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# **Southern Sudanese Women in the Diaspora**

Stanislava Benesova

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\* A special thanks to all the Sudanese in Jacksonville who participated in my study, especially Agii. I greatly appreciate their generosity and cooperation. I am also very grateful for the opportunity to learn under the guidance and expertise of Dr. De Jorio.

## **Introduction**

This paper focuses on the ways in which southern Sudanese women in the African Diaspora are undergoing certain transformations of their gender roles as mothers, daughters, and wives. People's identities in the diaspora can be regarded as a constant process of negotiation between the traditions of their homeland and the traditions of the host society. This paper investigates the relationship between ideologies of male domination and Sudanese women's actual status in the family and society. Indeed, immigrants' identity is affected by the host society's gender roles. This paper also provides an analysis of the role and importance of Christianity in the lives of southern Sudanese women. Indeed, it will be argued that religion is the main avenue for women's integration into US society and thus comes to constitute an important dimension of their understanding and experience of citizenship as a sense of belonging. This is particularly relevant to the context of my fieldwork, for religion plays a central role in the lives of Americans in the South. The paper is based upon eight

months of an anthropological fieldwork focused on southern Sudanese living in northeast Florida. During this period I met with several men and women from the Sudanese community in Northeast Florida, but conducted in-depth interviews with one Sudanese woman about the myriad aspects of her life associated with resettlement, social and gender role changes, and Christian religious identity. Pseudonyms are used to protect individuals' anonymity.

## **Historical Background**

Sudan is the largest country in Africa. In 2002, an estimated 37 million Sudanese lived in a total area of 967 thousand square miles, an area slightly larger than one-quarter the size of the United States. The country's geographical location and historical heritage consolidate its place in history as a meeting point of Arab and sub-Saharan worlds (Ramsay, 99). Besides being the largest country in Africa, Sudan is also the most diverse nation on the continent. Mostly Arabs occupy the northern part of Sudan and Africans from many ethnically diverse tribes live throughout the southern part of the country. Approximately two-thirds of the Sudanese are Muslims who are concentrated in the northern regions of the country. Roughly five percent of the population is Christian, while the remaining twenty five percent practice indigenous religions. (Voll,16).

The current borders of Sudan were outlined by the British administration in 1898 when the British and Egyptian governments signed a Condominium Agreement that provided for their joint sovereignty in Sudan. Egypt had been present in Sudan since 1820 when it conquered much of the

northern Sudan, then ruled Sudan until 1880. Eighteen years later the Egyptians were joined by the British and came to power again. In legal theory, the British and the Egyptians were jointly supposed to rule Sudan, but in terms of actual power and control, the British were in charge. This joint system of control is frequently regarded as the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium. The British administration strictly enforced a north-south division during their colonial power. Moreover, the British governed the two regions separately because they feared the threatening spread of northern cultural practices (such as female circumcision), and the Arabic language. The British administration was also afraid of the spread of Islam from the north to the south. Indeed, they implemented a policy of a so-called Closed Doors Ordinance. As a result, interaction between the northern and southern regions of Sudan was systematically discouraged. The highest ranks of the British colonial administration stationed in Khartoum had little interest in the southern region. Their main concern was to maintain stability at minimal cost as well as sufficient control to prevent any other country from gaining a foothold in the region. Consequently the area became administratively isolated, giving the local British colonial administrators and their appointed tribal chiefs a high degree of autonomy (Voll, 49). The tribes inhabiting southern regions were regarded by the British as pagan. Thus the south became the target of Christian missionaries who found in the British apparatus a safe harbor for their activities during the nineteenth century. Moreover, the south was divided into three regions, each assigned to a different missionary society. Missionary

work was supposed to be medical and educational. The missionaries were encouraged by the British to found their own missionary schools in order to increase the numbers of their adherents. Even though proselytizing was not supposed to be the major goal of the missionaries, many people converted to Christianity. The largest Christian group among the southern Sudanese is Roman Catholic, and there are also Protestant groups (such as Presbyterian and Episcopal) and a few smaller communities of Middle Eastern Christian traditions such as the Copts (Warburg, 58). Indeed, the British colonial policies of separation planted the seeds of disunity in a country with such remarkable ethnic diversity setting Northerners against Southerners and Arabs against Africans. Sudan was granted independence as a unified nation in 1956. Egypt and Great Britain immediately recognized the newly formed state. Sudan became a member of the Arab League and the United Nations the same year (Abusharaf, 50).

