

“ We escaped a jihad war and we are here ... but it is our right to be upset [about Agang’s murder] ”



Out of Africa

The Bulletin, 11/04/2006

A murder, a dead child, fleeing athletes - the trials of African migrants are making all the wrong headlines. The inside story, by Diana Bagnall, of Australia's fastest growing refugee population.

On a muggy morning in March, a small black boy buttoned into a suit swings gently on a woman’s arm on the steps of the Lidcombe Children’s Court in western Sydney. Nearby, two lanky detectives speak in low tones with a woman in a loose embroidered African-style dress and matching headdress.

Inside, a posse of teenage boys – pants worn low, singlets loose and hair shaved close at the sides – slouch on seats along the court’s dirty-yellow walls. One of their number, a tall thin lad, is called into the courtroom by his lawyer and his parents. Those waiting outside follow them in.

The hearing into the murder of Sudanese refugee Ruol Agang is brief; the matter adjourned for six weeks, and then the thin boy gets into his parents’ shiny car and is driven away. A second teenager is taken back into custody. The remaining boys saunter off down the street, trailing conversation smattered with Arabic.

After they’ve gone a tight cluster of Africans emerges from the courthouse, tenderly shepherding a young woman. The little boy clings to her knees now.

Her eyes, dark pools of incomprehension in her pretty expressionless face, struggle to take in her situation. She has buried a husband and the father of her children just three weeks earlier, four months after their arrival in a country which offers protection to the vulnerable and the persecuted. What comfort can she offer her two-year-old son?

Agang’s death from injuries sustained after being assaulted while walking through Auburn has shocked Sudanese refugees across the country. Sudanese community leaders produced generic statements of shock that a man who thought he’d left violence behind him had died in such a way. They left unsaid what they feared most – that the seeds of that violence existed also in a place they had thought was safe.

But a day after attending Agang’s funeral, Simon Pabek (left), 38, a Sudanese leader from Newcastle, tells *The Bulletin*: “We escaped a jihad war, and we are here, which is good, but it’s the same thing as talking about Jewish people [after the Holocaust]. It is our right to be upset about this one.”



Manyang Arob, 47, a relative of Agang, is even more blunt: "It would have been better if the young man had died [fighting] back home ... We thought it wouldn't happen here ... and if we come out and talk about it, they will say you are racist, but the realities are somewhere."

At the best of times, Australians, overwhelmingly of migrant stock, have little patience and time for distant civil wars; even less so since events post-September 11 have scrambled the connections between terrorism, refugees and security risks. Last December's riots at Cronulla blew the multicultural harmony wagon sky high and left it badly mangled from the force of the blast. A growing chorus of voices, above which Treasurer Peter Costello's soared in early March, insists that if migrants can't leave their baggage behind, they shouldn't be here; Australia has its own values, its own realities.

Pabek and Arob agree wholeheartedly with Costello. People have to fit into the Australian system, they say. But, they also say, if a government brings in a particular refugee group, it should look at the history of those people. Australia has little past history with Africa – the continent's diverse politics rarely rate a mention in our news bulletins. What we get is a running reel of famine, drought, mass killings, corrupt dictatorships and so on, which blurs into something called African politics.

When 14 athletes from the Sierra Leone Commonwealth Games team went AWOL and, with the help of refugee advocates, dramatically resurfaced to apply for bridging visas, how many Australians, a) knew where Sierra Leone was, and b) understood why they might have a case for asylum? (Sierra Leone is an important source of refugees under Australia's offshore humanitarian program, but Cameroon, which listed nine athletes missing from its team, is not.)

"In Australia, an African is an African," says Tilahun Woldegabriel, an Ethiopian who settled in Sydney 10 years ago and set up the website africanoz.com.au to support new migrants and to educate Australians. "Africans are people like you, they are looking for opportunities."

The basic facts about Sudan are that the long and bitter war from which people have fled over the past 20 years is between the dominant Muslim, Arab inhabitants of Sudan's northern and central provinces and the non-Arab, largely non-Muslim people of the south. Northerners have consistently discriminated against southerners on grounds of ethnicity and religion, and it's mostly southern Christians like Agang who've done the fleeing to the squalid camps and slums in neighbouring countries from which Australian immigration filters its refugee intake.

About 30,000 black African refugees have settled in Australia since 2000-01. Sudanese account for well over half those, with countries like Liberia, Somalia, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Congo and Eritrea providing smaller numbers.



