

**The Sacrifice of Honey:  
Stories of the Life and Work of  
Rebecca Joshua Okwaci of Sudan**

**By  
Susan Van Schoonhoven  
Peace Writer**

Edited by  
Emiko Noma

**2006 Women PeaceMakers Program  
Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice**

**\*Do not use or cite without permission from the  
Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice**

## Table of Contents

<i>Heading</i>	<i>Page #</i>
Acronyms	3
<i>Snapshots</i>	5
<i>Coming Home</i>	5
<i>Harvest</i>	8
<i>The March Bride</i>	12
<i>Summoned</i>	16
<i>The Birth of SWAN</i>	21
<i>Life as a Bird</i>	25
<i>The Peace Tent</i>	28
<i>A Life without Him</i>	33
<i>The Chairman</i>	37
<i>What We Have Been Through</i>	43
<i>What Peace Brings</i>	49
Bibliography	54



### **Acronyms**

CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
SPLM/A	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army
SSIM/A	South Sudan Independence Movement/Army
SuWEP	Sudanese Women's Empowerment for Peace
SWAN	Sudanese Women's Association in Nairobi
SWVP	Sudanese Women's Voice for Peace
UK	United Kingdom
WAD	Women's Action for Development

"The richness of life lies in the memories we have forgotten."

-Cesare Pavese

## **Snapshots**

For the last twenty years, Rebecca Joshua Okwaci has cultivated many identities throughout her struggles for peace in Sudan. As a journalist, an advocate, a wife, a mother, and a revolutionary with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), she has found ways for each of these identities to contribute to the overarching goal of peace. From her innovations in connecting media to peace, to bestowing an understanding of selflessness in wartime to her children, Rebecca has never wavered from her mission.

The following stories are merely snapshots of Rebecca's life and work and represent the influences and experiences that have shaped her as a leader, a woman, and a Sudanese. They are just glimpses into the whole story of a woman who has sacrificed much and through it all has been deeply invested in the fate of her nation. As a leader and as a woman, Rebecca has set an example not only for Sudanese women, but for all women.

## **Coming Home**

Their homecoming was marked with tears of happiness. After a week of celebration with relatives and friends, Rebecca turned to her sister. "Martha, it's time. We have to go and tell him." With that, the sisters walked resolutely to the veranda to find their father.

Rebecca, twelve, and Martha, fourteen, had just finished their primary schooling in the capital city of Khartoum. The Sudanese Evangelical Boarding School had been their home-away-from-home for six years. Rebecca's parents had sent her and her sister there as a precautionary measure to keep their daughters safe in school as the first civil war raged between the north and the south. Though in the history of Sudan there had been many rebellions against both British and Egyptian colonialism, as well as against the Arab practice of slave trading in

southern Sudan, the violence which began in 1955 between the Arab-dominated government in the north and the African-dominated south was considered the first civil war.

The year 1972 simultaneously marked the girls' graduation from primary school and the signing of the Addis Ababa Agreement, which granted autonomy to the south and provided a relative peace in the region.<sup>1</sup> For the first time in seventeen years the face of peace was peeking through the curtains of war. It was the opportune time for the sisters to approach their father.

Rebecca and Martha found him sitting on the veranda where he often read, occasionally glancing up at the eucalyptus trees. As Rebecca and her sister neared his reading corner, he laid down his book and removed his glasses with one hand. He had a ready smile for his daughters. “*Nya-chok, Nya-thatuki*,<sup>2</sup> what can I do for you?” The “chok, chok, chok” of the chickens echoed in Rebecca’s pet name given to her by her father. She loved the sound whenever he spoke it, and his warm, relaxed greeting bolstered the girls’ confidence. “Father, we have decided that we don’t want to go back to Khartoum for secondary school. We want to move home.”

It was not to say that life in Khartoum had been unkind to Rebecca. For the six years she and her sister lived there, Rebecca excelled in school and was constantly surrounded by friends and other girls her age. She enjoyed the structure the school provided, which was sadly lacking in the south in so many ways. The fighting between the government and the revolutionaries known as the Anyanya had been deeply entrenched in the south. The war had disintegrated what little services had existed before the fighting began. Rebecca knew, along with her parents, that she had received a better education in Khartoum and was grateful that the evangelical school had kept her rooted in her faith. But despite it all, Rebecca longed to be back in the warmth of her family. She yearned for the laughter and constant visitors and everything that was home to her.

---

<sup>1</sup> The agreement was signed on March 27, 1972 in the capital of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa.

<sup>2</sup> *Nya* is a Shilluk word meaning “daughter.” Shilluk is spoken by the Shilluk people who live primarily in southern Sudan. After the Dinka and the Nuer, the Shilluk are the third largest ethnic group in the south.

She missed the way her mother would slyly ask her to help with the chores: “Hmmm,” she would say loud enough for the children to hear, “I wonder if the *kisra*<sup>3</sup> has been made.” And she missed the way her father subtly educated her on agriculture and his work with the church and in parliament.

Rebecca and Martha felt no anxiety in talking with their father, though they did not know what to expect. They had never approached him like this before. Rebecca’s father had never taken a hand to her nor threatened her in any way; still, she had respect for his power. Until now, there was a general assumption within the family that the girls would continue their education in Khartoum.

Rebecca and Martha had thought through their proposal logically; they wanted to be prepared in case they had to defend their idea. They told their father that they knew coming back home for school would be a big change. While some schools in the south had begun operating again, the girls did not expect perfection. They knew that attending school in Malakal<sup>4</sup> would mean larger class sizes and no Christian teaching as they had in the evangelical school. It would mean no more brick schoolhouses, but mud walls, tin roofs, heat, and intermittent electricity. There would be an arduous process of talking to the director of education to arrange for their official transfer, which would not be easy. All of the structural changes going on in the south as a result of the peace agreement would make it difficult. But they were ready to sacrifice these things for the one thing they had been missing for the last six years: the chance to be with their

---

<sup>3</sup> *Kisra* is one of the staples of Sudanese meals and is made from the *durra* grain. *Durra* is a type of sorghum, often ground and formed into dough. It is then made into *kisra*, *mong’akello*, or *asida*. Generally, one of these three foods is a staple in every meal.

<sup>4</sup> Malakal, Rebecca’s hometown, is a southern city situated near the north-south border. Due to the underdevelopment of the south, the city’s infrastructure paled in comparison to that of Khartoum, yet, it was a bustling center of activity and community for the many Sudanese who lived there.

family every day, to weave themselves back into the daily life of their home and community. This was the only future they could envision for themselves.

The sisters waited patiently for their father to react. As he mulled over the idea, Rebecca sat near him and ran her fingers across his forehead, marked with the traditional scars of the Shilluk people. He did not drill them with questions; he did not even say yes or no. Instead, he opened up the topic to conversation as he would have done with any of his colleagues or neighbors. It did not matter to him that the girls were only twelve and fourteen—he valued their thoughts. The three conversed, exchanging their ideas and opinions of the future of their family and of their country. As the conversation progressed, Rebecca's self-confidence increased. Her strength in her own opinions and ideas began to ground itself in the words that flowed from father to sister and back to her.

By the time the afternoon sun was descending, the three had laid out the necessary plans to bring the girls home for good. Rebecca walked away from her father that afternoon somehow changed. She had absorbed his confidence in her. For her life to come, this confidence would be the foundation from which she would make difficult decisions that would affect far more serious things than she could fathom at the age of twelve.

### **Harvest**

In a good harvest year, the farmers would stand for a long while admiring their tall, green sorghum stalks. After a heavy rain, the broad leaves reflected the sun and water as if in celebration. Joshua Okwaci surveyed the crops with an eye for planning and a concern for the welfare of the community. He kept his ears open when the farmers told him what they read from the signs of nature indicating what kind of harvest the crops would yield. If the rains began too

early in the season, they would also end too early, destroying the harvest. So far, this year was not looking promising. The rains had come too soon, and food would be in short supply come harvest time.

Joshua called to his wife across the yard, “*Mey-Nyikango*.”<sup>5</sup> In her kind, unhurried manner she went to find her husband. Rebecca and her brothers, sisters, and cousins were scattered throughout the yard and the house. From their father’s call, they knew a consultation was coming. After speaking with her husband for a considerable amount of time, Rebecca’s mother told the family that they would have a meeting the next day.

By 1984, Rebecca had finished her education at the University of Alexandria in Egypt and had come back home to look for work. Only twenty-four years old, she found a job at the Office of Labor and Public Service as an Assistant Inspector. Although it was far different from the linguistics she had studied at university, Rebecca enjoyed her job and was happy to return to her family: to her father’s echoing laughter, her mother’s soft kindness, and to the playfulness of her brothers and sisters. She enjoyed returning home from work and talking with her father about her day. She shared with him her transformation to adulthood, and he felt proud to see the rewards of his investment in her education.

