

# Education Is My Mother and My Father

## How the Lost Boys of Sudan escaped the destruction of their ancient culture and landed in the 21st century

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In early August of 2001, 80 young men walked into the milking shed at the University of New Hampshire's Dairy Management Program and were utterly perplexed. Most were tall, many well over six feet. Their skin was jet black—almost blue in the summer sun. All were slender, and many seemed unnaturally gaunt, as if they had been semistarved for a long time. But their faces glowed with a mixture of happiness, expectation, and, most of all, curiosity. Each of these young men was an expert on cattle, although it had been many years since any of them had so much as touched a bull, a cow, or a calf.

The men had come to New Hampshire as guests of the university's highly regarded animal science faculty. Pete Erickson, one of the professors and a dairy nutrition specialist, had heard that in nearby Boston an unusual group of African refugees was in the process of being resettled. Newspapers and television programs were calling them the "Lost Boys of Sudan." They were youngsters who had been orphaned in childhood by the Sudanese civil war and who had trekked by themselves across East Africa. They had fled from their homes as children, some as young as four or five, others nine or ten. As many as 20,000—nobody really knew the numbers—started out. At first they found refuge in Ethiopia; then when revolution came to Addis Ababa, they were driven from their camps with great loss of life before eventually finding their way to the United Nations safe haven in Kenya's Kakuma refugee camp. Six thousand or so had been living there since 1992; some were girls, but most were boys (hence "The Lost Boys"). Approximately 3,500 were later admitted to the United States. Most were Dinkas, from South Sudan's largest tribe, but there were also Acholi, Shilluk, Nuer, and others. About 170 of them were bound for Boston; the 80 young men at the university milking shed were the first arrivals. As East African cattle herders whose childhoods had been spent learning about and caring for cattle, they had come to be introduced to the university's dairy herd. Erickson had invited them. He and his colleagues were knowledgeable about the African cattle cultures and were as eager to meet the Sudanese as the Sudanese were to see the cows.

The young men stepped through the anti-hoof-and-mouth disinfectant foot tray, entered the shed, and stopped cold. Well-fed, contented cows stared at them with liquid bovine eyes, Hoisteins and Brown Swiss rather than the native Sudanese Ankole, but intimately familiar anyway. The Sudanese stared back at the cows, instinctively drawn to these creatures who in the boys' still vivid childhood memories had been the objects of their care, the subjects of their songs, their dances, their hopes and aspirations. But as they registered what was actually happening in the milking parlor, attraction turned to confusion. All around the

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cows was a maze of stainless steel pipes, electronic control panels, and flexible black tubing clamped in some incomprehensible fashion to the teats of each cow's swollen udder.

Until coming to the United States, the young Sudanese men had never ridden in a car, switched on an electric light, watched a television, or used a flush toilet. As children they had lived in conical grass houses and followed their cattle. As refugees they had slept in mud huts, subsisting on a daily bowl of corn porridge. And now here they were, in Durham, New Hampshire, trying to comprehend a computerized milking operation with pulsating vacuums, sterile tanks, and high-tech cooling systems. For one long bewildering moment in that milking shed, the ancient and the modern stood face to face.

Today, more than four years later, some of those same Sudanese are students at the University of New Hampshire, not in dairy management but in mathematics, economics, and business administration. Other Boston-area Sudanese are enrolled at the University of Massachusetts, Brandeis, Dartmouth, Boston College, Boston University, and other schools. Around the country, in Phoenix, Grand Rapids, Burlington, and the other Lost Boy resettlement communities, former tribal herd boys are completing GED5, finishing up associate degrees at two-year colleges, progressing toward bachelor degrees at four-year schools, and contemplating their prospects for graduate studies. This is the story of how a historically unique group of young Africans, their minds formed and conditioned by the age-old patterns of life on the Upper Nile savanna, are transforming themselves and being transformed in 21st-century America.