“Sons bully mothers, while daughters reject traditional limits ... mothers are feeling very bitter about it”

VICTORIA ACHUT (ABOVE) FOUNDER, SUDANESE WOMEN'S WELFARE ASSOCIATION

Australia has never had a stream of refugees quite like this one. In 2004-05, 56% of the African refugee intake was under 20. Violetta Walsh, director of Newcastle's migrant resource centre, estimates that sole supporting mothers with large families (up to nine children) account for half the African community in that town.

Many of the women are highly traumatised. They've lost husbands, they've been brutalised and raped. “We are resettling women who have perhaps not one baby of rape but two or three by different men,” says Linda Bartolmei, who works at the University of NSW's Centre for Refugee Research.

Culture shock has many forms. Auburn-based Victoria Achut (left), who set up the Sudanese Women's Welfare Association, says sole mothers are vulnerable. Their sons challenge their authority, while their daughters reject traditional limits. “They want to go out to the cinema, to dance parties; in our country, girls can't go out with boys until they're married. Some children run to [welfare agencies] and say they are being mistreated. Mothers are feeling very bitter about it.”

Marriages break up at an alarming rate. “Men blame women, they say we've become big-headed, they say we don't respect them, and we say, what kind of respect are you looking for? They say, John Howard is now your husband, because he is the one providing. John Howard now cares for you, you don't take us seriously,” says a young Sudanese woman whose husband left her with three young children a year after their arrival in Australia. She's desperate to sponsor her grandmother and her aunt, both in refugee camps in Uganda, to come to Australia. Life without family is hard, she says. But when she talks about starting studies at TAFE, she smiles like a woman who has won the lottery.

She fled from Juba in southern Sudan when bombing closed her school and went to Kenya to live with her aunt. But her aunt couldn't pay her school fees. “Sometimes I would dream I was in school uniform.” She got married and had a baby, and then, because it offered the best chance of a future, she and her husband went to Kakuma refugee camp. “Kakuma is a place you can't wait to get out of,” she says. When they were interviewed in a group of 10 families by Australian immigration officials only seven families were accepted. It's just luck, she says.

Getting lucky means leaving a violent, lawless camp which houses 70,000 people, and arriving in a country that offers welfare payments, access to healthcare and free schooling for your children. And that, one might imagine, should be enough, shouldn't it? But many African children who arrive have not been in a school for several years and others have never attended. University of Western Sydney researchers Elizabeth Cassity and Greg Gow say teachers are having huge difficulties with African students. Africans are

dissimilar to previous refugee students in terms of consistently very low literacy levels. One teacher tells them: "It's a question of education, not of intelligence, and that's why for some kids it's so very frustrating when they get to high school because teachers know they're smart, the kids know they're smart, but they just can't do it."

Walsh adds: "We are looking at pockets of a lost generation. We have 18- or 19-year-olds being put into Year 10 with an educational base of maybe two years. They're not going to hang around at school. They're six foot eight, and full of herbs."

Young Africans who drop out find it hard to get jobs. People talk of them forming gangs, but Carmel Guerra, head of the Melbourne-based Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, believes that's the wrong word. "Yes, there is an issue of groups of young men feeling disconnected from the community ... [and] they are big, they are dark and they can look scary. They often freak out a lot of people, but in reality they aren't out for that purpose."

Peter Vardos, a high-ranking immigration official, says he's seen no empirical evidence to suggest that African kids are forming gangs or getting up to any criminal activity. "If we fall into the trap of characterising the African caseload as a problem it becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy and they will spin out," he tells *The Bulletin*.

Invisible integration is a nonsense for blacks in a white-dominated society. Nothing they do or are involved with goes unnoticed. Some people talk of a whispering campaign against Africans, but there was nothing subtle about Macquarie University academic Andrew Fraser's warning last July that crime would increase as a result of African migration, or independent NSW parliamentarian David Oldfield's provocative suggestion that Australians should worry about diseased Africans biting or spitting on their children. The media, particularly in smaller centres, makes a meal of African boys and women being picked up multiple times for unlicensed driving.

Yes, it's a problem, says Vardos, but let's keep it in perspective. With *Wheels* magazine estimating that nearly 2 million Australians drive outside the licensing system, "why pick out one or two Africans and say they are indicative of the entire African program?"

The Federation of African Community Councils head, Abeselom Nega, talks glumly of Africans being "hammered". Pabek says even more ominously: "We've been here in numbers for two or three years and these things one day will end up like fire, like what happened in Cronulla."

You can be sure this is the last thing they want to happen. Nega, who came as a refugee from Ethiopia in the late '80s, and Pabek, who arrived at the start of the African wave in 1999, are educated men. Nega is general manager of the employment section of Australian Multicultural Education Services; Pabek has just finished an information technology degree at Newcastle University. What they, and many other Africans, want more than anything is to contribute



to this country, both for their children’s sake and for the sake of those left behind in Africa.