Rebecca knew many of her friends did not have families or fathers like hers. Rarely did fathers relentlessly encourage their daughters to pursue higher education as much as they pushed their sons. Nor was it common for a father to solicit the opinions of his children. Joshua Okwaci imparted the importance of education equally to both his sons and his daughters, and he brought his experiences from his days in parliament into his home. All of Joshua’s children had become

---

<sup>5</sup> In the Shilluk tradition, husbands often have names for their wives. *Mey*, the Shilluk word for “mother,” is often placed before the name of the firstborn child. *Nyikango* was the name of Rebecca’s oldest brother. While *Mey-Nyikango* was the name Joshua called Rebecca’s mother, her children lovingly called her *Nyadak, dak*, referring to a famous Shilluk king.

versed in the terms used to conduct government business. When the noise level of Rebecca's brothers and sisters had reached a place where any strain of conversation was indiscernible, one of the children would jokingly ask, "Dad, is this where we call for point of order?" The way he employed the consultation process used in government as a mode of communication and decision making within his family was a rare thing indeed. Many times Rebecca's family gathered in the sitting room or the yard to collectively make decisions that affected the family or their property. When Rebecca's father called for a family consultation, he called on everybody whether they were elderly or newly born, boys or girls. No member of the Okwaci family would be uninformed if anything happened to their property.

So, on the following day when Rebecca's mother quietly walked through the house gathering the children to the sitting room, the older children arrived ready to voice their opinions, the younger ones eager to satiate their curiosity. Their father sat on the sofa waiting for them. Family members pulled chairs from the dining room up to the round table in the sitting room, while others found spots on the couches. All in all, fifteen people gathered to hear what the discussion was about: Rebecca's brothers and sisters, her cousin who had been living with them for some time, her father's second wife with her newborn,<sup>6</sup> and her mother and father.

Joshua told them what he knew of the danger to this year's crops. If they did not stock up now on durra, the staple food of Sudan, they could go hungry in the following year. And it was not only the Okwaci family who would not have enough food. All of the visitors who came to the house, relatives and neighbors who knew they could go to Joshua Okwaci if they hit hard times, would also suffer.

---

<sup>6</sup> It is common in Shilluk culture for husbands, as they are aging, to take a second or even third wife who is traditionally of childbearing age. The second wife will bear more children for the family. The newborn mentioned in this story was the first child of Joshua and his second wife.

The Okwaci family owned cattle which were just as valuable as any piece of land, and easier to sell for food. Joshua came to his family to ask for their thoughts on the idea of selling one cow for a year's supply of durra. Many of the younger children clamored for information. "How much durra is that?" "How will it get here?" Rebecca's mother and father patiently answered the questions. Renk, an agricultural town, had good grain to sell. Joshua had intended to buy one hundred sacks of durra which would have to be transported from Renk on barges down the White Nile to Malakal. From there it would be taken by trucks to their house. The family sat and discussed the matter. When all the questions had been answered and all opinions had been voiced, it was agreed that they would sell the cow and use the money for the durra.

About a month later the durra arrived in trucks at the house. The porters carried the heavy bags of grain on their backs and stacked them in the veranda until the sacks reached its roof. All of the children, young and old, climbed atop and slid down the bags of durra. The smaller children began a game of hide and seek, finding hiding places between the sacks of grain. The older children felt a sense of satisfaction and an appreciation for the value of their property. And as the year wore on, extended family would come to the house from time to time in need of food. At those times, the understanding of the impact of their decision would deepen in the children. They saw not only what the consultation meant to them, but what it meant to their community.

In later years, Joshua's lessons and laughter would echo in Rebecca's mind. When she found herself in times of struggle or seemingly unendurable circumstances, she would recall her father's voice from earlier days: "Do what is your responsibility and don't rely on God alone. If you prepare today, it will help you tomorrow."

## The March Bride

They packed one suitcase for the two of them. Its contents would lead everyone to believe they would only be going for a short honeymoon to Greece. The wedding gifts of hand-embroidered cloths and Egyptian cotton, their car, and all of their other belongings remained at their apartment. But this would not be an ordinary honeymoon. It would be the beginning of a long, oftentimes bittersweet, journey that would last for nearly two decades.

It was 1986, the third year of the second civil war in Sudan between the north and the south. Responding to the continuation of oppression of the south, a southern rebel movement had been fighting for freedom from subjugation by the north and for development of the south. After ten years of relative peace following the signing of the Addis Ababa Agreement, President Jaafar an Nimeiri revoked the autonomy of the south and divided it into three states in 1983, leaving the southerners bereft of the liberty to live their lives according to their own traditions and beliefs. In May of that year, a lieutenant colonel in the Sudanese army, a man from the south named Kerubino, led a mutiny which ignited the fire of the revolution.<sup>7</sup> The rebel movement became organized and took on the name the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). In September, the government imposed Sharia law<sup>8</sup> on all Sudanese people, Christian, animist, and Muslim alike, stoking the revolutionary fire even higher. By 1986, the conflict was in full swing and Kerubino had become one of the SPLM/A's top leaders, along with Dr. John Garang, Salva Kiir, and Arok Thon Arok. These men would rapidly become known throughout Sudan as the leaders of the revolution.

---

<sup>7</sup> The mutiny took place in Bor, a southern city 200 kilometers north of Juba.

<sup>8</sup> Sharia is the body of Islamic law based on the Quran. Under the law, perceived infractions such as adultery or the ingestion of alcohol were justifications for amputations and imprisonment. The imposition of Sharia law in Sudan is referred to as the September Laws.

Rebecca had met the famous Lam Akol years before as a teenager when he was in the Sudanese capital for his university studies. Lam was from Rebecca's hometown and was known throughout Sudan as an intellectual academic at the University of Khartoum. When Rebecca was visiting her cousin one day, Lam came for a visit as well. Rebecca and her cousin fought over whom would take Lam—a prestigious, older man—his tea in the sitting room. Rebecca won. It was pure excitement to be face to face with someone so famous for his intellect. At that age, she dreamed of nothing else but becoming as articulate, well-read, and knowledgeable as the esteemed Lam Akol.

After that first meeting, Lam returned to university but kept connections to Rebecca's family. Through the years, he had occasion to visit them again and again. Over time, Lam and Rebecca developed a strong bond, which eventually evolved into the beginning of a lifelong relationship. Toward the end of 1985, Lam asked Rebecca to marry him.

During their engagement, discussions of the shape of their future were laced with the state of their country, the civil war, and the revolution. Their decision to become active members of the SPLM/A was difficult, but in their hearts they knew that the time had come. Rebecca's knowledge of the politics of Sudan—passed on by her father and her work with the Labor Office—and her own witness of the destruction of her country, combined with Lam's advocacy for the freedom of regions marginalized and oppressed by the government, led to their decision. They would become part of the revolution.

They were married on March 7, 1986. It was a rushed ceremony by Sudanese standards. Traditionally, Sudanese weddings were celebrated for weeks, sometimes even a month. The prevailing security situation limited community gatherings, so while Lam and Rebecca's celebration was joyful, it was also brief.

The twentieth of March that year marked the beginning of a conference in Koka Dam, Ethiopia. This conference brought together academics, civil society members, guerilla fighters, and women who were all working toward the vision of a peaceful Sudan. Lam, a lecturer at the University of Khartoum in the Faculty of Engineering, had been asked to attend the conference as an academic. Rebecca attended the conference as an observer. The other conference participants joyfully teased her, calling her the “March Bride” in celebration of her marriage. For Rebecca, the political and the personal were suddenly intertwined.

The Koka Dam experience inspired her. For the first time, she was able to see the leaders of the SPLM/A, like Garang and Salva Kiir, in the flesh, their iconic reputations demystified. Her exposure to the intellectual process of peacebuilding in a diverse working body would also prove to be of great value to her future work. Yet, perhaps the most enlightening and practical pieces of her Koka Dam education came from watching her husband work exhaustively through the night on his papers. Seeing him in this light prepared her for his frequent and sometimes lengthy absences throughout their marriage. As much as she wanted him near, she would sacrifice for the national cause.

The newlywed couple returned to Khartoum toward the end of March and furtively began their preparations for their journey into the revolution. Only a month married, they would secretly abandon their life in Khartoum and become active members of the SPLM/A. This decision would forsake any security for their future together. The honey of their marriage, those first precious years as a young married couple, would also be sacrificed for the revolution.

They told family and friends that they would be spending a short vacation in Greece which, in truth, was a dream for Rebecca. Her studies of linguistics and the origins of language at the University of Alexandria led her to a fascination of Greek history and mythology. However,

Greece was just the beginning of their journey that would last for nearly two decades. Only one or two people closest to them were informed of Rebecca and Lam's true intentions. Three days of their travels would be spent in Greece and would provide only a taste of celebration before a journey to Addis Ababa, where they would take their first steps to becoming revolutionaries.

Three days in Greece would be, to Rebecca, like sampling bits of honey from the jar.

In the capital of Ethiopia, then dominated by a communist regime led by Mengitsu Haile Mariam, lay SPLM/A's connection to the outside world. Addis Ababa housed one of the SPLM/A offices which served as a liaison center for revolutionaries outside of Sudan. In contrast to Sudan's interior, the Addis Ababa office provided relative safety; Garang had close relations with Mengitsu. Here, the SPLM/A could communicate with the international community and liaise with the press. Yet nothing was truly safe now. For Rebecca and Lam, the journey to Addis Ababa was laced with trepidation. This fear could have been, and perhaps would have been for someone else, another deterrent from revolutionary life. Every step of the journey from Greece brought another chance for Lam and Rebecca to be harmed, abducted, or killed. Due to their known beliefs in the principles of the SPLM/A, their plane could be forced down or they could be arrested by government forces at the airport. There were no safeguards, but they still did not waver from their path. For them, there was no other option.