Understanding the immensity of this transformation requires an act of imagination—an effort to slide inside the minds of the children the Lost Boys used to be and to see the world as they saw it before the eruption of violence that sent them into panicked flight across the East African desert. “At the age of five or six,” said Mangok Mach, a senior business administration major at New Hampshire, “you are taken to the cattle camp to learn how to care for cattle, calves at first. What you know is that cattle are what provide everything for you. They are the one source of life.” Mangok and his Dinka contemporaries learned to graze the calves away from the cows so that the calves wouldn't suckle and consume all the milk, leaving none for the people. Looking after their herds, the children carried small spears, clubs, and bows and arrows. Lions and hyenas abounded near the camps, and practicing weapons skills was an essential part of growing up Dinka.

During the five or six hours a day that the boys were out, their thoughts were mainly about the calves, but they played too—wrestling (the traditional Dinka sport) and composing and singing songs praising themselves, their fathers, their clans, songs about cattle and manly courage, about warrior prowess and the dignity of the people. Looking into their future they saw themselves as young initiated warriors. Further along they would marry; only through marriage would a boy come into full manhood. They expected to become fathers, with their own herds, then elders, basking in the respect of their community. That was how it had been for their fathers and their fathers' fathers, as far back as



*Crossing the Sudan border into Kenya to reach the Kakuma refugee camp*

the clan had memory and that was how it would be for them. Life in Dinkaland was an endlessly repeated cycle, with variations, of course—one might be a better singer, one a more skilled herdsman, one a stronger fighter—but life's essential outline was always and forever one and the same.

For the Dinka children, space, like time, was bounded. Their community's land, its spread-out villages and dry-season pasturelands, had been given to the people by the ancestors. And one had no thoughts of ever leaving. Travel and exploration might have long pedigrees in other cultures, but not among the Dinka. "There's a Dinka word: *kok*," explained David Gai, a University of Massachusetts senior. "It's used about someone who has left the area. It's very negative. Someone might leave who has done something wrong in the community, something shameful, and feels he doesn't belong anymore. Instead of committing suicide, he'd rather go away. People do not leave out of curiosity. They enjoy living among themselves and are not interested in elsewhere."

The universe for the Dinka children and their Nilotic cousins was a closed entity with clear boundaries defining their land, the course of their lives, and the people among whom they would live. They were closest to their parents and age mates, but the entire community was small. Everyone knew everyone and everyone's lineages as well as their own, sometimes down to the 21st generation. They understood there was a world beyond, but exactly who might be living there was a mystery. Maduk Chol, a student at Bunker Hill Community College, remembers asking his father: "Where the sun goes down, do we have people there? Or where the sun comes up? My father said 'Yes,' but I thought maybe they would be people like our clan. 'You can get people over there,' my father said. 'But it takes a long time.'"

Into this closed universe in the dry season of 1987 a lightning bolt of destruction suddenly crashed, as if thrown from the hand of some malevolent god. It shattered villages, clans, and tribes, and it destroyed, among so much else, the comfortable mental world of thousands of children who fled in its wake.

Sudan's civil war between the Arab North and the rebelling black South, in which perhaps two million mostly southerners have died, started in 1963 and has flared and subsided intermittently ever since. (At this writing the Bush administration's pressure to reach a peace agreement seems to be bearing fruit.) In 1987 it flared. Northern army and Arab militia forces struck through wide swaths of South Sudan, leaving a devastated and depopulated countryside behind them. With many adults dead or abducted and villages in flames, children and young people abandoned the cattle camps and fled in whichever direction seemed most likely to afford safety. A huge column of youngsters, including Mangok Mach, David Gai, Maduk Chol, and their friends, headed east toward the Ethiopian border.

