

Sudanese Refugees and New Humanitarianism

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Waiting in line for a buffet dinner of chicken, pasta and salad at a suburban club house in a cookie-cutter Colorado development, I hardly feel like an anthropologist doing fieldwork. Yet, observing this fundraising event for the Lost Boys and Girls of Sudan enables me to gain insight into the language and practices of an emergent type of humanitarianism. In addition to studying the movement of Sudanese refugees across international borders, I am also examining the transnational images and discourses employed by humanitarian organizations to raise funds on behalf of these global migrants. This fundraising event provides a rich site for anthropological research on how transnational images and subjectivities are deployed and disputed, and how people make use of them.

A perky, blonde, female volunteer with leathery tanned skin collects my \$12 entrance fee, hands me a name tag and asks if I'd like to purchase a 2008 Lost Boys of Sudan calendar for \$10. Decorations include fliers with organization's motto—"Education is our mother and father"—written below a graphic of intertwined Colorado state and Southern Sudanese liberation flags.

This faith-based, non-profit group aiding Sudanese refugees is part of the "new humanitarianism" that emphasizes benevolence over justice, charity over obligation and generosity over entitlements. The theme of private charitable benevolence dominates the evening.

COMMENTARY

After we watch a short film about a Lost Boy reuniting with his mother near Juba, Sudan, the organization's leader gives a speech appealing for more funding to support displaced Sudanese youth in their educational pursuits and to support projects in villages near Bor and Juba. Images of barefoot, thin Sudanese villagers dressed in dirty, tattered clothing circulate in

brochures, handouts and the silent Powerpoint slide show running on automatic timer near the fundraiser entrance.

Transnational Migrants and Neoliberalism

Transnational migrants, such as the Sudanese refugees I study, have received considerable attention in the last thirty years as part of a wider scholarly concern with the international circulation of capital, goods, people and commodities. In my study, I focus on the global flow of transnational images and discourses used for charitable fundraising in the neoliberal era.

With its cost-cutting measures, subversion of democratic processes and increasing exploitation, neoliberalism has led to a reduction of refugee and immigrant social services; it has ushered in new forms of humanitarianism linked to the NGO industry. The emerging form of humanitarianism reveals a significant shift from state-run public programs to private charitable efforts that are part of a transnational system of governance. Though such private charitable organizations have been in existence for decades, what is new is the prominence of private versus state-supported efforts. What are the implications of the new humanitarianism for its beneficiaries and for transnational anthropology?

Anthropologists remain critical of several aspects of the new humanitarianism. First, there is concern that groups with the best opportunities to publicize compelling stories—but not necessarily with the greatest need—often gain the most assistance. Second there

is unease about reproducing asymmetrical power relations based on colonial legacies. Third, anthropologists argue that the new humanitarianism has the potential to turn refugees into passive victims.

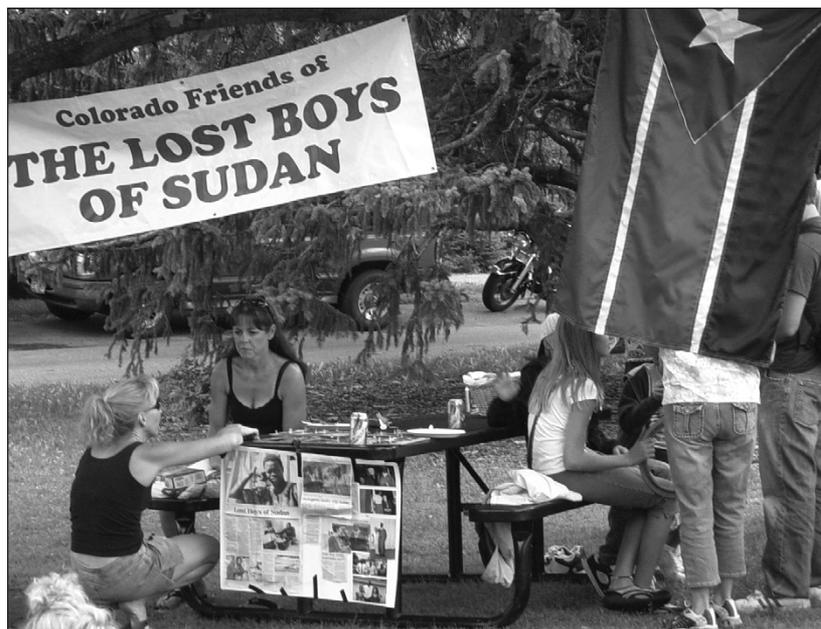
I am presently examining the new humanitarianism in an ethnographic study of several non-profit organizations in Colorado that were founded to assist Sudanese

refugee youth. The terms "Lost Boys" and "Lost Girls" were first ascribed to youth fleeing civil war in Sudan by humanitarian aid workers in reference to the orphaned characters in the children's story *Peter Pan*. They have become increasingly inappropriate, particularly now that these refugees are no longer children, but are young men and women. In addition, these labels obscure the fact that refugees are a diverse group not easily placed in categories. For example, not all of the so-called Lost Boys and Girls are orphans. Also, we now know that

ranging from *The New York Times Magazine* and *Sixty Minutes* to *People Magazine*. This group is also featured in documentaries such as *The Lost Boys of Sudan*, *God Grew Tired of Us* and *A Great Wonder: Lost Children of Sudan*, as well as Dave Eggers' 2006 best-selling novel *What is the What*.