As the newlyweds packed their bag and said their final goodbyes to Khartoum with misleadingly carefree smiles, Rebecca knew that she would soon be enveloped by the realities of her decision. But, in this moment, there was no way for her to foresee the first of her many separations from Lam, when he would go back to the deep bush of southern Sudan and she would remain in Ethiopia serving the revolution by working for the clandestine Radio SPLA. Regardless, Rebecca had made her choice with open eyes, ready for the challenges she would

face, and with an awareness and commitment to move forward with no sure knowledge of what each step would bring.

### **Summoned**

Ethiopia's communist regime came to an end in 1991, when the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took hold of Addis Ababa and the SPLM/A lost their safe haven in the capital. The trauma of war once again laid its grip on the many Sudanese who had taken refuge within Ethiopian borders. With the coming of the EPRDF, many feared that the horrors of their violent pasts would once again become a reality; a mass exodus of refugees flowed back into Sudan. Additionally, the SPLM/A liaison office, which had served as a central location for the revolution outside of Sudan, relocated to the more stable environment of Nairobi, in the neighboring country of Kenya.

Rebecca, like many others, left Addis Ababa. Radio SPLA, where she had upheld her assignment for the revolution for five years, had also been shut down when the SPLM/A moved to Kenya. After visiting Lam for nearly two months in Nasir,<sup>9</sup> Rebecca moved on to Nairobi. Again, neither she nor Lam could predict their future or when they might see each other again.

Rebecca had only been in Nairobi for a matter of weeks when on August 28, the Nasir Declaration<sup>10</sup> caused a rumbling between the SPLM/A and what became known as the Nasir faction, led by Riek Machar, Lam, and Gordon Kong. The declaration stated the concerns of the Nasir faction, namely that human rights abuses within the SPLM/A and the lack of a clear mandate for the south's right to self-determination were causing the revolution to stray off

---

<sup>9</sup> Nasir is a town located in the Upper Nile region just southeast of Malakal.

<sup>10</sup> The declaration was announced in Nasir. Dr. Garang, leader of the SPLM/A, did not agree with the proposed reforms stated in the declaration, causing what would later be termed as "the split." Lam and Riek then formed the rebel faction SPLM-United.

course. The declaration was not an attempt to divide the SPLM/A, but to create a forum for reforms within its present structure. Even though some within the SPLM/A forces knew about the tension in SPLM/A's top ranks, nobody was prepared for the trembling anxiety in the movement which the declaration caused. No one wanted the revolution to be divided, yet Lam, Gordon Kong, and Riek, among others, could not deny their consciences. There was no other choice but to voice their concerns regarding the SPLM/A, and to try to create a just leadership for the people of the south. The Nasir Declaration formalized a clear divide in the vision for the future of the SPLM/A.

Only weeks after the Nasir Declaration, Rebecca sat in the house of her brother-in-law, Yohanis, where she was staying. Though the declaration had been reported by the BBC and other media, the SPLM/A office had not publicly verified the story. Rebecca was surrounded in the sitting room by Yohanis' wife, Deborah, and other family and friends who had come for their customary visits. A knock on the door brought yet another visitor. Standing in the doorway was Dr. Justin, an elder who had known Rebecca's father when they were in the government together in Juba. He was also the husband of one of her close friends. To Rebecca, his appearance was just another ordinary visit. As such, she invited him into the sitting room and offered him something to drink, but he asked to speak to Rebecca privately. As they walked out of earshot of those in the sitting room, Dr. Justin told her the SPLM/A office requested a meeting with her the following morning. When she asked the reason, Dr. Justin simply replied that he did not know, but perhaps it was best if she went and asked directly.

The meeting was set for ten o'clock the next morning, and it had been arranged that the office would send a car for her. When she arrived and stepped into the office, it was clear that something was happening. There was a sense of confusion. The tension was thick and visibly

unnerving. Rebecca retained her composure as she walked through the corridors. She was ready to face whatever would happen in these next few moments. She was kept waiting in the hall for fifteen minutes before she was finally summoned into the meeting room.

She was faced with three men she knew very well. Elijah Malok, a relative of Garang, had also worked with Rebecca's father in the southern government in Juba in the mid-1970s. Elijah sat at the far end of the room behind his desk. His air of pompousness and unfounded self-satisfaction filled the room. He viewed himself as one of the custodians of the revolution and guarded it dearly. Elijah was joined by Mario Mour, whose wedding Rebecca had helped to arrange, and Deng Alor, the former manager of the SPLM/A office in Addis Ababa. Rebecca knew Deng well through her work with Radio SPLA. Each one of these men was a devout follower of Garang.

Rebecca was beckoned to sit at the end of the conference table that filled the room. Mario and Deng sat on either side of her, so no matter which direction she looked, they were there. The men sat as steadfast as walls, facing Rebecca with their stony disposition. When they were all seated, the rant began. Up to this point, Rebecca had no awareness of what this meeting was about, but she quickly learned that the Nasir Declaration was the topic at hand. The men were infuriated that anyone would deviate from the revolution or from Garang. Furthermore, they were blaming her. She lived in Nairobi, and merely for the reasons of proximity and marriage she was chosen as the recipient of their rage. She was the best scapegoat they could lay their hands on in that moment.

For over two hours, Rebecca sat silent and composed as Elijah, Mario, and Deng talked over one another to demand why Lam had done such a thing and what Rebecca knew about it. She remained still as Elijah, his mouth frothing with anger, defamed her husband, mistakenly

claiming he was the leader of the declaration. In truth, Riek was the leader of the Nasir faction. Still, she said nothing. Rebecca knew their ammunition of verbal attacks was dwindling when they resorted to spewing forth personal attacks: “Who does your husband think he is?”

Rebecca was quick to realize that these men made an error in their judgment of her. They had ignored the fact that she was not merely the wife of a revolutionary; she was a revolutionary herself with the intelligence, ferocity, and bravery that is required for survival in such a situation. As she examined these men, one by one, she pitied their ignorance. Despite all of their attempts at intimidation and the potential danger she faced, Rebecca remained steadfast in her convictions. In her mind, their misinformed arrogance was the Achilles’ heel not only in their view of her, but in their general views of the revolution. These men felt the declaration was a betrayal of both the revolution and of their beloved leader. To Rebecca, they were sadly myopic in their devotion to Garang. She took it upon herself to enlighten them and was prepared to challenge their staunch faith in Garang’s leadership with a rationale that could not be ignored.

Rebecca knew the time had come for her to speak when she saw the men had exhausted themselves and their raving became repetitive. Rebecca steeled herself and spoke, “Have you finished?”

Elijah retorted with his mouth still gnashing. “What do you have to say?”

Refusing to be pulled into the irrationality of the moment Rebecca replied sweetly to Elijah, “Thank you very much for calling me.”

From here, Rebecca took her time to speak. Sitting for two hours listening to nonsense had given her the opportunity to clarify in her mind the many things she felt these wayward custodians of the revolution needed to hear. In the same manner a teacher instructs a student struggling for comprehension, she informed them they were not speaking to Lam’s wife, they

were speaking to Rebecca. She spoke calmly as she reiterated for them what they already knew about her own contributions to the SPLM/A, how she stood apart as a woman and a committed and educated revolutionary. Having focused the blurred lens through which these men viewed her, Rebecca slowly began to address the issue that had driven these men to distraction: the Nasir Declaration.

In Rebecca's mind, the declaration was a natural progression of the revolution. The SPLM/A had been downplaying its own mandate and vision for the south's right to self-determination in an effort to maintain good diplomatic relations with the rest of Sudan and beyond. Yet, in doing so, the people had been lost. In addition, the SPLM/A was suspected of human rights violations in the south—an accusation extremely harmful to a movement acting on behalf of the very people whose rights they were accused of violating. Rebecca had no prior knowledge of the declaration, but still stood deeply grounded in her beliefs and understanding of the situation. She told Elijah, Mario, and Deng exactly what they did not want to hear. "If you would prove to me that all of the violations of human rights did not happen, then I will agree that the Nasir Declaration was a mistake. If you prove to me that the SPLM/A is clearly working toward the right to self-determination for the south, then, yes, it was a mistake."

Her logic, along with their own anger, had worn the men out. But Rebecca's cool anger had also intensified. In a final assertion of her identity, Rebecca turned on Elijah, "If you want to talk military, then Lam is in Nasir, in the field. If you want to talk [to] men, then go and meet Lam. If you want him, go to him, don't come to me."

Elijah's face was contorted with rage, but Rebecca regained her composure. She breathed deeply and spoke calmly. "That is all I can say. Can I go now?"

Exasperated and exhausted, Elijah gruffly waved his hand toward the door. Rebecca had entered the meeting as a potential scapegoat, yet walked out unscathed.

