particularly in reference to the challenges of life in the camp: “A lot of people make a strike. They go in the road, shouting and what, and then the community writes the problem. They need food, they need water, they need clothes, they need everything.” He said that community leaders often composed letters requesting help, which they sent to the UNHCR or other NGOs.

Clearly, literacy activities crossed boundaries between social domains in Kakuma. Literacy activities related to religious life and community life were closely intertwined for refugees in the camp; Chol explained that a common literacy routine in Kakuma’s churches was the recording of greetings by visitors. These visitors often brought written messages for community members from family, community members, and other loved ones from afar. Literacy activities that occurred in churches also supported formal academic instruction in the camp, as evidenced by Ezra’s work toward funding a church library. What is significant is that each of the domains that were mediated by literacy contained a strong community focus, suggesting that community purposes provided important motivations for participants to engage with print literacy practices.

Literacy and Community: Sudanese Refugees in Michigan

Participants in this study continued many of the community-oriented literacy practices that had been important to them in Kakuma when they resettled in Michigan. Literacy practices surrounding religion and spirituality continued to play an important role in the lives of these youth. During numerous observations, I noticed English Bibles lying on participants’ desks or beds; Ezra, who worked as a Bible translator in the Kakuma Refugee Camp, owned an entire shelf of religious texts, most in English. In separate visits, Chol shared two Dinka religious texts with me—a passage from the Bible, and a religious pamphlet. Participants’ speech was also

peppered with Biblical references, indicating their deep knowledge of that text. For example, Ezra referred to the Bible many times in a speech he gave at his graduation party, quoting several passages from memory. During interviews, participants also described a number of literacy practices that center around religion. For example, Chol carried a little notebook with him to church, in which he wrote down important messages from the pastor; Ezra read the Bible for at least 20-30 minutes each day.

Keeping in touch with displaced friends, family, and other community members likewise continued to remain an important literacy practice for the participants in this study. Participants' communications increasingly were mediated by the Internet, as they gained greater access to those technologies, and as the distances between loved ones increased. "I write people here," Chol explained. "I wrote to many people, like in the different states, different boys, guys who were in Kakuma. I write to them. Especially I use email for that." Likewise, Francis stated that email "is the easiest way to communicate at times, because to call a person in Africa costs five dollars, but the Internet is free of charge." According to Ezra, the Internet not only was an important method of keeping in contact, but it also has become a very important means of accessing (and disseminating) information and news about the global Sudanese community:

It is where I write a lot, because I read about almost every day, maybe two or three times a day, about Sudan and about the peace talks that have been going on in Nairobi. And I write a lot to the news media, and also I express my opinions, because we do have a website for the Sudanese who are outside Sudan in the West here. That website brings them together and shares their thoughts and ideas and experiences.

Print-based literacies, particularly those associated with digital technologies, served an important role in mediating community across the Sudanese refugee diaspora.

As participants settled into their lives in Michigan, many refugee youth became involved in local Sudanese community organization. Here, again, literacies served an important community function. Sudanese tribes highly value leadership in their communities (Deng, 1995), and this was exemplified by several participants in this study. Chol, for example, was viewed as a leader in the wider Sudanese community in Michigan, despite his youth. Many of Chol's literacy practices revolved around this leadership role. He was frequently nominated by the community to sit on organizational committees for important community events (e.g., planning the annual May 16th memorial event); he also was elected to serve on the main Sudanese refugee governing board that represented the community, mediated disputes, and offered assistance to community members, in addition to serving on the board of SSRRA. Chol's leadership role required him to write notes during meetings (often re-typed on the computer), write and send letters to the refugee community, and to contribute columns to the local refugee newsletter. Chol also created his own leadership opportunities where he used literacy. For example, he shared a business ledger he created for a financial group he organized, called the Brothers Union Investment Club; this group was composed of several Sudanese Lost Boys who saw themselves as "self-starters". Figure 1 shows a page from the business ledger Chol created for the Brothers Union Investment Club.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Similarly, Ezra described his dream of starting a non-profit organization to organize Sudanese refugees and to provide assistance for those still in Africa; he explained that he had received help from a lawyer to get the organization up and running.