Sympathy and Empowerment

Questions about regarding why particular kinds of imagery and argument have resonance for faith-based and secular charities, and how that information is created



Lost Boys picnic in Colorado. Photo courtesy Laura DeLuca

many of the Lost Boys—portrayed as innocent orphans who fled violent government attacks—were also recruits to rebel military training camps in Ethiopia and in some cases became child soldiers.

Lost Boys and Girls as a Humanitarian Brand

Some sponsors employ the term "Found Men and Women" instead of Lost Boys and Girls; yet, the Sudanese refugee youth themselves continue to use the term, wielding it like a well-recognized humanitarian brand. Though the moniker Lost Boys and Girls is problematic, the dramatic images associated with it have captured the attention of faith-based and secular humanitarian groups in the United States and beyond, who have continuously circulated the images in aid efforts. The plight of the Lost Boys (and to a lesser extent the Lost Girls) has been well documented in the US media

and circulated. Do photographs of refugee families summon the same kind of sympathy as images of unaccompanied minors? Why do Sudanese leaders actively choose potentially disempowering images of suffering Africans in their fundraising campaigns on behalf of the Lost Girls and Boys? Why is the religious dimension of the North-South Sudanese war featured so prominently by non-profit fundraisers? Why are other root causes of the Sudanese conflict such as the impact of Cold War Weapons, arbitrary colonial boundaries, politics of divide and conquer and tensions over oil, water and other resources often obscured?

The sponsors featured in my research are predominantly white, upper middle class, middle-aged, highly educated women. Many are motivated by religious faith and others by a secularly-based commit-

See *Refugees* on page 18



"Nelli," an undocumented Nicaraguan migrant in Costa Rica, pregnant, and her two children. Photo courtesy Kate Goldade

Health Care Experiences of South-South Migrant Women

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Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica tripled over the 1990s to compose up to 10% of the Costa Rican population, in one of many South-South migration flows. Almost half of the world's migrants move between countries of the global economic South (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007).

In Costa Rica, migrant mothers bear unique forms of exclusion due to the intersection of the *jus soli* citizenship model, Costa Rica's universal health care policies for all citizen children and anti-immigrant legislation enacted in 2004 limiting health care access for undocumented migrants.

Like three quarters of the 43 women interviewed by Goldade over a year of ethnographic field research, Nelli reported lack of health care to be the most difficult aspect of life as an undocumented migrant. She explained what happened when she went to the government clinic for an initial prenatal consultation:

They spoke strongly to me and told me that if the test said I was not pregnant, that I would have to pay for it. I decided to wait until they could see my belly before going back. Then they attended me but I only went three times because I was so ashamed. I thought, "It's better I don't go."

Kate Goldade recently received her PhD in cultural and medical anthropology from the University of Arizona. Her research interests include migration, reproduction, health and Central America. She is the author of "Pangs of Guilt: Transnational Ethnography, Motherhood, and Moral Dilemmas in Central America" in Gardner and Hoffman's Dispatches from the Field (2006). ☐

Refugees

continued from page 17

ment to social justice. There are several reasons why this study poses challenges to my training as an anthropologist. First, demographically I have much in common with my non-profit research subjects. Second, I face the tension of being an active participant in the very project that I am observing.

Though I share other anthropologists' reservations about new humanitarian efforts, I am also aware of the constraints under which non-profit organizations operate and their need to launch compelling fundraising campaigns to continue their humanitarian work. This places me in a position of productive ambivalence, as

evident in my analysis of an "adopt a Sudanese refugee" program. Similar to the Save the Children child sponsorship program, here community members are encouraged to pay \$1,250 per year to fund a refugee's school tuition and other expenses and in return receive pictures, progress reports and personal thank you letters from the refugee, allowing them to form a personal connection. Anthropological critiques would likely focus on the disempowering potential of this program. However, it is also important to recognize that it is being implemented in part by a Sudanese refugee leader who appears unconcerned about the risk of identifying Sudanese participants as victims and placing them in an unbalanced power relationship evoking certain benevolent colonialist atti-

tudes. Notably, one could also view this "risk" as an opportunity for empowerment, as refugees subversively employ the techniques of the powerful to access the resources of the powerful. The Sudanese refugee youth with whom I work have resourcefully adapted to a variety of challenging situations, from fleeing villages in Sudan to adjusting to life in Ethiopian and Kenyan refugee camps and resettling in the United States. Learning how to work within—and at times manipulate—the dominant neoliberal system has been key to their survival.

Laura DeLuca teaches anthropology at the University of Colorado at Boulder (CU-Boulder), where she works closely with the Smith Hall International Program. She has worked with Sudanese refugees in Colorado

since 2003 and is currently writing a book on this subject with Leah Bassoff. Her research has received support from the Colorado Humanities, CU-Boulder Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program and School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe. She can be contacted at laura.deluca@yahoo.com. ☐

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