For some the trek lasted a matter of weeks; for others it took up to three months. With no shoes, no food or water other than what they could find along the way, and no protection, death came in many forms: militia attacks, animal predation, infection, starvation, thirst. "The U.N. did not reach us in time," recalled Jacob Mabil, another New Hampshire student. "We spent days without food, feeding on trees, sick and starved. If you got sick, there was no one to help you." But across the Ethiopian border the United Nations was waiting, together with other aid organizations and a number of Sudanese who had arrived earlier. There the children were divided into *kois*, groups of a hundred, and they set about cutting wood and grasses to make shelters. Most had no idea what had happened. They were children, suddenly separated from parents and communities, who had suffered unexpected brutality and hardship and who now found themselves in an

alien place with many thousands of other equally confused and traumatized children, many of whom (amazingly to them) could not even understand each other's speech.

With a cruel abruptness, their lives were changed. For most, thinking mainly about how to get food and shelter and wondering when they could start going back, it took time for the truth to hit home. But some, such as David Gai, recognized it immediately: "I ran with others. And the next morning when the sun rose we found ourselves in an open area, just flat, not a single tree. I couldn't even see the end. It came to my mind that something dangerous was happening, that my life was going to be changed completely."

In Ethiopia the children set about building huts to live in. Some were also detailed by U.N. workers to construct makeshift classrooms. Although none of the young refugees could have articulated it, the boundaries of their traditional life and its mindset had already burst. The war had thrust them out of what they had always considered their only possible home. It had thrown them together with vast numbers of strangers, clan with clan, tribe with tribe. Now another mental barrier was about to be breached. With the construction of classrooms and a small number of teachers on hand, school was getting ready to start.

Before the deluge, few Dinka children thought much about schooling, and if they did, it was usually with a sense of the shame and stigma of it. Western education was not

unknown in South Sudan. English missionaries had established boarding schools earlier in the century, but only Christianized families and townsfolk had sent their children, along with a few cadets from the families of paramount chiefs who understood the advantage of having some Western knowledge at their disposal. A family with too few cows to enable all its sons to marry would also consider sending one or more of its children away. For the rest, school was a place to deposit children too lazy, recalcitrant, or incompetent to be trusted with the family cattle. Sending a child to school meant branding him with the shame of his father's disrespect or his poverty.

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But now the adult caretakers overseeing the children were telling them to go to school—only a selected few at first because of the lack of classrooms and teachers, but later more and more. Jacob Mabil was among the first. "I wasn't thinking about going to school," he said. "I was thinking that if I had a chance I would go back and die with my father. But our caretaker told me to go to class. And when I got there the teachers brought cookies. We ate them and we said, Oh, this is good. I have to come every day. They did that for a week. We learned the ABCs, and I thought that was good. So that's how I started school."

While the first students were in class, the others were doing hard work: cutting wood, building houses, preparing food. Jealousy reared its head. Then there was the curiosity factor. The schoolboys would come home, and everyone would want to know what they had learned. "We learned this," they'd say, and trace an A in the dirt with a stick. Before long everyone else was trying to trace the same A.

Education soon began to seem like a mission. At home, work meant herding. Here, with no cows, there was still at least one thing that had obvious meaning: schoolwork. At home there were older brothers and fathers to look to. "Here," Maduk Chol said, "we had no models except our teachers. Or we might see a doctor. A plane lands at the airstrip and the pilot comes out. He's a human being, and we thought, Why not us?" "I became a thinker when I left home," Mangok Mach remembered. "Things were so strange, and I had to find my own way. Most of us had never thought about the future because we never knew about it. But now

you had to think about how you would live. We could see that the lives of people who went to school were changed. We got the idea that when you were educated you could help yourself and your community. You could be a different person.”

In 1991 the Sudanese children’s encampment in Ethiopia was destroyed. A revolution had taken place in Addis Ababa, and the regime that had been friendly toward the Sudanese rebels and had permitted the resettlement was overthrown by one that wanted to mend fences with Sudan’s Arab government. In the violence that accompanied the end of the old regime, forces were dispatched to get rid of the Lost Boys who constituted a potential recruiting ground for the rebels.