As in Kakuma, community purposes provided much of the impetus for participants to engage with printed text through reading and writing in their new lives in the U.S. In fact, I argue that the participants' diasporic migration to this country, which increased the distance between them and their loved ones, and which gave them better access to communicative technologies such as the Internet, resulted in increased importance for literacy as a mediator for community.

Education and the Socio-Activity Domain of School

There is a proverb among the Lost Boys—"Education is our mother and our father"—which illustrates the high regard with which this community holds education (Lost Boys of Sudan, n.d.). Ezra, for example, explained why he felt that learning to read and write and becoming educated were so important:

I was so desperate, living by myself without any parents, without any relatives, without any older person to give me advice and guidance—so, I felt that as long as I live and as long as God keeps me alive and lets me breathe, I would do anything I could to become one day a professional like some of the people that I saw.

The Lost Boys' first experiences with formal schooling occurred in the refugee camps. In Sudan, the youth had little access to schooling, and the few schools available in the south were taught in Arabic, due to the government's official policy to promote Islam, the Arab culture, and the Arabic language in Sudanese schools. In general, the southern Sudanese youth were deeply committed to their academic studies in the Kakuma Refugee Camp (Yang, 2002), and this was certainly exemplified by the participants in this study. The UNHCR set up schools in the camp, based upon the Kenyan educational system; the schools were free for refugee children and youth. Proficiency in English was very important for Sudanese refugee students in Kakuma, because English was the medium of instruction in the schools, and because important culminating

exams—the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education and the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education—were conducted in English, as well. Students were also taught KiSwahili, the national language of Kenya, as a second language. Because English and KiSwahili were the official languages of schooling, few southern Sudanese children had the opportunity to become literate in Dinka, Nuer, Madi, or other local dialects. Some refugee youth believed that this missed opportunity to become literate in their local languages had serious implications for Sudanese community, culture, and identity (Perry, 2007).

Many of the Sudanese participants equated education with improving Sudan’s lot, as well as with improving their own life chances. Becoming educated, they believe, is one of the most important duties they have to those left behind in Africa. For example, in *Escape from Slavery*, Bok (2003) described the two great dreams in his life as “to get an education and to do something that would help our people by telling my story” (p. 187). During an interview, Ezra told me that “the reason why we go to school is to get that knowledge, and then come back with it and use it for the betterment of human society.” These quotes show that education and knowledge are valued not just for their own sake or for the individual opportunities they afford, but because they may be *used* to help both the Sudanese and “human society” in general.

These sentiments were repeatedly played out during several community events, when I observed community leaders exhorting the Sudanese to work hard toward obtaining an education. At Ezra’s graduation party, one community leader talked at length about the educational opportunities the Sudanese have available to them in the U.S.—opportunities that are not available to them in the Sudan. Similarly, a speaker at a welcoming party for a newly arrived Sudanese family urged the U.S. to bring over more young Sudanese refugees so that they can obtain an education. He said that it is difficult to fight a successful war without education, and

that “being here is another part of the war.” This speaker emphasized to the listeners that Sudanese refugees must learn as much as they can here in the U.S. so that they can return to Sudan and help to rebuild their native country. “The only way we can help them is to have an education,” Ezra said at his own graduation party. Speakers at these events emphasized the importance of community among the Sudanese, as well as the need for unity among the diverse Sudanese community in order to bring about peace in that country.