In the eyes of those men left drained in the meeting room—but still rooted firm in blind devotion to the SPLM/A—Rebecca had quickly evolved from a queen of Radio SPLA to an enemy of the “real” revolution. But it was unimportant. Her allegiance to the values of the revolution remained. Her belief in fighting for the south for a lasting peace, not just any peace, drove her to stand by the Nasir faction.

### **The Birth of SWAN**

Now in Nairobi, Rebecca recalled her first journey to the city in 1986, when she traveled there to take advantage of their improved medical services. The SPLM/A had arranged for her to stay in the house of one of the SPLM/A wives living in Nairobi, Awut Deng. Awut was a strong and curious woman. She had a drive and a thirst for learning that Rebecca admired. But living in Kenya had been anything but easy, as she soon learned from women she met in the Kenyan capital.

Women, like Awut, many of them wives of SPLM/A members or sympathizers, had left Sudan in search of a place where they could raise their children without the threat of war. When leaving such hardship, all they could think of were the travesties or difficulties they were leaving behind. It was unimaginable that they could withstand any more than they already had. Without home, without family, without the ability to obtain their most basic needs in their new environment, they were changed. Rebecca discovered that their situations reflected very little of her own experiences. Even though she had grappled with these very same challenges, her path had been unique in comparison to the situations of the women she found living in Nairobi.

She told them of her stories as a revolutionary and of the happenings at home. As an active member of the SPLM/A, she was far more connected to what was occurring in the movement than these women. They were cut off from the daily news of the war, their families, and their towns. She told them of life in the bush, the constant search—sometimes through snake-infested flood water—to find leaves for food. She shared with them what it was like to be surrounded by the guns, the military, and the security characteristic of the SPLM/A posts throughout southern Sudan. She told stories of her life in Addis and her work with Radio SPLA as one of only two females. And the women in Nairobi soaked in every word. In turn, Rebecca recognized both how unique her experiences were and how much she had in common with these women.

It was true that she had faced many challenges in her own way as a revolutionary. But her responsibilities, in their most basic forms, were to ensure her survival alone and to do so in environments where she had learned how to take care of herself. In contrast, most of these women were not active revolutionaries, they were mothers. They came to Nairobi sometimes with nothing, no money, no possessions, no family save the children who relied on them soul and body. But their souls were stretched. In Sudan, they managed their family's basic needs using their skills and strengths. But those same strengths that worked for them in Sudan were of no use to them in the big, foreign city of Nairobi. Their greatest sources of pride fell limp. In Kenya, neither their Arabic nor their local languages could help them, as English and Kiswahili were the predominant languages. Rebecca saw how they were virtual prisoners, unable to express their simplest desires or needs to their neighbors. Though the women cried for themselves, for their children, and for each other, they only had so many tears. Throughout her stay, Rebecca saw how these women shared their stories and supported each other. She saw the beginning of healing.

When Rebecca returned to Addis Ababa after her two-month visit, she remained in spirit and heart with the women she had met in Nairobi. For five years they stayed in contact while Rebecca continued her assignments with the SPLM/A.

In Nairobi again in 1991, she was welcomed back with open arms by those same women she had met years before. During her time away, the women had continued to gather, share their stories, and support one another. Their numbers had swelled. More and more Sudanese women who came to Nairobi found compassionate, understanding souls who had already gone through what they were now experiencing.

For some time, the idea had been growing for the group to formalize themselves as an organization with the capacity to address the issues these women faced. There were a few core members of the group driving this initiative, including Dr. Pauline, a Jamaican woman who had married a Sudanese man and now taught at Kenyatta University; Amal, whose friendship with Rebecca dated back to their childhood days; Awut, who Rebecca had stayed with in 1986; and Rebecca, herself.

The women wanted to include not only those affiliated with the SPLM/A, but all Sudanese living in Nairobi. Rebecca, Pauline, and the others knew that many Sudanese who were not affiliated with the SPLM/A were living in a section of the city known as Kibera. Pauline and Rebecca had arranged a meeting with the women of Kibera to involve them in their efforts and give them a voice in the organization. But they were very resistant. A few welcomed the idea of Sudanese women coming together, but most thought that Pauline and Rebecca had a political agenda and wanted to recruit them into the revolution. Carla, one of the more outspoken women, was the strongest opponent to the idea of joining some organization that was not even an organization yet. But Pauline talked it through with them and convinced them there was no

political agenda involved. They wanted to have a place for Sudanese women in Nairobi to gather, and where they could provide English classes with the goal of economic empowerment. After a lengthy discussion, many of the women of Kibera were swayed. Carla would later become one of the most active members of the group.

The next step was to face the labyrinth of formalizing themselves, difficult in Kenya where the social structures and systems of government were far removed from their experiences. The women embarked on a journey in which numerous people would help them find their way. They gathered a small amount of money to rent a house where they could organize their activities. The aunt of a man named Fred Ogumbo owned the house next door. The women approached Fred for advice and he soon became one of their first Kenyan supporters. Fred told the women they would need a lawyer to advise them on registering an organization. Although the women explained they had no money to pay for legal help, Fred urged them to find his cousin, a lawyer. With his help, the women unraveled the mysteries of Kenyan law and formality and took a huge stride toward forming their organization.

On their journey of education and empowerment, they learned how to search for funding and defined clear goals and objectives for what they wanted the organization to accomplish. They created a constitution and a provisional body of elected leadership for their organization, as well as a name for themselves: Sudanese Women's Association in Nairobi (SWAN). In 1994, the Kenyan Office of Registry granted SWAN their official status.

Throughout the process, Pauline, Rebecca, Awut, and all the others had become well-versed in the technicalities of Kenyan law, and had acquired the skills and fortitude necessary to form a civil society organization. But these skills, as valuable as they were, were merely a by-

product of their labors. It was the women they were trying to help who truly gained from that core group's efforts.

From the time of their formalization, SWAN provided English classes for not only women, but all members of the Sudanese community. They organized economic empowerment activities and trainings which gave women the skills and knowledge to earn money and even to set up their own businesses. With a steady income, the burdens of rent, feeding their children, and earning their education fees were lifted. Their ability to provide for themselves and their families became an immeasurable source of pride. In place of the initial fear and invalidation they found in Nairobi, they found a power and a strength which allowed them to raise their heads and fearlessly face each coming day.

### **Life as a Bird**

Though SWAN had finally come together and was working on implementing its initiatives of education and empowerment, the challenges did not simply fall away. Nor was Rebecca immune to the obstacles of living in a foreign land. When Rebecca's first child was born in 1993, she found herself experiencing hardships she had seen the other women go through. But until now, she could not truly comprehend them.

Many times Rebecca had dreamed that her children would have childhoods somewhat like hers, filled with laughter and ever-present uncles, aunts, grandparents, and cousins. She imagined for them the freedom she had to explore her environment and her ideas, and a home with a courtyard where she could play. Now, as she held her son Ganjwok, or Win, the disparities between her dreams and reality flooded her mind.

For the third time in Rebecca's four years of living in Nairobi, she was evicted. She had been living in a small house in a section of Nairobi called Zimmerman, far from the city center. Due to its distance from the hub of activity, the rent was more reasonable, although still difficult for Rebecca to manage. She had no job. The little income she scraped together came from her commission from the economic empowerment activities at SWAN. But it was not nearly enough. Each month she struggled to pull together the rent, oftentimes late. So, when her landlord requested that Rebecca come up with three months' rent in advance, she was not surprised. She liked her landlord and he had always been kind to her in the past, but he also had to earn a living for his family. His request was his thoughtful way of telling her he needed to rent the home to someone he knew could afford it.

In Nairobi, Rebecca had constantly faced impossible choices such as this. Did she leave of her own accord or wait to be officially evicted? Perhaps if she still led the life of a revolutionary with only herself to take care of, she would still be in the bush or in Addis fighting. But now, graced with the gift of a child, she faced a different kind of fight. She was a mother first, a revolutionary second. She could no longer run off to wherever the SPLM/A needed her. She needed a stable environment, away from the heart of the war, where she could raise Win.

Because of her strong sense of pride, Rebecca opted to leave the house on her own rather than be evicted. She had nowhere to go, but she recalled a passage from the Bible:

Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 6.26-29. New Revised Standard Version.

Through every challenge she faced, Rebecca felt that she, like the birds, would find a way to survive.

She knew what she was to herself, to Lam, and to Win, but here in Nairobi, who was she? She had temporary documents that allowed her to navigate life in the city, but she was not a refugee or in official exile. She struggled daily with a lack of external identity and faced the mounting pressure to provide for her child.

Oftentimes, however, the kindness of others provided for her. Lam, from the frontlines, would ask friends going to Nairobi to check on Rebecca and Win, and they would help in whatever way they could. Rebecca would send messages back to Lam through friends as well. And sometimes those closer to her in proximity would find a way to help. Her friend and relative, Dr. Adwok Adiang, also lived in Nairobi. He was among those who had extended his hand to Rebecca in her times of need. She went to him when she could not manage otherwise. On several occasions, he unselfishly helped Rebecca with her rent. She would never forget his kindness.