For most of the boys, the first hint of trouble was the rattle of small arms and the thud of high explosives. Four years earlier they had suddenly found themselves on the run. Now they were running for their lives again, this time back toward Sudan. At the swollen, crocodile-infested Gilo River the thousands of fleeing youngsters stopped; but as their pursuers closed in, the boys flung themselves into the water. Many perished. From the far bank, those who survived watched their friends die in the river.

After more than a year on the run, the remnants of the Lost Boys crossed into Kenya and were admitted to a United Nations safe haven for refugees at Kakuma. There school started up again, this time sponsored by the Kenyan Department of Education. As the boys progressed from grade to grade, the transformation that had begun in Ethiopia accelerated. It was as if the initial shock of leaving home had, in Mangok’s words, “opened up our minds.” In Kenya the new mental landscape began to take a clearer shape. In Ethiopia they had been traumatized children who wanted more than anything to go home. Few now had any illusions about going back; South Sudan was a charnel house. They began to see schooling as their one lifeline to the future.

Kakuma camp is a sprawling refugee metropolis of 80,000 people, complete with a United Nations refugee agency infrastructure, a hospital, schools, clinics, food distribution center, and other support mechanisms. Next to Kakuma camp is the town of Kakuma, a fly-bitten backwater by any standards except those of the boys. For them, it seemed a showcase of wonders: cars, trucks, houses, running water, flooring. They visited their teachers’ homes got a quick look at some of the trappings of contemporary life. At the same time they saw in the desperately poor local tribes something very similar to their own past.

“Kakuma was the turning point,” Mangok said. “When we came to Kenya, we saw the huge difference between the educated and the noneducated. We saw the hierarchy. Those people who had degrees were the uppermost, and those with high school diplomas were in second place. And we saw the Turkana, the local people, who had their cattle and nothing else. We saw the huge gap, and we understood the real meaning of education in terms of living.”

From within the Lost Boy community a saying had spontaneously generated itself: *Pioc yen e kee ama ku awa* (Education is my mother and my father). It was an altogether remarkable paradigm transfer. In their traditional childhood, everything had depended on parents: their mothers to give them love, sustenance, and early training; their fathers to give them



skills, wisdom, and the cattle they would need to make their own lives as adults, conduits of the ancestral bloodlines that connected them to their historical communities of clan and sub-tribe. In all these ways, as orphans their identities had been stripped from them. And there in Kakuma, after all the running and dying and exposure to people and things they had never imagined, they grasped that there was one way to reconstruct themselves, through education.

In 1998, after the Lost Boys had spent six years in Kakuma, the U.S. State Department identified them as a group deserving resettlement in America. Two years later, the processing was done, and they began to arrive. A few, like Mangok Mach and David Gai, had finished high school and become teachers themselves—the only real professional opportunity available in Kakuma. Others were as much as three or four years away from their diplomas.

Landing in places like Boston, Philadelphia, and Kansas City, they felt as if the earth had moved. “The flight itself,” one boy wrote to a friend, “was a mystery to us who were not familiar with its fluctuating situation and giddy behaviors. Even here in Philadelphia now everything is strange. Very strange!” At every turn, like the young men standing in the milking shed in Durham, they were confronted with the unimaginable. They responded at first with wonder and, sometimes, desperation.

Educational assessments performed shortly after their arrival tended to be woeful. High school graduates often tested at the fifth- or sixth-grade level, and those who had been in ninth or tenth grades might test at second or third. Part of the reason was the depth of their disorientation, another the inadequacy of refugee camp schools. “It was confusing,” David Gai said. “The school I had gone to was so remote, I didn’t know if I would be competent.”

But as they started figuring out their new surroundings, their drive for education reasserted itself. In the United States, unlike Kakuma, they saw a galaxy of possibilities. They could, it became evident, make at least a minimal living even without more schooling. For some that seemed enough. For others, even as they worked second- and third-shift entry-level jobs, their eyes were fixed on how Americans lived and what they did to get there. “A higher education,” thought Jacob Mabil, “a Ph.D. I could do that!”