In the Kakuma camp, literacy and education also were enacted communally. According to all of the focal participants, students typically had to share textbooks, because there usually were not enough texts to go around. “You share with other students,” Francis explained, “Three or four people with one book.” Apart from sharing scarce textbooks, whole-school literacy routines in Kakuma also emphasized communal values. For example, Chol described the morning assembly, where students took turns leading the school community in prayers and reading from the Bible. According to Chol, the morning prayers and Bible-reading were the one time when students were permitted to use their native languages: “If she’s Somali or Burundi, then she can explain. But it doesn’t matter. People will just come and pray. She can pray in her language; after pray, say ‘Amen’, then people say ‘Amen’.” This example is particularly interesting, because it shows a community literacy practice that reached beyond borders of ethnicity or nationality, beyond just the community of Sudanese.

Storytelling: Community Education

Educational and community issues are clearly linked for this group of refugees, the importance of which can be seen in the ways in which the focal participants talked about storytelling. In Dinka culture, storytelling is a form of traditional education in the Sudan. According to Ezra,

Storytelling is an important aspect [of our culture] . . . To keep the history of the community and the culture and the customs, you pass them from one generation to another through storytelling. . . . It was through storytelling where people came to learn about culture, the customs, about the traditions, about the norms, about the values.

Because there was no way—you could not find them in a book.

Similarly, Chol says that “the stories, they help us a lot”. He also suggests that storytelling is not only a way of passing on culture and history, but it also brings happiness and “people can laugh”—certainly no small matter, given the hardships endured by the refugees in this community.

However, storytelling has become somewhat problematic for the Lost Boys who came to the U.S., because it was traditionally done by community elders—a resource no longer available to these orphaned youth. Francis explained that in Africa, storytelling happens in the evenings, when people sit together and share stories. “People tell a lot of stories [in Africa],” he said, “but here, now, we don’t learn. We don’t tell any stories like that.” Community elders were available in the refugee camp, according to Chol: “Like in Kakuma, the old people, they tell stories like ‘a long time ago’.” Ezra, however, tells a slightly different story of life in the camp:

There were a few elders, [but] it is not everybody who has made an effort to talk with some elders and to know about some issues, to know things about the community. So here, even if there is time to sit and talk about storytelling, . . . some people might not have the resources that they need in this area of storytelling, they may not be able to do it.

Despite the challenges described by Ezra and Francis, traditional storytelling does appear to occur to a limited extent among the Sudanese community in Michigan. Chol explained that, although “we don’t have old people here,” some of the relocated youth have carried on traditions

of oral storytelling: “We have some funny guys that tell a lot of stories ... Four guys from Grand Rapids—when they sit here, a lot of Lost Boys come and listen to them.”

The participants’ treatment of storytelling illustrates important themes that arose again and again in terms of literacy, education, and community. Storytelling appeared to be deeply connected to community, both in the act of telling stories and in the content of those stories. Storytelling in Africa was a communal and cross-generational event, where elders passed on collective wisdom to future generations. This also was where Sudanese came “to know things about the community,” as Ezra explained. Although participants in this study did not tell many traditional stories themselves, storytelling was nonetheless a powerful motivator for many of their print literacy practices. Many times, Chol expressed to me his desire to publish the memories he had of his own personal experiences as a refugee, and he began to write down portions of his autobiography. Ezra explained that he sometimes gave speeches about his experiences and the situation in the Sudan, and he spent time in libraries researching material to include in those speeches. For many of these displaced Sudanese refugees, storytelling is being transformed from the old way of passing down cultural traditions within their own ethnic group into a way of educating the wider world about their experiences, both through speeches and written texts. In this sense, as Sudanese refugees tell their stories to the world, they are transforming storytelling from an event that happens in the local community to one that is being shared with the global community (see Perry, 2005).