And so it went day to day, dealing with what came next. Win, the revolution, SWAN, and another nongovernmental organization (NGO) Rebecca helped to establish, Sudanese Women's Voice for Peace (SWVP),<sup>12</sup> remained the constants in her life. Her sisters at SWAN and SWVP, with their own challenging conditions, knew all too well the stress that this kind of life caused. So, when she was forced to leave Zimmerman with no place to go, she called on her friend and fellow SWAN member, Madalena Sule. Madalena readily took Rebecca and Win into her home.

That day, Rebecca had no home of her own, but she had the kindness and generosity of others. Tomorrow would bring a new array of questions, demands, and impossible choices.

---

<sup>12</sup> SWVP is comprised of women, including some members of SWAN, who wanted to have a forum to discuss and articulate peace issues concerning Sudan. The organization was founded in 1994, not long after the formalization of SWAN.

Today, she and Win were cradled in the warmth of Madalena's home. She would be ready for tomorrow armed with the gifts of education and responsibility from her parents, and with the passage she carried in her memory. "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them."

### **The Peace Tent**

In 1995, the same year that Rebecca had been evicted from her third home, the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women was held in Beijing, China. Representatives from governments around the globe convened in China to address issues such as health, governance, and peace in relation to the advancement of all women. In addition, over 30,000 representatives from NGOs and civil society organizations from every corner of the world attended the NGO Forum preceding the government forum.<sup>13</sup> The NGO Forum provided the opportunity for those working at the grassroots level to share their varied experiences and efforts towards the betterment of women in their communities, countries, and regions.

Along with six of her colleagues from SWVP, Rebecca arrived in China to attend the NGO Forum. The women from SWVP came to Beijing with a clear mandate to carry the voices of the southern Sudanese women to the international community. They represented the women who had experienced first-hand the ravages of war. Throughout the history of war in Sudan,

---

<sup>13</sup> The structure and purpose of the NGO Forum is most aptly described by the Executive Director of the forum, Irene Santiago of the Philippines: "While UN conferences provide an arena for NGO input on international issues being discussed by governments, NGO Forums have always provided the space for articulation of new and emerging issues, or evaluation of strategies used in dealing with current problems in order to increase the effectiveness of NGO work at all levels. . . . The NGO Forum on Women '95 was an occasion for women to reflect on lessons learned from past work and struggles and to create new agendas for the future. . . . The agenda-setting objective . . . was accomplished not only through plenaries but also through a rich program of more than 4,000 workshops, panels, tribunals, congresses, exhibits, video screenings, and cultural activities." Irene Santiago, Foreword to *Look at the World Through Their Eyes: Plenary Speeches from the NGO Forum on Women, Beijing '95*, ed. Eva Friedlander (New York: NGO Forum on Women, Beijing '95, Inc., 1996), xix-xvii.

these women had suffered the losses of their families, their homes and their own identities as many of them had been internally displaced or had left Sudan to provide a safe environment for their children. Yet through their struggles, the southern Sudanese women had found each other and gained an understanding of their collective strength. The women of SWVP were in Beijing not only to give voice to the women of southern Sudan, but also to gain wisdom from the stories of women from all over the world who had also suffered, yet found the strength to work for social change.

By the time of the conference in Beijing, the second civil war in Sudan had been raging for over a decade. The years of oppression and underdevelopment of the south had spread a pervasive mistrust between the southerners and the stronghold government of Khartoum in the north. Despite all of this, the women of Sudan from both the north and the south had been making attempts to work together to find a common ground. As SWVP grew as an organization, so did their awareness of the importance of inclusiveness within the peace process. The women of SWVP had witnessed the marginalization of areas other than southern Sudan, such as the Nuba Mountains and the region of the Blue Nile.<sup>14</sup> Rebecca's former colleague from Radio SPLA, Mary James, was from the Nuba Mountains and a member of SWVP. As a woman who had suffered from the war, but was not technically part of the south or the north, Mary represented the need to create space for all women affected by war whether from north, south, east, or west.

Convening in China were women from all areas of Sudan: women working for the government and for civil society organizations, women from the south, north, Nuba Mountains,

---

<sup>14</sup> Together with Abyei, these regions are commonly referred to as the "three areas." Rebel groups from the areas, also trying to escape marginalization by the north, fought alongside the SPLM/A, though they are not technically part of southern Sudan.

Blue Nile, and women like Rebecca who were living in exile. This was a prime opportunity for these women to work together, to forge a new path for peace in Sudan.

Rebecca felt a relative freedom being so far from home, a freedom to express herself openly without the worry of her words being reported back to anyone. Inside Sudan and even in Kenya, the war situation made her cautious of what she said or did. But here, she had left her revolutionary identity behind and, in its place, identified as a woman who had been hurt by war, who wanted peace, and who was ready to work for it.

A space known as the Peace Tent, a large covered area, was provided for groups to gather to organize their presentations for the forum or set up tables with posters, brochures, and signs advocating their cause. When Rebecca and her colleagues entered the tent they always sat together. The northern women conspicuously sat somewhere else. Tensions that had existed for decades could not easily be dissolved.

Throughout the conference, waves of conflict and dialogue passed between the women delegates of Sudan. The women from the north held a demonstration in support of human rights for Islamic countries. Rage swept through the women from the south. How could these women speak of human rights for other nations when children were dying in their own country? Midway through the conference, another major confrontation broke out when the Sudanese women were asked to stage a cultural representation of their country. The northern women and the women from the south simply could not jointly represent Sudan; the cultures of each community were vastly different. The women of the south felt a great deal of animosity when the women of the north suggested they work together on this. “Why not? We are all Sudanese,” the northern women said, casually casting aside forty years of oppression.

Rebecca, with her own anger and frustrations, was an active participant in these skirmishes. She herself had been oppressed and had worked for the revolution, fighting for the south's right to self-determination. And despite it all, or perhaps because of her experiences, she knew that the path to peace was a path that all parties, oppressor and oppressed, needed to walk together. Scraping away the layers of anger and hatred of the "other" was easier said than done, but Rebecca was compelled to engage in dialogue with the northern women and all of the parties representing Sudan. Soon, outbursts of tension were interspersed with moments of sustained dialogue about their differences. They made advances toward finding common ground and understanding. Still, Rebecca wanted more. She wanted dedication and commitment from both parties that each would, in their own capacities, continue what they had started together in Beijing; she wanted an articulated understanding on paper.

With only a few days left before the end of the conference, Rebecca and her colleagues extended a verbal invitation to all the Sudanese women to meet in the Peace Tent the following day to draft a document. It did not have to be lengthy, just something that related the common vision of the women's hopes for the future. A few of the women from the north agreed to the meeting. The following morning came and went, yet the only people at the table were the women from the south. Undaunted, Rebecca found the phone number of Bedria, a lawyer from the north, to ask why she had not come. Bedria excused herself and her colleagues by saying they had been caught up in preparations for their return home. Rebecca pressed Bedria to arrange for a second meeting. They agreed to meet the following morning at Bedria's hotel in the middle of Beijing.

The women from SWVP had been staying near the NGO Forum site in Hairou, thirty kilometers from Beijing. With the intense business of the forum (nearly 500 activities occurring every day for ten days), Rebecca had not yet ventured into the chaos of the city, its maze of roads

and masses of people. When Rebecca had asked the other women from SWVP to go with her to Beijing, only Mary James volunteered. The other women were feeling the pressure of preparing to go home. Mary not only wanted to help draft the document, she also did not want Rebecca to wander through Beijing alone.

The next morning, Rebecca and Mary hailed a cab in Hairou. Someone helped them tell the cab driver the name of the hotel they needed to get to, but he only dropped them off near the hotel and vaguely gestured in its general direction. Rebecca and Mary towered above the throngs of people in the streets as they searched for the hotel. Their colorful dresses and long strides stood out among the business of the city. At last they found the hotel.

As Rebecca and Mary stepped inside Bedria's room, they felt a sense of relief when they saw five other women from the north there to work on the document as well. It was an indication to Rebecca that all of her pressing and urging was not in vain.

After talking over tea first, as is customary for Sudanese, one of the women, Leila Al-Maghrabi, a renowned journalist from the north, agreed to draft the agreement of understanding using the shared principles and ideas of the entire group. Using just a small piece of paper, she wrote out by hand the declaration that these women had developed at the conference, and that they were, heretofore, committed to work for peace by networking and communicating for the future peace of Sudan. Once she had finished, the women listened as the draft was read back to them. They discussed. They made revisions. They worked together until everyone was satisfied. But the process did not take long. The women already knew how they felt, what they wanted. The transfer of their thoughts and hopes to paper was simply an extension of their experiences together in Beijing. Through waves of opposition and unity, they had made their way.

Two copies of the paper were written out by hand to carry back to Sudan: one document went with the women of the south, the other with the women of the north. In Rebecca's mind, those pieces of paper represented a promising declaration of things to come. Once home, Rebecca had thought that the documents would remain a symbol of women working together, simply a reminder for each group of what they had done. But later, Rebecca saw an entire newspaper article in a Khartoum daily devoted to the story of their time in Beijing. The women from the north had come home and spread the word. They had made a public declaration that they were personally committed to working with women from throughout Sudan for peace in their country. When Rebecca laid her eyes on the copy of their document printed alongside the story in the newspaper, it reaffirmed what she already knew: this was only the beginning.