Political turmoil has been a permanent aspect of Sudanese life since the country gained independence from British administration. Indeed, colonially created ethnic, religious, and regional divisions undermined the unity of the Sudanese state from its early beginning. Even though the country began its post independence era as a parliamentary democracy, a military coup in 1958 resulted in a military dictatorship that remained in power until a civilian overthrow in 1964. Then in 1969, the government of Jaafar Nimeiri seized power through another military coup. One of the major achievements of his government in the early years was bringing an end to an ongoing civil war between the north and the south. The

peace agreement was signed in 1972 in Addis Ababa between Nimeiri's government and rebel leaders from southern Sudan. As a result of the agreement the south was supposed to have its own Regional People's Assembly and a High Executive Council that would serve as a regional cabinet. The regional government had authority in many areas, and the special autonomy of the south was recognized by the north. The Addis Ababa agreement remained in place for over a decade, and provided a clear end to the civil war that had been off and on since the country gained independence in 1956. Additionally, the agreement granted recognition to the pluralistic nature of Sudanese society.

In 1983, the Nimeiri government announced a policy change. Some laws were changed, such as a law to ban alcoholic beverages. More importantly, though, the imposition of Quranic punishments for a number of crimes was implemented. These changes to the law also included the imposition of Islamic Sharia law, which affected the whole of Sudan, but especially had a tremendous impact on the Christian south. The new policy represented a sharp move away from the previously established policies regarding religious matters especially in the southern part of Sudan, which is primarily Christian. Consequently, the radical implementation of Islamic Sharia law empowered the northern section of the Sudanese population to the disadvantage of the mostly Christian southerners. Thus only people who obeyed by the standards of the Sharia law were given a chance in state political matters. This exclusion of the vast majority of the people of southern regions from the state power led to a state of tension. A clash between the main rebel army formed in southern

Sudan, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), and Nimeiri's government forces marked the beginning of yet another civil war, which is still going on today. Since the outbreak of the current civil war, many southern Sudanese had fled the country into neighboring countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda. Some of the southerners also sought refuge in Chad and Egypt.

According to a 1998 study by the U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR), it is estimated that over 1.9 million people in southern and central Sudan had died of war-related causes since 1983. Another USCR report stressed that Sudanese have suffered more war-related deaths during the past 16 years than any other single population of the world. Statistics published in the *United States Committee for Refugees News* (1999) showed that Sudan led the world in internally displaced persons with four million southerners living in the north. The division between south and north is serious and real, grounded in historical, social, political, economic, and religious differences. Politically and economically the north dominates the national scene, and has used this power to promote an Islamic agenda throughout the country, including the south, which primarily practices Christianity and indigenous religions. The discovery of oil reserves in western areas of southern Sudan has added a very real economic basis to the conflict between the north and south (Hutchinson, 16).

### **Ethnic diversity and Arab hegemony in Sudan**

This section intends to outline Sudan's ethnic diversity, but also the stringent criteria by which people can be

recognized as Arab and thus become the primary beneficiary of state policies. Indeed, the Arab population occupies almost all of the key political and administrative positions within the Sudanese government. It should be clear that the ability to speak Arabic is not sufficient for a person to claim Arab identity. Arabic, Sudan's official language, is spoken by about forty percent of the total population. However, not all the forty percent of the population can claim an Arab identity. Indeed, a person must descend from an Arab or Nubian tribe to be recognized as such.