Differences Between School and Community Conceptualizations of Literacy

Although participants in this study clearly used literacy in a rich variety of ways in their daily and community lives, it was also clear that school uses and community uses of literacy often differed. The school-based literacies of the participants in this study often did not reflect

those that existed within their community lives. School literacies, as experienced by the informants for this study, both in the Kakuma Refugee Camp and in the United States, tended to focus on purposes of certification and credentialing. For example, Ezra explained that the majority of the texts funded by his grant proposal in Kakuma were books to support academic studies which ultimately led to certification exams. He also reported that in Kakuma, exam-related materials received preferential treatment for limited typing and copying resources. Certification and credentialing played a similarly important role in the participants' experience of literacy in schooling in the United States. When asked about what he found difficult about school literacy, Francis responded:

General maths was hard. Organic chemistry, too, was very hard, but I passed it, but I did not do good in maths. I was having four classes or five...I did not pass my maths, so I have to take it to get associate's [degree] in chemical technology. Otherwise I can't take my two physics classes...I'm trying to get an associate's degree in chemical technology.

It is significant that Francis focuses on the need to pass exams, rather than difficulties he might experience in completing homework or writing papers—literacy events which actually occupied a far greater portion of his time and energy in the domain of school—nor does Francis mention the fact that he is required to read and write in a language that is not his native tongue.

Clearly, certification is an important focus for these Sudanese youth when they think about schooling and literacy—a focus that has important implications for participants' future selves. Many southern Sudanese refugees struggle somewhat when they enter the U.S. schooling system. Many are required to take what Ezra calls “remedial classes”—that is, basic English classes, despite the fact that they have been educated in and have communicated in English for about a decade, or more. On many occasions, for example, I observed Chol's roommate, John,

struggling with worksheets for his ESL class. Like many Sudanese refugees in this community, John was required to complete these “remedial” ESL courses, despite the fact that he could engage in lengthy, in-depth conversations in English. And, like many, John could not complete higher-level courses until he had passed the ESL certification requirements.

Education and Literacy—Creating a Community of Orphans

The themes of orphanhood and of community provide a stark contrast in this study, yet it is a contrast that contextualizes the importance of literacy and education for this group of refugees. The words *orphan* and *community* typically evoke opposite images—of utter aloneness and abandonment on the one hand, and of togetherness and support on the other. The two concepts in this case, however, may not be as dichotomous as they first appear. As Ezra so eloquently explained to me, “We are a community-oriented people.” Deng (1995) also explains that the Dinka people consider orphanhood to be an exceptionally deprived condition; it is therefore not surprising that the orphaned refugees might seek out community and work to create it, especially when community is so emphasized in their culture. It is also not surprising that the literacy practices valued and enacted within this group reflect the high value placed on community.

In this study, literacy, education, and community transact with and co-construct each other. Community-oriented domains of social activity such as religion, interpersonal communication, and community organization provide powerful motivations for literacy practices among this group of Sudanese. As Sudanese refugees find themselves in diaspora around the globe, it is not surprising that they utilize literacy practices in such a way to mediate community; that is, community becomes something that is textually mediated when it can be no longer physically or spatially mediated. As literacy gains increasing importance in a particular

community, so too must education—education provides opportunities for literacy as well as the means through which the Sudanese may “do something that would help our people,” as Bok says (2003, p. 187). Literacy appears to be a particularly important mediator of community for this group of refugees, a group who are without parents and family, and who must somehow make their way in a new country and culture, while simultaneously maintaining an identity as Sudanese. For Ezra, who has worked to increase Dinka literacy and the number of available Dinka texts, literacy is especially important for cultural identity among this particular community, precisely because of the generation gap and the lack of access to traditional education:

There are problems with oral communication or oral forms of keeping things, because if there are no experts or if the older people who are much informed about certain issues are no longer there, then the new people will not know anything, and they will be lost. So, now ... the new generation will not know anything about the old generation and so there will be a cut. So, this group will be a different group, although they will claim by their mouth that they are Dinka, they don't behave like Dinka ... The important thing about a culture is not only saying the name of the culture like Dinka, but to behave in [the] culture—that is critical.

In this sense, literacy is crucial not only for its ability to maintain community (and also help community members who have been left behind), but also for its ability to preserve an increasingly threatened culture and way of life.