### **A Life without Him**

On February 12, 1998, Rebecca returned home from the BBC office in Nairobi where she was working as a sub-editor. With Lam still fighting for the revolution in the bush, Rebecca was using her education and skills to make ends meet for her family.

Exhausted, she curled up in the sitting room with her baby daughter as her son played near her feet. Rebecca switched on the radio and began listening to the 6:15 broadcast of BBC's *Focus on Africa*, but sat up as she heard the report that a Sudanese plane carrying senior military and political leaders had crashed in southern Sudan, killing a number of people on board. Among those reported dead was the Sudanese Vice-President, Al-Zubair Muhammad Saleh. John, one of the Sudanese youth staying with her at the time, sat across the room also listening to the radio. Rebecca turned to him, "It may not be just Zubair alone." Intuition told her that she knew someone else on that plane, whether a relative or the husband of a friend. As Rebecca listened,

she heard that Arok Thon Arok, a well-known and beloved revolutionary in the SPLM-United, was reported among the deceased. She felt a wave of panic, like currents of electricity, run through her as the reporters imparted what little information they had about the plane which had crashed into the Sobat River.

The memories of Arok came back to her. He had always called her by her full name, Rebecca Joshua Okwaci, and said it just the way she had announced herself on the radio, letting her know he was always following her broadcasts. She remembered his easy smile in spite of the pain of war and the years of imprisonment he had endured.

Arok had been seen as a traitor by the SPLM/A when he was allegedly seen conversing with some northern Sudanese on a trip to the United Kingdom (UK). At the time, the SPLM/A leadership had little trust in engaging with the government of the north in peace talks, while some in their ranks, such as Arok, saw a chance at ending the war. For his alleged treachery, he had been held captive without charge in one of the SPLM/A's many prisons. After nearly seven years of incarceration, he managed to escape with other fellow prisoners. Arok and Lam then worked closely to put forth the agenda of SPLM-United: the recognition of human rights within the SPLM/A and the right to self-determination for southern Sudan. Arok's death was a loss for the SPLM-United and for southern Sudan.

In 1995, due to differences of opinion on the proper direction of the SPLM-United, Lam and Riek Machar parted ways. Lam became the chairman of the SPLM-United and continued to work for the right of self-determination in the south. Riek formed the South Sudan Independence Movement/Army (SSIM/A), which leaned towards the goal of complete independence for the south. By 1997, the fatigue of fourteen years of war had influenced the SPLM-United to begin peace talks with the government in Khartoum, culminating in the Fashoda Peace Agreement of

September. Members of the SPLM-United and the Government of Sudan who were trying to implement the agreement were the passengers of the plane.

As darkness fell around Nairobi, the tension in Rebecca had built. There was no news about the other passengers aboard the plane. Who among them had she known? Shortly after ten o'clock the phone rang. Lam's brother, Yohanis, a lawyer living in the UK, was on the other end saying he had heard from his connections in Khartoum. Lam had been a passenger on the plane, but he was fine. Rebecca had not considered the possibility that her husband had been on the plane; the shock of it intensified the electricity already coursing through her. Her thoughts and prayers had been with others in her community. Yohanis' words, intended to comfort her, brought confusion. He would surely do anything to spare her pain. He could be lying. Even if Lam wasn't dead, he was at the very least, severely injured. There was also the chance that her brother-in-law was telling the truth, that Lam, indeed, was safe.

This internal conversation kept Rebecca company throughout the night as she played the argument over and over again in her head, trying to rationalize through the uncertainty, as if wading through the muddy swamp of the Sudd. Rebecca held her unwavering faith in God, which stood as a guiding sentinel for her to follow. By morning, Rebecca had rationalized her way to the belief that Lam was alive. Her confirmation came when Lam's elder sister arrived at the door at six o'clock. She was alone. If Lam was truly gone, she would have arrived surrounded by family. They would have appeared in a throng of support to carry her through her mourning.

Rebecca's sister-in-law once again confirmed that Lam was on the plane. Out of fifty-seven passengers, thirty-one died, many of them drowning in their attempts to escape the plane

and the engorging river. Rebecca was told Lam walked away with only a bruise on his foot. Her relief washed over her, yet in her heart she still could not believe that Lam was so unscathed.

Throughout the morning, Rebecca's house filled with her community away from home. The women made tea, held her children, and held her. In the absence of her sister, Martha, there were other Marthas to support her. Rebecca had worked hard to save Win and her baby daughter Nyadak, or Wong, now two years old, from the panic and trauma of war. Despite the hard times Rebecca faced, she always stayed strong for her children. Now, however, when they were out of earshot she would break. The women would lay Rebecca's head on their shoulders and their hands around her waist. They felt her tears run down their arms.

All through the day the phone rang persistently as more friends filled the house with warmth and support, but no call from Lam. Nobody was sure if they could believe the official reports that bad weather had forced the plane to go down. Nevertheless, Rebecca stayed firm in her belief that nobody in the north would sacrifice their vice president for Lam, Arok, or any of the other members of the SPLM-United.

On the third day of waiting, the phone rang yet again. When Rebecca answered, Lam's voice brought her to silence. She had no words to convey the comforting pain and undeniable reality that Lam was alive. Beyond all of the confusion and theories and angst of the past few days lay a truth which reined above all others: she had not yet had the chance to live a family life. In life without war, if a wife loses her husband, others may tell her to appreciate the time she had with him when he was alive. Rebecca had not yet had that time. The struggles of her country, her family, the people of Sudan, and the sacrifices that both she and Lam had made had consumed any notion of an ordinary marriage. She could not be consoled by remembering a life with him. She could only hope in the possibility that such a life would someday exist.

## The Chairman

The military car bumped its way along the road to the SPLM/A military post in Yei, a small city in southern Sudan. Rebecca held her recording equipment tightly to her chest. The four soldiers sitting around her in the back of the car eyed her suspiciously.

“Who is she? Is she a Kenyan? Is she a journalist?” The men spoke in the Dinka language which Rebecca could follow with some difficulty. Still, she kept quiet.

From the side of the road, crowds of children and the rest of the town cheered the motorcade of official SPLM/A cars and military trucks. As the procession made its way out of town and into nothingness, the soldiers became concerned. Rebecca had simply jumped into the car when the motorcade was leaving. She had recognized the front-seat passenger as one of the most senior SPLM/A officials and knew she wanted to be wherever he was going. A screen divided the front of the car from the back and had kept him from noticing her. But the soldiers sitting next to her were now uneasy with her presence. Her civilian dress, the equipment she was carrying, and her silence were quickly fueling their suspicions.

Finally, one of them asked Rebecca in his broken English, “Who are you?”

She replied, “I am I. Who are you?”

The men reared back. “You can’t see who we are?”

Their uniforms and AK-47s were clear signs that they were SPLM/A soldiers. Rebecca knew this, of course, but was buying time until the car came closer to the post.

“Where are you going?” the soldiers asked.

“I am going where you are going,” said Rebecca.

“Where?” they asked.

“Where Dr. Garang is. People want to see him.”

As an executive producer with Sudan Radio Service,<sup>15</sup> Rebecca had come to Yei to cover a workshop held by an NGO called Skills for Southern Sudan. The organization strove to take stock of and foster within the people of southern Sudan the skills needed to implement and sustain the peace expected to come to the south. The year was 2004 and the six protocols, the culmination of peace negotiations between the SPLM/A and the Sudanese government, were paving a path toward that peace.<sup>16</sup> Many SPLM/A officials came to the workshop to share their vision of a peaceful Sudan and delineate the types of job opportunities that would become available as a result of the peace. This was the story that Rebecca was assigned to cover.

The day before Rebecca's departure to Yei, however, the SPLM/A made a surprise announcement that Dr. Garang, the Chairman of the SPLM/A, and his colleagues would be traveling through various regions in southern Sudan to talk about the six protocols. Yei was one of Garang's destinations and his presence there fell concurrently with the Skills workshop. Victor, Rebecca's colleague in charge of the news department at Sudan Radio Service, would follow her a day later to cover the story.

A buzz began during the opening of the workshop that Dr. Garang would be arriving at any moment in Yei. The SPLM/A officials attending the workshop quickly got up to leave; it was their duty to greet Garang when he landed at the airport. All of a sudden, the environment became electric with activity. Everybody was mobilizing and piling into cars to go and receive Garang. Rebecca negotiated her way into accompanying the SPLM/A team to cover his arrival by convincing a senior SPLM/A officer that it was in the SPLM/A's best interest to allow it. She

---

<sup>15</sup> Rebecca had been with the BBC nearly six years when the nascent Sudan Radio Service offered her a position. In her new job, she enjoyed relative freedom to work in the field in Sudan, produce radio programs aimed at women and gender equity, and have more time for her children.

<sup>16</sup> On October 31, 2003, Lam and Salva Kiir, second-in-line to Garang, signed a declaration reuniting the SPLM/A and the SPLM-United, stating that the two sides had mended their differences and were in agreement that a unified revolution was the only way to bring about a fair and just peace.

advised him that friendly relations with the press and positive publicity were simply good political strategies. In her mind, she thought perhaps she could get an exclusive interview with Garang.