As opposed to the dominant and more homogenous north, the Sudanese south is more ethnically diversified. Ethnographers distinguish three main groups: the Nilotics, including Dinka, Nuer, Shiluk, and Anuak; the Nilo-Hamitics, including the Murle, Didinga, Boya, Toposa, and Latuka; and the Sudanic people, including the Azande among other smaller groups. Additionally, Dinka represent more than ten percent of the total Sudanese population and are the largest ethnic group in southern Sudan (Voll, 10).

Even though the civil war had been prompted by political objectives, ethnicity was a major component of the anti-government uprisings (Abusharaf, 51). However, the common Christian identity as well as a common enemy, the dominant Islamic north, has created some opportunities for interethnic alliance in the south (for further information on this topic see work by Hutchinson).

Agii is a southern Sudanese woman affiliated with Anuak tribe, and she speaks Arabic in addition to her native Anuak language. In 1984, under the Islamic Nemeiri administration, she

worked in Khartoum as an office manager in the Southern Coronation Office, later to be named the Office for Southern Affairs. Due to the forced implementation of Sharia law in the daily lives of all Sudanese, she was asked to cover her head while at work. Because she refused to fulfill this requirement and instead followed her Christian traditions, she was told by a supervisor not to come to work anymore. Thus, Islamic intolerance towards her Christian non-Arabic identity cost her job. Consequently, the family was in a danger of persecution on the basis of their religious affiliation.

## **Women in Sudan**

Even though sharp cultural divisions between the northern and southern part of Sudan exist, certain customs such as marriage are surprisingly similar. Marriage in both the Muslim north and the non-Muslim south is an arrangement between families rather than the partners to be, and its main purpose is procreation. The bridewealth system is practiced in both communities, and it is a prerequisite for the marriage contract. The amount of bridewealth depends largely on the social status of the two families, and is paid in cattle in areas where livestock represents real wealth. Among the northern Muslims, the bridewealth belongs to the bride and its transfer marks the end of the marriage contract. In the south, however, the bridewealth is divided among various members of the bride's family including extensive family members like uncles. Marriage between northerners and southerners is rare, for both societies prefer to marry and remain within their own religious, cultural, and ethnic environments (Hall, 5-6).

Holtzman, in his book *Nuer Journeys, Nuer Lives*, describes the process of marriage to be the most important aspect of traditional Nuer family life. A wide kinship network is involved in the process of marrying and continues to have considerable influence over the couple long after the marriage itself is final. The key aspect of the involvement of the kinship network is the payment of bridewealth – usually twenty-five to forty cattle - from the groom's family to the bride's family. The bridewealth cattle are not only distributed to the bride's nuclear family, but also to many members of her extended family (74).

The primary place of a Sudanese woman is firmly grounded in a home where her role as a mother and wife is regarded with honor and prestige. An ideal woman is hardworking, thrifty, and caring for her family, to which she is expected to be loyal, respectful and submissive (201). A woman's ultimate goal is to be a mother, for it is the only way for the woman to gain an independent status in the family, as well as in the society. The more children a woman produces, the more her position in the family structure strengthens and her views and opinions begin to be sought after by other members of the extended family. Large families are desirable, and even among the educated parents, eight or nine children seems to be quite normal (Hall 238).

Deng, in his book *The Dinka of the Sudan*, explains that once a Dinka girl is married, she takes on a new form of her status as a married woman. She becomes a guest wife and is often the focus of flirtation by her husband's age-mates. Moreover, she is stripped of her jewelry and belongings given by her own family, but is soon provided with

new beads, dresses, and other objects of decoration to demonstrate her new status as a married woman. During her first week with her husband's family, she is a guest wife to be served and she doesn't serve others. From the second week or so, though, she takes up gradually most of the housework and integrates herself into the status of a wife (98).