Implications

This study highlights the increasing importance of issues concerning identity and community in literacy research. The participants in this study feel a strong need to maintain

connections with the larger southern Sudanese community, which is now spread across the globe. Literacies of religion, interpersonal communication, community information/news, and community organization within the southern Sudanese community serve this important function. The emerging need among Sudanese refugees to share their stories with the larger world is also part of this issue of identity and community. As a cultural practice, storytelling has been transformed into a new literacy practice for the southern Sudanese refugees, and it is a transformation that has linked the southern Sudanese community to the global community.

This study also raises important questions about the ways in which school-based literacies interact and transact with out-of-school literacies. The differences between school and community purposes for engaging in literacy practices in both the U.S. and Africa may reflect the increasing hegemony of Western-style education systems; even in the Kakuma refugee camp, the refugee youth participated in schools that were patterned after British educational models. Cultural communities vary greatly in the degree to which they value individualism, autonomy, community, competition and collaboration (Nisbett, 2003; Rogoff, 2003; Schweder, 2003), yet educational institutions largely emphasize the Western-based values of individualism, autonomy and competition (Rogoff, 2003). Clearly, the literacy practices of the Sudanese refugee youth reflect the high value they place on community, a value that may be heightened by the physical diaspora of the worldwide Sudanese community.

While participants in this study have been largely successful in school, their overall literacy practices do not reflect those that are widely practiced in schools. Recent research in adult literacy programs indicates that matching literacy instruction to authentic², real-world purposes for literacy leads to positive changes in students' literacy practices. Students in classes that incorporated authentic purposes for literacy into literacy instruction not only read more

often, but they also read and wrote more complex texts (Purcell-Gates, Jacobson, & Degener, 2004). Although researchers are still exploring the ways in which in-school and out-of-school literacy practices interact and transact, it appears to be generally beneficial for school-based instruction to incorporate authentic texts and authentic purposes for reading and writing whenever possible. Schools, both in the U.S. and in refugee camps such as Kakuma, therefore may want to pay greater attention to the local literacies practiced by the communities that they serve. Schools in the Kakuma Refugee Camp, at the very least, appeared to do a slightly better job of incorporating community literacies in the school domain by allowing students to read the Bible in their local languages. Schools in the U.S., unless they are church-supported, are not allowed to include religious material, thus depriving many students of a vital and relevant community text or purpose for reading in the course of literacy instruction. In the particular case of the participants in this study, school literacy instruction could be more authentic and more relative to refugees' lives by incorporating community literacy practices such as interpersonal communication, community organization, and community information/news into literacy instruction. Each of these domains contains powerful motivations for participants to practice various literacies, and incorporating them into school literacy instruction may help to make schooling a more meaningful and a more successful experience for refugees.

References

- Barton, D. & Hamilton, M. (1998). *Local literacies: Reading and writing in one community*. London: Routledge.
- Barton, D., Hamilton, M., & Ivanič, R. (Eds.). (2000). *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context*. London: Routledge.
- Bok, F. (2003). *Escape from Slavery*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Braziel, J.E. & Mannur, A. (2003). Nation, migration, globalization: Points of contention in diaspora studies. In J.E. Braziel & A. Mannur (Eds.), *Theorizing Diaspora* (pp. 1-22). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Deng, F. M. (1995). *War of visions: Conflict of identities in the Sudan*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution.
- Embassy of the Republic of the Sudan. (2005, February-March). Sudan government and SPLM/A sign a comprehensive peace agreement ending Africa's longest conflict [Electronic version]. *SudaNews*.
- Gonzalez, N., Moll, L., Tenery, F., Rivera, A., Rendon, P., Gonzales, R., & Amanti, C. (1995). Funds of knowledge for teaching in Latino households. *Urban Education*, 29, 443-470.
- Hall, S. (2003). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J.E. Braziel & A. Mannur (Eds.), *Theorizing Diaspora* (pp. 233-246). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Holland, D., Lachicotte Jr., W., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hymes, D. (1996). *Ethnography, linguistics, narrative inequality: Toward an understanding of voice*. London: Taylor and Francis.

