

BULLETIN

SUDAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION

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RESEARCH NOTE

All the Light We Cannot See:

A Khawaja Ph.D. Candidate in South Sudan

By Tarnjeet Kang

It's difficult to say when I first fell in love with South Sudan. As a woman of Punjabi heritage, I also come from a people who understand resilience in the face of adversity, courage in the name of justice, and historical marginalization from an elite that had been put into power by British colonizers. I always felt that my own history was too painful, too personal, to really approach as an objective researcher. Since then I've learned of course, that there really is no such thing as objective research when human beings are involved.

"I don't want to scare you, but there are reports of shooting in Juba," he said, the night before I was supposed to fly out to South Sudan for the first time. In a matter of hours I had to make a decision as to whether or not I would proceed to South Sudan to begin my pre-dissertation research. As one of my professors blatantly stated: "You don't speak any of the languages, and you don't blend in." I was encouraged to consider changing my dissertation topic to focus on another country or the Diaspora instead, but I wasn't convinced. In some respects the presence of conflict exacerbates the urgency of recording histories and narratives that are lost when people are killed, displaced from their communities and land, and when infrastructures fall apart.

With the media blackout and phone lines

cut in South Sudan, it would be days before those of us from abroad would get a good grasp of what had occurred in December of 2013. It was only a year later that reports and data are finally being produced to illustrate the impact that the crisis has had on both human life and development in South Sudan. The Education Cluster has done a tremendous job of working with partners to collect data on the status of schools in areas that have been affected by the conflict, and continues to make their information publicly available (<http://www.humanitarianresponse.info/operations/south-sudan/education>). However, the occupation of schools by armed groups, the destruction of school buildings, on-going conflict and the recruitment of child soldiers continue to be barriers to educational access, enrollment and attainment. Furthermore, many NGOs either re-directed their aid to humanitarian needs, or left the country altogether. This leaves many needs unmet and further strains existing resources.

Unlearning as I learned

Five months later [date?] I finally made it to South Sudan for the first time. "Good luck with that!" he said sarcastically. "They don't want to work, they want the government to do everything for them," was another response I got. I had only just arrived in South Sudan and from every direction

I was receiving skeptical responses to my dissertation topic which examined community self-determination in education. My dissertation topic was essentially derived from two sentences in an article by Dr. Luka Biong Deng on education: “The education baseline survey report clearly shows that almost every primary school in southern Sudan has a community or parents’ group involved in its management. Besides building schools, the local communities maintain these schools, cover part of teachers’ salaries or incentives and pay school fees for their children.” None of the other NGO reports, policies, legislation and academic literature I had poured over ever referred to the role and agency of communities. Yet, those that were educated in South Sudan’s communities during the civil wars possess knowledge of historical community self-determination that allowed some kind of an educational system to be maintained when there was a vacuum of governance and aid. Unfortunately, as researchers we never seemed to ask the right questions to capture this history or this agency. Or perhaps, it was a history that did not contain much value in the context of a neo-colonial development narrative which maintains that the South Sudanese people are entirely dependent on aid, do not value education, and are not willing to contribute to development.

There’s an unacknowledged history in South Sudan of communities founding schools, paying for teachers’ salaries, and even constructing classrooms; I was hoping to be able to capture a phenomenon that challenged the prevailing narrative of laziness and dependency. Except, both national and international professionals that I encountered seemed doubtful that this was possible. Six months of fieldwork across five different states at the national, intermediary and community levels has proven other-

wise.

As it turns out, there is a strong history of community self-determination in South Sudan, but it has been left out of historical accounts as well as contemporary development programs and policies. In Tambura, Western Equatoria, I had the privilege to visit a community boarding school for girls the day before it opened for the first time. The school had initially been built by the Constituency Development Fund, supported by the national budget, but it had taken years for the school to be officially handed over to the community. When I explained the lack of information and research regarding the involvement of community members in education, they seemed shocked. “But we’re used to it,” said a member of the PTA. “We also started that school over there,” he continued, pointing to a neighboring primary school that was thriving. Why aren’t such schools and examples of community agency and self-determination a part of national and international narratives on South Sudan?

What if, instead of drawing best practices from other developing and developed countries with different geographies, histories, cultures and modes of governance, we sought out successful strategies that have proven to work in South Sudan? What if, instead of going into enormous debt and depending on external resources, communities were able to teach each other how to implement programs and policies based on their own experiences? The possibilities of recognizing, recording and supporting community self-determination are enormous, particularly given that South Sudan is in the process of creating and developing a national identity and national infrastructure.

My dissertation project has given me concrete examples of the great importance of doing extensive fieldwork, and particularly the importance of methodology being reflective and flexible in our research. Without the flexibility and holistic approach that qualitative methods provide, I would have not been able to learn the narratives, histories and examples of resilience that my data now illustrates. Furthermore, it is often difficult to ascertain what information currently exists on South Sudan from the other side of the world. Within a week of arriving in South Sudan I decided to add a second set of interviews to my dissertation design that sought to record the existence of South Sudanese organizations and institutions. By the time I made it back to the United States I realized the importance of including observational data to capture dynamics that could not be captured adequately through other methods, or were not available in written form.

Research in a Nascent Nation

One of the most thrilling parts of conducting research in South Sudan is that there are so many things to capture that have never been recorded in academic literature. Some aspects of South Sudan, such as community self-determination, often fail to make it into academic literature, government policies, and even the reports of international development organizations. This happens despite the fact that many South Sudanese people have personally experienced this in the communities that they were raised in or work in, and many development workers observe this phenomenon when visiting communities across the country. This discrepancy speaks volumes about how the agency, narratives and experiences of communities are not emerging in South Sudan's official story that is being documented.