But even as this determination worked in them, what they discovered when they picked up their studies was often daunting. English fluency was the first problem. English was the language of the camp schools, and many were versed in the traditional Bible English. But outside of school they had spoken only Dinka or other tribal languages. To Americans their language often seemed oddly elegant yet fractured and barely comprehensible. “It is a fundamental fact and majestic,” one newly arrived Lost Boy wrote to friends about his well-being, “to hold up my pen beyond my reasoning capacity to call all my compliments hoping that you are under normal residential area because the pen holder is also kicking well under an umbrella of Almighty God.”

More problematic for those interested in college was their utter lack of awareness about world civilization outside of East Africa. Plato, Aristotle, Alexander the Great, Galileo, Michelangelo, Marx, and Freud were not recognized names. In an effort to address the knowledge gap, one volunteer professor set up a pre-college seminar for those who were beginning to take courses in community colleges and were looking forward to studying fulltime. “It turned out to be the most interesting teaching experience in my life,” he said. “You talk about the most significant watersheds in human history—pastoralism to settled life, oral culture to literacy, animism or pantheism to monotheism. They had never thought about these things critically, or even

at all. But they had a remarkable receptivity. They came out of traditional Dinka life, pre-literate, pastoral, animist. They became literate, settled; they were baptized into Christianity.”

But the biggest hurdle was accommodating themselves to the American way of learning. Educators in Africa generally tend to emphasize memorization rather than critical thinking. People coming from oral cultures typically have quicker, more expansive memories than do those from literate cultures, where books serve as easily accessible, artificial memories. Consequently, in traditional societies rote learning is often the most logical and appropriate route to knowledge. According to Joseph Lugalla, a Tanzanian anthropology professor at the University of New Hampshire, “All over Africa, schools have few resources. Education is underfunded, and so important facilities like books and visual aids are just not available.” Of course that is especially true in the camps. Jacob Mabil remembers it well. “When we went to school there,” he explained, “10 people might share one book. If you share that book, you might have it for only one day, so you have to memorize everything. You won’t see that book again until you have to read the next chapter.”

According to Lugalla, the lack of teaching aids in African classrooms—books especially, but also computers, VCRs, films, TV5, transparencies, photographs—means that there is no shorthand way to convey information. Teachers must spend most of their time talking just to get across facts. In that environment there isn’t much room for the synthesizing and interpreting that characterizes American education. The premium is on acquiring information, not using it. As a result, African students who come to the United States often have little experience with the kind of critical thinking American professors expect.

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“It goes beyond that,” Lugalla said. “With no lab equipment, no materials to work with, no chemicals for chemistry no specimens or microscopes for biology, students end up acquiring theoretical, abstract knowledge, but they have no way of subjecting theoretical knowledge to practical experience, no way of testing theories.”

“When we learned things in the camp,” said University of Massachusetts senior David Gai, “often they were about things we had no experience of, that we could not even picture. Carpets, for example. We were told about them and how to clean them. But we had no idea what they were. So we just memorized. The mind got used to picturing things we didn’t know. We learned about carpets, wooden floors, electricity. It was as if the teachers were talking about angels in heaven.”

The Lost Boy students who succeed in college, and most do, are those who manage to reorient their learning psychology> shifting from memorization to critical thinking. “Teaching them to think [along Western lines] has to be done incrementally,” explained Vivian Zamel, an English professor at the University of Massachusetts who has designed curricula for immigrant students and teaches the Sudanese. Zamel’s programs emphasize reading biographies and autobiographies, which stimulate students to write and think about their own lives and to reflect on others’ experiences in relation to their own. The emphasis is not on what students learn but rather on what they think about what they learn. “It’s not just saying what the author is saying,” Zamel explained, “but why do you think he is saying it, and how does that compare to author X. We

get them into questioning instead of regurgitation. You do that slowly and repeatedly, building it up. And they get used to it. It becomes a habit of mind.”