- Ifekwunigwe, J.O. (2003). Returning(s): Relocating the critical feminist auto-ethnographer. In J.E. Braziel & A. Mannur (Eds.), *Theorizing Diaspora* (pp. 184-206). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Lost Boys of Sudan. (n.d.). *Lost Boys of Sudan*. Retrieved March 20, 2005, from <http://www.lostboysofsudan.com>
- Maguire, M.H., Beer, A.J., Attarian, H., Baygin, D., Curdt-Christiansen, X.L., & Yoshida, R. (2005). The chameleon character of multilingual literacy portraits: Re-searching in “heritage” language places and spaces. In J. Anderson, M. Kendrick, T. Rogers., & S. Smythe (Eds.), *Portraits of Literacy Across Families, Communities, and Schools: Intersections and Tensions*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Nisbett, R.E. (2003). *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently...and Why*. New York: The Free Press.
- Perry, K. (2007). Sharing stories, linking lives: Literacy practices among Sudanese refugees. In V. Purcell-Gates (Ed.), *Cultural Practices of Literacy: Case Studies of Language, Literacy, Social Practice, and Power*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Perry, K. (2005). *From Storytelling to Writing: Transforming Literacy Practices Among Sudanese Refugees*. Paper presented at the 14th World Congress of Applied Linguistics/International Association of Applied Linguistics, Madison, WI.
- Purcell-Gates, V. (Ed.). (2007.) *Cultural Practices of Literacy: Case Studies of Language, Literacy, Social Practice, and Power*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Purcell-Gates, V., Jacobson, E., Degener, S. (2004). *In school and out: A sociocognitive lens on literacy development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Radhakrishnan, R. (2003). Ethnicity in an age of diaspora. In J.E. Braziel & A. Mannur (Eds.), *Theorizing Diaspora* (pp. 119-131). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Rogoff, B. (2003). *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Schweder, R.A. (2003). *Why Do Men Barbecue? Recipes for Cultural Psychology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Street, B. (2001). The New Literacy Studies. In E. Cushman, G.R. Kintgen, B.M. Kroll, & M. Rose (Eds.), *Literacy: A critical sourcebook* (pp. 430-442). Boston: St. Martin's Press.

Yang, D.C. (2002). *Kakuma Turkana*. St. Paul, MN: Pangaea.

Endnotes

¹ Northern Sudanese are not ethnically Arab, but they have been “Arabized” culturally, they are lighter-skinned than their southern counterparts, and they consider themselves to be Arab (Deng, 1995).

² Authenticity is defined as using texts that are either identical or very similar to those texts that occur in students’ daily lives, and using those texts in purposeful ways that reflect students’ actual uses of those texts outside of school. Examples of authentic literacy practices that easily translate to instructional contexts include reading a newspaper article or website for community information, writing a letter that is actually sent, and reading instructions in order to do or make something.

Table 1

Examples of texts read and written by the Sudanese youth in two contexts.

Domain	Kakuma		Michigan	
	Texts Read	Texts Written	Texts Read	Texts Written
Participating in Spirituality	Bible Church pamphlets		Bible Oxford Companion to the Bible Church pamphlets Church bulletins Bible commentaries	Sermons Notes from sermons Articles for church bulletins
Relating Interpersonally	letters emails	letters emails	letters emails phone messages	letters emails phone messages
Participating in Community	Letters Newspapers	Newsletter columns letters Grant proposals	letters Internet discussion boards Listserv emails International websites Invitations	Newsletter columns Letters to the Editor Discussion board postings Meeting notes Business ledgers Invitations

Figure Caption

Figure 1. The cover page of Chol's notebook for the Brothers Union Investment Club.

Figure 1.