Instead, the challenges, problems, and the discrepancies between need and services continue to dominate the story. While there is no intention or purpose in overly romanticizing the agency of communities, it is imperative to begin to give a more balanced, holistic and honest portrayal of their role within our research.

One of the most frustrating aspects of conducting research was the lack of public information. While collecting literature to provide a context to my fieldwork I found that needs assessments, evaluations, national legislation and budgets were often unavailable for public use. Many of the international organizations that I visited told me about projects and assessments carried out at the community level, however the reports that were produced from these initiatives were never approved for public release. Government offices were reluctant to provide copies of national and state budgets, and obtaining copies of national legislation was problematic as well. This makes it difficult to obtain an accurate and complete idea of what is actually happening with communities in South Sudan, and subsequently limits our analysis. When this knowledge is retained for private or internal use, we all suffer. Our research is less informed, we risk losing the ability to be innovative in our questions, methods and analysis, and most importantly, we inhibit the right of South Sudanese citizens to access information about their own country.

Returning to the Subaltern

As I began to make my way back to South Sudan for the second time, I realized that no matter how meticulously I planned my fieldwork, I would not be able to capture all of the necessary details, narratives and data that were necessary to answer the questions

I was asking. However what seemed to be primarily missing from my data was the experiences and opinions of the South Sudanese communities.

During my first trip to South Sudan I was able to conduct research in Juba and three state capitals; on my second trip, my main priority was to conduct interviews with community members and more community-founded schools. In one community, north of Yambio, participants were adamant that the responsibility to initiate schools and support them was their own responsibility. Subsequent communities that I visited echoed this sentiment, and emphasized the importance of education for future generations. This contrasted with the narratives that were presented in literature and that emerged during interviews that I had conducted in Juba. It became evident that although resources had been invested in researching access to education and the challenges in the education system, studies do not tend to examine the experiences that communities have with education, or the role that they play in providing education to the next generation.

For those of us that have had the privilege and fortune to conduct fieldwork with communities in different parts of the country, South Sudan has become home. These relationships, that become somewhat familial, emerge because of our significant dependency on the South Sudanese people to both facilitate and understand our research. Regardless of how long this country becomes our home, we are still inherently outsiders that maintain a limitation in our contextual knowledge.

Permission to Conduct Research

On the whole I have found that national,

state and local officials are welcoming of students. They help to ensure our safety as we travel to different parts of the country, and provide advice and connections to those of us working independently without attachments. The access that I had to government officials, schools, program implementers and community members was unparalleled to anything that I would have been able to achieve in the United States – this is both reflective of the privilege I had as a foreigner, as well as the culture of hospitality of the South Sudanese people.

The permission process for research in South Sudan remains unclear at times. Permission at the national level needs to be obtained for all research that is conducted in South Sudan, and the National Ministry of Education has indicated that a Higher Education Research Council was being formed which would assume responsibility for providing permission to student researchers. Students should also seek letters of support from national ministries that cover areas related to their research topic. Subsequently, permission also needs to be obtained from the offices of governors at the state level.

In a legally decentralized system, the protocols for obtaining permission vary by region and level of government. In Yambio town, approval from the County Commissioner suffices and this also ensures that national security are also notified of our presence and purpose in the area. However, as I travelled to Wau town for the very first time, via public transport, I realized that the processes are quite different. In an attempt to decentralize Wau County, the Commissioner's office had been moved to a village over an hour away. As one of the few municipalities in the country, Wau is run by a mayor, whose permission was needed to conduct research in the town. This presents

a dilemma however for those that would like to conduct research in other parts of the county but may not be able to travel to the area where the county office is located. Within decentralization and federalism discourses it also raises concerns as to whether or not local governance institutions really are now more accessible to citizens.

Agency as Researchers

As I traveled across Western Equatoria it was implored, “When you go back to your country, tell your people that it is peaceful here.” Outside of South Sudan, a lot of people depend on blanket security warnings for the whole country. However, many states and communities have been impacted by the exodus of NGOs even though they are no longer embroiled in the conflict happening in the north-east of the country. Travel warnings by the State Department and governments of other countries has inhibited travel and funding for research and programming across the country.

More of the Ph.D students I now encounter in South Sudan have attachments with UN agencies or other NGOs, which addresses a lot of the security and financial concerns that arise when conducting research here. Prior to the crisis of December 2013, students were able to obtain external funding more easily that allowed them to conduct research in South Sudan without an attachment. This was particularly useful for anthropological students that wanted to spend up to a year living in a particular community as a part of their study, without having to work on the side for an organization. Other students that were in the middle of their projects when the crisis happened have either had to switch their dissertation topics to different countries, have made peace with the data they were able to col-

lect in the initial stages, or went through frustrating and lengthy appeals processes with their universities. Additionally, many of us have had to restrict our research to areas of South Sudan that are deemed to be “safe enough,” which inherently leaves out a significant portion of the country. Given the high expense of living and traveling around South Sudan, research with a degree of autonomy has become increasingly rare. Instead, we find ourselves dependent on development and humanitarian organizations, who naturally have their own agenda and values, to fund our research. This of course has significant implications for a country in which the majority of research has historically been produced and controlled by outsiders, and for which minimal research exists to begin with.

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