Having a child is the first and far most important step in the process of integration. Children give the spouses a common purpose and are a guarantee in the duration of the marriage. Although the rights and duties of the spouses are neither equal nor identical, they are in a sense reciprocal. The husband's role is to take care of his wife, to build her a hut, help cultivate her field, provide her with cows for milk, and above all give her children. The wife's part is to show devotion to her husband, love him and respect him, care for his health and nourishment, and love his children. Additionally she must exclusively belong to him in a sexual relationship, yet she is obligated to maintain an open house and heart to all his kinsmen and friends. If the wife or the husband fails to meet the standard in their reciprocal relationship, the sanctions are less than equal. A woman who doesn't fulfill the norms of wifehood and motherhood faces the threat of punishment ranging from reprimand to beating. In a case of adultery, though, it is the male party who is punished and consequently is responsible for paying so called adultery compensation. Among the Dinka people the act of adultery is legally recognized as an offense committed only by a man against an unfaithful wife of a husband (Deng, 99-100).

According to Hutchinson, an American anthropologist, women in Sudan are viewed as "less complete as

persons” within the domain of social networks and in comparison to the male population. The ongoing civil war has unquestionably challenged the female-male relationships and consequently transformed the gender roles within the family itself. Nuer and Dinka men became less capable of fulfilling their most important social role as protectors of their families, homes, and herds. Additionally, the males failed their roles as providers and this caused a state of “crisis of masculinity” – a crisis that reflected itself in rising rates of domestic violence and sexual abuse against women. Women, as the primary agents of cultural and individual identity, came under even greater pressure during the war, which even more highlighted the continuity of their roles as conceivers and procreators. Unarmed women and children often became the targets of humiliation based on their ethnic affiliation. Moreover, women and children have been the vast majority of the civil war’s victims (105).

Abusharaf, in her book *Wanderings*, focuses on depicting women’s lives under the Sudanese Islamic government. Women under this regime cannot occupy formal political positions. Due to the imposition of Islamic Sharia law, which indeed enhances the “guardianship” of men, women must always have a lower status. In recent years Sudanese women have been subjected to discriminatory practices and many have also experienced detention, ill treatment, and torture. Whipping has been introduced by the state as a punishment, and women are specifically targeted for this harsh treatment. There is no doubt that the current regime has implemented many laws to intentionally undermine

women’s rights in the name of Islam (94).

### **Women in the Diaspora**

Holtzman tackles in his research the question of how Nuer refugees’ gender roles and relationships transform in the United States. In Sudan, Nuer women and men have well-defined cultural roles that are integral to their daily lives. They learn from childhood the particular tasks associated with their gender, as well as how men and women are expected to behave (79). These patterns, though, do not necessarily translate to their lives in the United States, where men and women need to cooperate in new ways. Moreover, the power relations between men and women are also significantly altered in the United States. Indeed, ritual activities, which may justify male claims of superiority, are absent. Moreover, Nuer women encounter a social environment that promotes female independence rather than deference. Understandably, the women may welcome this change, but it can certainly cause significant stress within their marriages. Nuer men, then, might feel that women, who previously showed respect to them, no longer respect them in the same magnitude as in Sudan (81).

Nuer couples in the United States are now unintentionally forced closer together, both physically and in the organization of their daily lives. It is difficult for the Nuer couples to maintain distinct male and female spaces while living in the United States in the ways that they did in Sudan. Rather than living in spacious homesteads, with separate buildings for male and female activity, Nuer in Minnesota, for instance, live in small suburban apartments

usually with only one or two bedrooms for the entire family. In Sudan, Nuer men socialize among themselves and women do so accordingly. This physical separation is in place in Sudan, but in Minnesota is simply not possible due to the spatial limitation. The change in physical separation is one of the new aspects of Nuer refugees lives in the United States.