The airport was covered in a burst of color as women gathered to sing and perform their local dances in response to Garang's arrival. The excitement and energy of the moment pervaded the atmosphere. But disappointment came when the flight, without any public explanation, was delayed. After a long wait, Garang's plane arrived at last. When the hatch opened, he emerged with his wife and bodyguards to find a crowd of supporters and fellow revolutionaries cheering him on. Yet, within moments, he was quickly rushed off to his heavily guarded motorcade, which Rebecca covertly joined.

Now, here she sat, with four SPLM/A soldiers wondering about this strange woman. "You want to see Garang?" they asked, as if they could not imagine what she might want with him.

Finally, she began to reveal her purpose. "I'm actually a journalist," she said. "Just like any other journalist, I want to cover Garang's arrival."

The men began speaking Dinka once more, debating whether this woman was Kenyan, doubting that she could be Sudanese.

"You, a journalist?" they asked.

"Yes, I'm a journalist," she answered.

"Which country you come from?" they asked.

She told them she came from Sudan.

"Eh? You are a girl of Sudan?" they said in astonishment.

"Yes," she replied.

“And you are a Sudanese journalist?” The soldiers’ bewilderment was evolving into respect.

She asked them if they ever listened to the radio. They told her they did not listen often, but once upon a time there was the Radio SPLA. They informed her that it had been shut down in 1991.

“Do you remember anyone from Radio SPLA?” she asked.

“Yes,” they replied, “Sudanese women, Mary and Rebecca.” They openly admired the strength of their Sudanese sisters on the radio long ago.

“Did you ever see Rebecca?” she asked coyly.

“No. That was a long time ago,” they told her.

She egged them on. “Do you remember her voice?”

They said that it was too long ago to remember.

“Well,” she said with triumph in her voice, “If you allow me to go with you now, I am Rebecca.”

Immediately, any last shreds of military bravado evaporated and the remainder of the car ride was more than hospitable.

When they arrived at the SPLM/A military post outside of Yei, the soldiers scattered to fall into ranks, leaving Rebecca to try and spot Garang through the chaos. But Garang had been whisked inside the post so quickly that she never even caught a glimpse of him.

For three days, Rebecca and Victor continued to report the news from Yei, both the Skills activities and the news of Garang and the protocols. But Rebecca knew that time was closing in on her chance to interview the chairman. She seized her opportunity when she found Samson Kwaje, the SPLM/A Secretary for Information and official spokesperson at an SPLM/A rally

later that day. With her position at Sudan Radio Service and his position with the SPLM/A, the two had crossed paths on several occasions.

She approached him determined. “Dr. Samson, I want to have an exclusive interview with Garang.”

Samson looked at her with feigned pity. “Madam, Dr. Garang is very busy. There is a lot he’s doing. I don’t think I will put you in the program now. Only media organizations that are booked are getting interviews.”

Rebecca refused to take this as the final word. “Dr. Samson, with all due respect, I don’t have to book an interview with Dr. Garang. After all, I am Sudanese and Sudan Radio Service is a Sudanese program. So, who booked? The BBC? Fine, put me on after the BBC.” Rebecca continued, “I don’t have a quarrel with the BBC, but now they are everything. The moment peace is signed in Sudan, the BBC will go away and look for other conflict areas and you will come looking for Rebecca. So, please, let us have good relationships now.”

Samson began to get bothered, “Oh, Madam Rebecca, why are you so hot sometimes?”

She asserted, “Because I need to do my work, Dr. Samson.”

In a last-ditch effort to distract her, Samson said, “Have you met your husband?”

Of course, Rebecca had seen him. Lam had been accompanying Garang in his official capacity as one of the SPLM/A senior leaders. They had greeted each other briefly yet warmly, in the manner they always did when they were in public. They were always respectful of one another’s professional positions: Rebecca as a journalist and Lam as an SPLM/A official.

Samson’s diversionary ploy had failed. Rebecca loved her husband, but she had work to do. She was determined to get an interview with Garang with or without the assistance of Samson. At that moment, Rebecca spotted the chairman walking toward her as he was heading to the rally.

He was surrounded by bodyguards and arms, the usual security. Rebecca left Samson behind and briskly walked toward Garang.

“Oh, Rebecca, how are you?” Garang greeted Rebecca warmly.

Samson tried to intervene, “Dr. Garang, Madam Rebecca with Sudan Radio Service wanted an interview with you, but I know you are very busy.”

With a calm smile amidst the excitement, Garang said, “I know we have to go to the rally, but I don’t mind.”

They crossed over to the area where the journalists from the BBC waited to conduct their scheduled interview. Rebecca, as promised, sat patiently as they solicited word of the protocols from Garang. As she looked on, a young Japanese journalist milling around the interview site approached her. He expressed his admiration that she would interview the great Garang. He had not managed to get on the program. Rebecca encouraged him, “Don’t be too nice. As soon as I leave, don’t wait. Be aggressive.”

When the BBC had finished their interview, Rebecca approached the tree under which Garang sat. She sat facing him on the wooden chair, excited and prepared. Surrounding them were Garang’s bodyguards holding their official poses: heads facing forward, AK-47s held firmly across their chests.

As they talked, Rebecca navigated through the lofty phrases he was known for using, such as “paradigm shift” and “political dispensation,” and brought his focus back to the ground, to his people. She pressed him for information on the peace process and the current priorities of the SPLM/A. She asked him about the challenges the SPLM/A faced in its potential transition from revolution to government. And finally, she brought the interview around to the topic that always burned in her mind and heart: “What is the SPLM/A doing for women?” Through it all,

Garang spoke with enthusiasm. His answers came spontaneously with every question, showing Rebecca his passion to what he and so many others had devoted their lives. She was satisfied.

Her success in finally reaching the revered SPLM/A leader was not only a great achievement for Sudan Radio Service, but for Rebecca as well. As she walked away, she turned back to see the young Japanese man sitting with Garang getting his interview.

### **What We Have Been Through**

Rebecca and John Tanza, the station manager, were leading the Sudan Radio Service team. Doki, David Amour, Elizabeth Limagur, Grace, Muneim,<sup>17</sup> and the young journalists in training were there alongside them. Everybody at Sudan Radio Service had exhausted themselves preparing for the broadcast. Now, on a sunny January morning at Nyayo Stadium, they were in Nairobi ready to cover one of the most momentous occasions in Sudan's history, the signing of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).

Rebecca had already reported from Naivasha, Kenya on the signing of the last three protocols,<sup>18</sup> which provided the framework for the CPA in May of 2004. All of the work and sweat poured into making peace possible were coming to fruition in these three negotiated settlements. Rebecca stood anxiously waiting for news while groups of people sang and danced in anticipated celebration. Lazarus Sumbeiywo, the chief negotiator of the peace talks, would occasionally appear in front of the crowd to tell them that everyone inside was working hard and to ask those waiting for their patience. Rebecca sensed the tension of the moment, like the last

---

<sup>17</sup> Just as Garang is usually referred to as "the late Dr. Garang," and Lam is referred to as Dr. Lam (no last name), names are commonly either abbreviated or extended.

<sup>18</sup> The last three protocols were focused on the issues of power-sharing, the future of the Abyei region, and the future status of the Nuba Mountains and southern Blue Nile areas. The first three protocols signed earlier were the Machakos Protocol of July 2002, which focused on the issues surrounding the south's right to self-determination, the Security Protocol signed in September 2003, and the Wealth-sharing Protocol signed in January 2004.

moments of labor before birth. The weight of all Sudan was now resting on the shoulders of those few men inside the negotiating room. Rebecca knew that among those few, Garang, Vice-President Ali Osman Mohamed Taha, and Sumbeiywo were sweating through the air conditioning, with the fate of Sudan in their hands.

After nearly a full day of waiting, Sumbeiywo appeared before the crowd to announce that the negotiations had, at last, been finalized. Garang, Taha, and the other negotiators came out to publicly sign the protocols. Among the group was also Deng Alor, Rebecca's colleague from her days with the Radio SPLA. When Rebecca saw him, she smiled, remembering him in the SPLM/A office in Nairobi after the Nasir Declaration was announced. So much had happened since then.

The signing of the protocols had been a big story for Rebecca, but it was only a lead-in to the story she now found herself covering. She listened intently as Sumbeiywo's voice echoed in Nyayo stadium announcing the beginning of the ceremony that would allow the world to witness the public signing of the CPA. As he called out the officials who walked onto the stage, each name drew strong reactions from the crowd: Daniel Arap Moi, the former president of Kenya; Yoweri Museveni, the President of Uganda and, at the time, the chair of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD);<sup>19</sup> Colin Powell representing the United States; Amr Musa representing the Arab League; representatives from the African Union, the Netherlands, Italy, and Egypt, among others. It seemed as if the whole world had descended on Nairobi to witness the signing. And even when the man whose actions inspired the second civil war, former Sudanese President Jaafar an Nimeiri, walked onto the stage, the crowd's joyfulness did not subside.