Zamel’s focus on what might be called metacognition has helped the Sudanese in her programs turn themselves from memorizers into critical thinkers. But even those who don’t have the advantage of Zamel’s tutelage are usually able to make the transition. Paradoxically perhaps, their former traditional lives, still so present in their memories, give them a springboard. They live, after all, in two worlds. Intellectually and emotionally they are connected not just with their childhoods, as we all are, but with childhoods lived in a time millennia older than our own, kept vivid, even photographic, by the intensifying power of trauma. And because they live these simultaneous lives, the business of analysis and comparison, of synthesis and interpretation, is for them daily fare.

In terms of academic learning, their history gives the Lost Boys a uniquely powerful perspective, at least in many of the humanities and social sciences. Students of history for example, need to make an imaginative leap; they have to immerse themselves in the data of lives lived in different times and places in order to understand a period in its own terms rather than through contemporary eyes. Studying literature demands a similar imaginative projection. But for the Lost Boys, living in one world and understanding another in its own terms is second nature. It is who they are.

To the extent that their courses deal with pre-modern-era subjects or with the transition from pre-modern to modern, they have an additional advantage. A popular textbook in comparative politics, for example, begins with an exposition on the Enlightenment origins of the social sciences. A Lost Boy taking this course has no trouble grasping pre-Enlightenment modes of thinking. In significant ways his traditional life was similarly bounded. Another Lost Boy studying macroeconomics easily follows the history and meaning of money and modern monetary instruments; he knows what the world was like before money was invented. Talk about the closed world giving way to a new universe in the Renaissance—they have been there. The meaning of religion—they have thought deeply about it. The Exodus—they have made one. The Holocaust—they have survived their own.

The professors interviewed for this article all point to another characteristic that is helping the Lost Boys navigate the academic jungle: their sheer obsessive determination. “For these youngsters,” one University of New Hampshire professor said, “being in college is a 24-hour-a-day job. It’s 2:00 in the morning, and they’re still at it. Usually college kids take breaks; it’s party time, it’s social time. These guys don’t.”

“They are such committed students,” Vivian Zamel said. “They don’t rest easy. Most American students, if they don’t get Descartes or something else, think, okay, I’ll take care of it tomorrow. They can just go on to the next thing. The Sudanese are very disturbed by not knowing. Knowing how much they don’t know disturbs them.” What also strikes Zamel, Lugalla, and others is how compelling new knowledge is to the Lost Boys. Behind this phenomenon, so remarkable to almost all their teachers, is a psychological reality born of their history.

For the Lost Boys, learning has become over the years a survival mechanism, not only an internalized value but a driving force. They, who were born into the most insular and static of cultures, have evolved into a community of sojourners, and as such they have acquired the sojourner’s two most essential pieces of baggage. They understand, first, that knowledge is a portable commodity, to be gathered like gold at each stop along the way for use at the next. They have learned too that intelligence itself is the most dynamic

of human characteristics. “The mind,” an eminent educator once quipped, “is like a parachute. When you need it, it has to open.” For the Lost Boys of Sudan, that piece of wisdom began to reveal itself 18 years ago when the bombs first started falling. For those who have watched their progress here, they are the most vivid of witnesses to the inner workings of man’s adaptive nature.

Almost universally, their professors mention one more thing about the Lost Boys: they have a profound effect on their college communities and fellow students. “You feel a special bond to these students,” Zamel said. “What has happened to them seeps into the things they do.” Given what they have experienced, the death of families and friends, the long years of violence and deprivation, they might have been expected to have become aggressive and hard-shelled, violent in their own lives. Yet the opposite seems to be true. “They are open, positive, optimistic,” as one of their teachers put it. “Given that they grew up without any real adult guidance, it reaffirms something about what you hope human beings really are. It’s like *Lord of the Flies* in reverse.”

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