Daily work of raising a family in Minnesota requires for couples to blur the social boundaries and function as a single, cooperative unit. In Sudan, men and women had their own clearly distinct roles which they learned to master since they were children. In Minnesota, then, the Nuer refugees are challenged by many new tasks, with which neither men nor women are familiar. Indeed, performing familiar tasks in new contexts may force men and women to go outside of traditional gender roles. In Sudan, providing food is something which women do alone. In the United States, men and women shop for food together. Nuer women find themselves often dependent on their husbands to perform tasks which would have been female jobs in Sudan, for they lack particular skills such as the ability to drive or competence in English. For illustration, if a woman needs to be at an appointment, she might need to rely on her husband to drive her there, or ensure that he will stay at home with the children while she is away. Where once men and women operated relatively independently of one another in organizing their daily lives, now they must cooperate in order to keep the family running smoothly (Holtzman, 83).

Indeed, Nuer men have been placed in positions with far greater responsibility in the United States than

in Sudan, both in terms of providing for their families and household chores. In Sudan, both men and women cultivate the fields, while in the United States, the men are usually the ones expected to go out to find work in order to support their families. Nuer women, on the other hand, are expected to stay at home with the children. This role restricts them to the household in ways that it did not in Sudan where they were able to combine childcare with working in the fields, collecting firewood, and performing other tasks. When Nuer women in the United States work, other types of stress regarding gender roles might occur, as men are asked to perform home tasks that are outside the realm of normal expectations in Sudan. The most significant area in this regard is cooking. In Sudan, Nuer men are not expected to cook for their own consumption. When the Nuer men came to the United States, they learned early that this cooking restriction would be very difficult to adhere. They waited hungrily for their wives to return from their jobs because traditionally they were not supposed to cook for themselves. Thus many Nuer men began to cook for themselves and their children shortly after their arrival in the United States. Although male cooking was initially a point of considerable tension, Nuer couples recognize that life in the United States sometimes requires a shift in gender responsibilities (Holtzman, 85).

Nuer men have more difficulty actually enforcing their desired pattern of household organization because their authority over their wives is greatly diminished in the United States. The idea that women in the United States are the equals of men was promoted even prior to their resettlement through cultural orientation programs held in

Kenya to facilitate the adaptation of refugees. After their arrival in the United States, the Nuer women observed the freedom that American women enjoy and that women don't need to obey whatever men say. Indeed, they no longer recognize the need to follow their husbands' orders as they do in Sudan. Nuer men, then, come to recognize that their own gender attitudes are quite different from the American ideas regarding gender roles. They have, however, a great difficulty accepting that their wives should be considered equal to them (Holtzman, 87).

Abusharaf describes in her research the challenges in the lives of Sudanese migrants and exiles in North America. Like Holtzman, she was interested in Sudanese refugees and a shift of gender roles after their arrival in the United States. Similarly, the increased participation of Sudanese women in employment outside the household has expanded the scope of household duties performed by men. Prior to migration, Sudanese men rarely did laundry, cooked, or cared for children. Indeed, the division of household labor is becoming more equitable since men and women no longer divide work along gender lines. These transformations account for a restructuring of gender boundaries in the diaspora. Consequently, family politics tend to change as women exercise greater influence in the household. One clear result of the transformations is greater gender interdependence (124).

Both Holtzman and Abusharaf focused on the transformation of gender roles within a realm of a two-parent family. Agii's gender role in her family provides a great example of yet another gender role shift. She is a single parent who came to Jacksonville in 1999 with

eight children. She accepted her husband's decision to stay in Sudan and be active in his cause to help facilitate peace between the Islamic government and southern rebels. Currently, she lives in a house with six teenagers, two sons and four daughters. Agii, as both a mother and a father, faces somewhat different challenges than the ones described by Holtzman regarding the transformation of gender roles among the Nuer refugees. In an interview, she mentioned that she had "two faces", one described as being a friendly motherly face, and the other being more serious and authoritative. According to Anuak family traditions, the mother is supposed to be like a friend to her children while the father has a role of an authority that is not to be addressed directly by the children. Agii finds it very difficult to cope with her new role as both mother and father, yet she manages to raise the teenagers in an admirable manner. During the numerous visits to her house, I have observed the various interactions between Agii and her children, especially daughters. Even though I had to rely many times on body language, tone of voice, and other external factors of human expression, I noticed the respect, admiration, and pride expressed during conversations.