Australia has been resettling refugees for nearly six decades. It has a reputation second to none for its ability to do so. But settlement services have had some high-profile failures lately, notably the death of a Burundi child within days of his arrival late last year. Concern at the size of the African “caseload” is being expressed at political levels and across all sectors, says Paris Aristotle, director of the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture. He reads it as “a reaction to feeling out of your depth”.

“Those kept at an arm’s length get lost ... they live here but have no sense of affinity to the nation”
 JULIANA NKURMAH RIGHTS ADVOCATE

In Newcastle, for example, where the African community has grown from a standing start to about 700 over three years, local infrastructure – schools, housing, health services – weren’t well prepared and are still staggering under the weight of the Africans’ needs, says Walsh. “These aren’t your Joe Bloggs who can just slide into the community.”

Ola Sunmola, 40, (left) a Nigerian, moved to Australia in 1997 with his Broken Hill-born wife.

Sunmola says: “They come from where everything is completely upside-down to a system which is well planned and developed. You can’t expect them to adjust straight away.”



Ghanaian Juliana Nkrumah (below), a long-standing advocate for African women’s rights (“some people call me a mad woman, a bad woman, but in my community they call me *Yaa Asantewaa*: the Iron Woman”), believes “she’ll be right” (the only Australian value she vouches for after nearly 20 years here) shortchanges refugees.

“We support refugee resettlement at an arm’s length,” she says. “What I’ve realised is that people who have other people take an interest in their lives, and work them through the system, have achieved some level of sense of effectiveness and integration. But those who are kept at an arm’s length get lost. They live here, but they have no sense of affinity to the nation.”

In 2004-05, 70% of the 12,000 refugees invited here were from Africa; this financial year it will be reduced to about 60% and the following year, to around half. It’s not that Africa is running out of candidates for resettlement – far from it. Nega says, “I am absolutely sure that there is an element of

reaction in the reduction of African refugees. There's an element of nervousness within DIMA."

But in a world where millions of refugees are "warehoused", countries like Australia must make hard choices. In its recommendations to the federal government in February, the Refugee Council said it believed the African program should be reduced to 60% so other "deserving caseloads" could be given attention. Vardos says the UNHCR has asked Australia to consider increasing its intake from South-East Asia. The camps on the Thai-Burma border are terrible places, too.

Does Australia have an African problem? Certainly the Africans have problems. Some are common to every wave of refugees – kids bucking against cultural traditions, women feeling isolated, men losing their sense of worth when they can't find work, language difficulties, money hassles, perceived prejudice and racism, a sense of profound displacement. It's tough being a newcomer without credentials. But, as Sunmola points out, "the critical issue in any country is not to look at what the opportunities are, but how well you can tap into those opportunities."

Sunmola has a good job with a financial services company in Sydney's CBD. But it didn't happen straight away, though he's well qualified. "People think that when you get to Australia, it is like milk and honey. But you don't pick the milk and honey off the street. There's a system going around ensuring you partake in the milk and honey."

Sunmola was never a refugee. Not every African in Australia is, though every African in Australia has probably been mistaken for one at some point. Ghanaian Rita Gyimah, 20, who has just started university studies in theology and social work at the Australian Catholic University, pays no attention to the stares. "In my country, when Europeans come, we also look at them, and say, 'how come they are so white?' " The stigma of being perceived as a refugee is harder. "People ask, 'did you eat?' ... People are just too interested in the why, why, why. People should learn to know that certain things are private and personal."

Her own story has little in common with the stereotypical narrative of escaping famine, drought and war. She grew up going to a Catholic school in Accra, and was a promising athlete. She's literate in English and French and two Ghanaian languages. But things happened to her, ugly things, and she ended up here alone, in detention, and fears going back to a country she loves. "My nana told me that home is where you make it," she says, sitting in the modest third-floor apartment she has just moved into and shares with another Ghanaian girl.

The capacity for hope in the face of catastrophe seems a characteristically African gift. Matthew Albert, a young Victorian lawyer who runs Sudanese African Institute of Literacy programs, a volunteer service across Melbourne teaching English and life skills to Sudanese families, says Africans don't



present as traumatised. “They are so optimistic, resilient, committed to making life better here.”