### **Role of Religion**

Dianna Shandy, an American anthropologist, explored in her research the socio-political role of Christianity in the forced migration experiences of southern Sudanese refugees living in the United States. She argues that Christianity plays a role of a "socio-political agent" and supports her hypothesis with an outline of four points explaining an articulation between

religion and the experiences of southern refugees. First, a religious identity is crucial in terms of the religious composition within Sudan, for the Christians are being persecuted by the Muslim government. More importantly the religious identity serves as a justification for those seeking a refugee status in “ways that fleeing hunger, destruction of the means of livelihood, and other results of the civil war simply do not” (214). Additionally, the religious affiliation may be an asset in securing third country resettlement. Indeed, religion may be a factor in making a refugee status determination. For instance, some Nuer Christian men in a refugee camp in Kenya were advised by an American legal advisor in the camp to eliminate the Islamic parts of their names, if they wanted to qualify for resettlement in the United States. These men claimed persecution in Sudan on the basis of being Christian, but parts of their names were Islamic. Agii, a southern Sudanese woman, on the other hand, had a different experience while filling out her application for refugee status in the Cairo office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Egypt. According to her, a Christian identity didn’t play a major role within her process of applying for a refugee status. She believed that it was the “story that matters”. Her experience of being discriminated against on the basis of Christianity was more important than her Christian identity on the application issued by UNHCR. Yet, it is important to mention that Agii’s name does not contain any Arabic parts. If she perhaps had the name “Amin” as a middle name, she might have encountered a similar experience like the Nuer refugees in Kenya.

Secondly, a Christian religious identity connects southern Sudanese to a wider international community of Christians. These international networks may facilitate the refugee resettlement process. Lutheran Social Services, an organization that resettles refugees in Jacksonville, doesn’t claim any religious affiliation. However, it does receive money in the form of donations from Episcopal Migration Ministries, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, and Church World Services, which all have religious affiliation. Since their arrival, Agii and her family have been attending the St. Peter’s Episcopal church. Prior to Agii’s family arrival, this church was actively involved in helping to free southern Sudanese from what they described as conditions of slavery under northern Islamic rule. Some members of St. Peter’s collected money, which was then sent to Sudan to free especially southern Sudanese children. In particular, one little boy from St. Peter’s church gave up all of his savings to free three southern Sudanese children. Currently though, St. Peter’s Church as a whole is not involved in any particular way in the social, political, economic, or religious matters in southern Sudan. This is not necessarily true regarding Jean who is a member of St. Peter’s Church and had been a vital and important part of the lives of many Sudanese refugees in Jacksonville. Jean visited southern Sudan in early June 2004. Her trip was not organized by St. Peter’s, but interestingly enough she joined a group from another Protestant church in Jacksonville. A few members of a missionary committee at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church and their pastor intended to finalize their plans of building an orphanage in Bari region in southern Sudan. These examples once

again highlight the role of religious organizations in the Sudanese diaspora.