Guerra says the young Africans are probably the most organised group of young people she’s ever worked with. Take Nelson Akech Manyiel, 26, (pictured left) who arrived in Melbourne two years ago. He’s got a job, a place to live and owns a car – when I ask what sort, he laughs and says, “You don’t want to know”. His last car was better, but got wrecked on country roads when he went fruit-picking. He’s got a nice sense of humour, too. It’s essential to his survival kit. He spent two months looking for his current job as a baggage-handler at the airport, which he was told would last four weeks. But it’s getting easier, he says.

He’d like to get married, but he can’t afford the dowry – about \$20,000, depending on what girl you marry (young men find wives in the camps, and their families expect a dowry). He’s paying off a \$10,000 loan which paid the fares for his brother’s wife and four children. As his friend Michael Chuti Apout, 25, says: “A lot of people who you left behind are relying on your help. There’s no question of whether you need to help them.” Apout, who sends half his income back to Kakuma, also has no problem with the idea of a dowry, though it’s keeping him single, too. “You have to respect your culture. If you step outside it you become an outcast.”

Manyiel didn’t have much of a childhood. He left southern Sudan 20 years ago after his father was arrested and died in prison. He has been in refugee camps most of his life, in Ethiopia and Kenya. He was a good basketball player, and a Nairobi school offered him a scholarship. But he returned to the camp each “holidays”. In Kenya he wasn’t recognised as anything but a refugee. “I had to live basically on handouts and it was getting harder every day.”

Finally, an aunt sponsored him to come to Australia. He tried to start engineering studies at university but couldn’t afford to continue. He doesn’t want pity. Nor does Apout, who was sent as a child from his village in Sudan to a military training camp in Ethiopia, and finally came alone to Australia at 15. “Australia is made up of refugees and those people call themselves Australian. I see myself as an Australian.” Manyiel likes the term African Australian. “That’s what I am feeling, but I don’t see there is a space for me where there is such an identity,” he says.

Last November, Munther Emad, an ethnic community liaison officer for the NSW police in Merrylands, in Sydney’s west, invited about 40 young Sudanese to the Merrylands police station for a barbecue. He was aware of the growing rumble about young Africans, but not aware of anyone having done much to make them feel a part of the wider community.

The Sudanese, he says, have “absolutely no awareness” of what powers the police and courts have in Australia. He believes it’s the host country which has an obligation to inform those it’s invited to stay about such things. Otherwise things start to go wrong. “From what I’ve seen, some of them lose

the thread of why they came here in the first place,” he says. “They just mingle in the wrong way ... It’s very easy for them to adapt to a culture that is not constructive for them.”

At the barbecue, Emad, picking up on their attitude, spoke to them as a Palestinian. “I said to them, ‘pointing your finger at a police officer inside a station is unheard of in your country. You disappear for such a thing. It is such a privilege to be inside a police station and do things so freely, without fear of persecution’. This is what we start talking about, and they start to recognise that they are dealing with Australian police and not Sudanese police.”

Born in Gaza, Emad knows a thing or two about conditions that nurture or suppress conflict. He likes the way Africans are upfront about their problems. “They don’t put up with something, they aren’t willing to keep silent, and this could be a positive thing. With other communities, the reason we have so many problems is that the nature of the culture was covering up, pushing under the carpet until it reached the stage where nobody could hide it anymore.”

The Agang murder has proven an unsought but defining moment in the very short history of Sudanese – and by extension, all Africans – in Australia. Leaders like Angelo Cawuop immediately understood how important it was that Africans be seen to be good citizens. “We had a lot of anger to manage but our people really responded to what the leaders and elders told them... We told them to stay calm,” says Cawuop.

“People should judge Sudanese from that, from how we handled it. If we’d wanted to make pressure on the media, Arabs versus Christians, if we wanted like that, we would have done it. But we didn’t want to escalate any problem, we want to help the authorities. We didn’t want to take the laws into our hands like other people do.”

But Eileen Pittaway, director of the Centre for Refugee Research at UNSW, wonders if, despite Australia’s reputation, it has really got the hang of this settlement business. “We reap what we sow,” she says. “I am nearly 60 and you feel like you are saying, I told you so ... we will not name the ethnicity of some gangs because it is racist ... but by not naming, we are not [asking] ‘who are these people?’ When they came here, what were the circumstances of their arrival and what did we do or not do when they arrived? Lebanese youth came from [refugee] camps, too. We have to look at where they came from, and what they did as a family before.”

Pittaway is always terrified of having to say exactly what support African refugees need, she told an audience at the Sydney Institute last year, because some people say: “Oh, don’t bring them in, then, if they need that much help. We can’t afford to look after these people for the rest of their lives.’

“But I’ve been in this game for 30 years, and I know we won’t have to – if we get it right.”