Third, a common Christian identity can contribute to the creation of new identities, which can potentially “unite disparate ethnic group and sub-groups” within Sudan (215). Nonetheless, this idea has to be rethought more carefully, especially in the light of the limited prospects for southern Sudanese unity. Indeed, Christianity in southern Sudan does not seem to be a sufficient factor for people to overcome ethnic divisions. Yet it could be argued that the Christian religious identity could play a significant role to the southern Sudanese integration in the American society. Agii agrees with Shandy’s statement about a common Christian identity bringing kinship unity among the Sudanese in Jacksonville, whose ethnicity is very diverse. In other words, Christianity is besides the Arabic language, the only commonality to be recognized among the southern Sudanese, for they all have their own distinct tribal identity, language, and traditions. Until today, Sudanese from Dinka, Nuer, Anuak, and Bari tribes have been resettled in Jacksonville through Lutheran Social Services and World Relief. Sudanese refugees from various tribes came together at St. John’s Episcopal Church located in downtown during 2000. They sought not only a fellowship with other Christians, but also a desire to be socially, emotionally, and cognitively connected to their Sudanese countrymen. Every Sunday afternoon they gathered inside the church and spent time praying, networking, and sharing their problems and experiences as refugees in Jacksonville. These meetings, however, ceased to take place in the early months of 2001 as most of the Sudanese

refugees found other churches located closer to their new homes.

The fourth point, according to Shandy’s research, is that Christian identity serves as “a vehicle for social reconstruction” among Sudanese refugees in the United States. Religious institutions take over the management of refugees’ integration into the US society, literally as soon as these refugees step on the American soil. With a systematic cooperation of numerous volunteers the religious institutions, such as Episcopal Migration Ministries, and Catholic Charities, implement their refugee resettlement programs. The volunteers recruited from the population of religious institutions help to successfully map out the first steps of the refugee integration process. They help the recently arrived refugees to make a foreign environment familiar through hosting them temporarily in their homes, gathering clothing and furniture, and finding low-cost housing, cars, and employment (215).

Lutheran Social Services in Jacksonville, which is the primary agent in the refugee resettlement in northeast Florida, cooperates as part of its resettlement program with various local churches; for instance, St. Peter’s Episcopal Church, Mandarin Christian Church, and All Souls Episcopal Church. Lutheran Social Services regularly contacts these various churches and provides basic information to them about upcoming refugees with the intentions of asking for help with their resettlement. The organization’s employees can only be available to help the refugees during their working hours (Mondays through Fridays from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m.). Because the newly arrived refugees need help outside of the working hours, the volunteers fill in the

gaps and are available to assist the refugees when their case managers cannot. A volunteer's assistance varies from clothing to furniture donations, tutoring the adults or children, to helping the newly arrived to get "plugged" into a church. Thus the volunteers serve as important agents in the refugees' lives and their integration into a church. Agii's first days in Jacksonville provide a great example of a volunteer's involvement in a refugee resettlement. If Jean, who attends St. Peter's, hadn't volunteered to pick up Agii every Sunday and brought her regularly to attend Sunday services at St. Peter's Church, Agii would not have been able to attend a single service until she had gotten her own vehicle. Jean had extended her volunteer service beyond the regular rides to St. Peter's. She collected numerous donations in terms of clothing, cooking pots, and furniture, and also spent countless hours tutoring Agii's six daughters and two sons who all now attend a junior college except one daughter who is enrolled as a senior in a high school. For almost five years Jean remains to be a vital part of Agii's family.

## Conclusion

In Sudan, men and women have well-defined gender roles that are integral to their lives. Since childhood they are being educated about female and male roles within the family context. Furthermore they learn about how men and women are expected to behave in their society. Women are expected to fulfill their roles as mother and men face the challenges of the world outside of the family boundaries.

The transformation of gender roles is one of the challenges in the lives

of Sudanese refugees during their first months of their resettlement in the United States.

The stories of Sudanese women reflect the changing nature of gender roles and expectations in the diaspora.

Religion is the main avenue for Sudanese people's integration into US society and has a crucial role in the Sudanese lives in the diaspora. The religious identity connects southern Sudanese to a wider community of Christians. Indeed, the Christian identity brings kinship unity among the diverse Sudanese population living in Northeast Florida. Besides spiritual nourishment churches provide social support – a sense of identity, which ultimately helps an individual to find his or her relationship to society. Religion is one set of solidarities, of defining who you are and where you belong.

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