---

<sup>19</sup> IGAD is comprised of seven nations working for regional development in East Africa. The contributing nations are Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Uganda, and Kenya. IGAD had encouraged the peace negotiations between the government and SPLM/A since 1993.

As Rebecca reported the minute-by-minute happenings back to Sudan Radio Service, she was seen by the public as a journalist. While her focus was on covering the story, she also stood in the stadium representing all of the roles in which, in her own way, she had contributed to peace between the government and the south. She had sacrificed all of her adult life for the realization of this moment.

In 2000, Rebecca had been called on by the African Renaissance Institute to participate in a series of workshops geared toward peacebuilding interventions in Sudan. This intellectual forum addressed issues that would later become integral elements of the CPA, such as power-sharing, wealth-sharing, and humanitarian issues. The participants were selected based on their previous efforts for a peaceful Sudan and asked to participate as individuals, putting their affiliations with governments and organizations aside. Throughout the series of workshops, Rebecca made her presence known and contributed greatly to the issues with an eye for inclusiveness of marginalized groups, such as the people of the Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile, and Abyei.

Rebecca had also advocated for women and fought for their representation in the new government. She and her colleagues from the Sudanese Women's Empowerment for Peace (SuWEP)<sup>20</sup> network had advocated thirty percent women's representation. Every document, correspondence, or interaction any SuWEP member had with IGAD, the Dutch government, contacts in the United States, leaders in the Sudanese government, or the SPLM/A, stated with resounding clarity that, as stakeholders in the future of Sudan, the women would be represented

---

<sup>20</sup> SuWEP is a network of Sudanese women's organizations representing the north and south who have been working together toward creating a peaceful Sudan. Organizations from the north represent members of civil society organizations, the Nuba Mountains, southern women living in the north, the National Democratic Alliance (formerly known as the opposition), and the National Group (affiliated with the Sudanese government). The southern-based organizations represent the women of the SPLM, non-partisan groups (including SWVP and SWAN), SuWEP: Women Action for Development (WAD), and the Sudanese People's Democratic Front.

at the decision-making level. Present at the recent negotiation processes was a delegation of northern women and southern women living in the north from SuWEP, reflecting the collective face of Sudanese women as they reiterated their demand and simultaneously supported those at the negotiating table.

Likewise, Rebecca and Lam had supported one another throughout their marriage and the peace process. Nearly twenty years ago, they had made a joint decision to fight for the revolution together no matter what may befall either of them. Even now, when there was a seat for Rebecca next to Lam on stage, he understood why it was empty. “Where is Madam Rebecca?” his colleagues asked.

He proudly pointed down to Rebecca among her team, “Do you see the one with the recorder and the headphones around her head? She’s there.”

So, as Rebecca watched Dr. Garang enter the stadium, she was filled with pride. The old SPLM/A morale songs that filled the stadium brought back her revolutionary self. She knew them all by heart. Everything she had worked for as a journalist, as a contributing member to the process, and as a revolutionary was coming together right in front of her. Vice-President Taha, ushered in by the traditional songs of his Arab culture and roaring approval from the masses, made his appearance on the stage alongside Garang.

As Rebecca continued supplying the news to Sudan Radio Service, her eyes fell on Kenyan Ambassador Bethuel Kiplagat.

“Oh my God, my daughter,” he said at seeing her. He wrapped her up in his arms as the tears rolled down both of their faces. Ambassador Kiplagat had been working with Sudanese civil society on issues of peace since 1985. He knew Rebecca’s family from the time she was a child, when he would come to the house to visit her father. The two men had sat and discussed

Joshua's work with the Sudan Council of Churches rehabilitation projects. Rebecca's mother would cook and take care of everyone, as was her custom. Throughout Rebecca's time and efforts in Kenya, Ambassador Kiplagat would advise her and the women with whom she worked. Now, as he looked at Rebecca, this grown woman who had sacrificed so much, he knew the struggles she had suffered through and the challenges she had taken on. With profound sincerity he said to her, "I hope this is the real peace for Sudan today."

The air was electrified and laced with a slight tension. There had been peace agreements in the past. They had always been interrupted by a coup or takeover. A certain amount of hesitation was a natural reaction. Still, the magnitude of everything that it had taken, all of the work invested by so many, a collective and true desire for peace at last between the south and the government, were reflected on the faces of everyone there.

When Sumbeiywo began to call the names of the signing dignitaries, Rebecca reported every minute back to Sudan Radio Service. As they were called, the dignitaries made their way to the signing table piled high with the thick, bound copies of the agreement. All of the stakeholders, supporters, representatives of Sudan and of international organizations took their hands to the document. Through televised reporting, the whole world could see that the signatories had committed themselves to peace. The many Sudanese who had suffered could see that a new day was dawning.

As the long, involved signing process came to a close and people were beginning to exit the stadium, a small boy came running up to Rebecca. "You are Madam Rebecca, aren't you?"

Rebecca saw in him the look of a former child soldier who had ended up far from home, away from his family. She had come to know many boys just like him when they would come to the SWAN center seeking help after they had found their way to the relative haven of Nairobi.

“I want to talk with you,” he said.

In the midst of her final reporting Rebecca patiently looked at the boy. “Fine, but now I am doing my official work. Don’t go. Just stick to me. If I disappear, just follow me.”

Once Rebecca submitted her final words wrapping up her coverage of the day, she turned once again to the boy who had been waiting. “Come forward. What do you want?”

“This paper I have, this is my poetry. I write my poetry. And I want you to tell people in our country through the radio we are very happy. My English is not good. You want to write it in good English?” he said.

Rebecca looked at the scrap of paper clutched in the boy’s hand. “We respect how people express themselves. We will read it the way it is and our people will understand that.”

The boy’s bravery had paid off. “Oh, Madam Rebecca, thank you very much. I am very happy that you people are telling our relatives there. If you read this poetry, tell my brother that I am alive. I am in Nairobi and I am in Nyayo Stadium, and it is me who write this. I am fine. I am alive.”

Rebecca looked from the poet to his friend who was latched on his arm. Their faces carved themselves into her memory. To this day, Rebecca keeps that scrap of paper, stained with dirt and sweat, in her house in Nairobi. She dreams that someday she will carry it with her back to Sudan, telling the story of what they went through.

When the boys had gone and everyone had cleared out of the arena, Doki pulled out his camera and snapped a shot of Rebecca. In the photograph Rebecca is standing against the backdrop of the empty stadium, exhausted and jubilant.

## What Peace Brings

After the signing of the CPA in 2005, the transition from war to peace has brought its own unique challenges and hopes. As the concept of peace seeps in and takes the place of the environment of war, it also gives way to the Herculean tasks of implementation and development. Much is left unsettled.

The process of implementation of the CPA is in progress and Rebecca is acutely aware of the progress thus far.

The process toward physically having the structures [of government] filled with human beings was, to me, one of the successes of the implementation. Having the ten southern states established was also a great achievement because before we had only three regions. For the first time, we are going to have a system of government in those areas.<sup>21</sup>

To Rebecca, laying these foundations will help everything else move along. “If you don’t put things properly it will be difficult to move.” The restructuring of military forces and the formation of commissions on anti-corruption and disarmament are underway.

There are other elements of the peace agreement also in progress or pending implementation. The border demarcation of the thirteenth parallel, which will define the border between the north and the south, weighs heavy on the minds of those who identify themselves as southerners. In 2011, the citizens of southern Sudan will hold a referendum to decide whether they will continue work toward a united Sudan or secede and become an independent nation. It is a decision that hangs on the work that is being done now. “It’s important to work toward [the border demarcation] because it will become thorny at the time we are talking about self-determination. We don’t want the referendum to come when we don’t have it. It has to be very clear.”

---

<sup>21</sup> All direct quotations in this section are taken from interviews with Rebecca Joshua Okwaci between September 19 and November 10, 2006.

On a personal level for Rebecca, there are more questions than answers in regard to her future. Currently, she is still living in Nairobi, but the dream at the forefront of her mind and heart is to have her family together.

After these long decades of being apart as a family, all in the name of liberation, freedom, and justice, I feel it's time for the family to be reunited—what we call family in our African culture: husband, wife, children, and maybe extended family and relatives.

But, even though family is her primary focus, Rebecca will never stop working towards a brighter future for Sudan. She is constantly looking forward to the next steps.

Some of Rebecca's professional dreams revolve around the media and working with radio or newspapers in Sudan. While she is still an executive producer with Sudan Radio Service in Nairobi, she has already been asked by several press organizations within Sudan to join their ranks when she returns home. But she also has dreams of continuing to incorporate media into the peace and development of Sudan. She has an idea of using radio to unite communities; she envisions daily reports of births, community happenings, and news that directly impact community members. The radio would be an opportunity to give everyone a voice, and she insists that everybody will speak in their own language to break down the communication barriers that translation often builds.

Rebecca also dreams of developing a media unit within her most recent civil society organization aimed at women, Women Action for Development (WAD). Within SuWEP, Rebecca was part of the SPLM-United Working Group doing outreach with SPLM-United members to sensitize them to the tangible issues that would create peace in Sudan. When peace was becoming a more believable concept, the women of SuWEP wanted to concentrate on the core relationship between peace and development, so Rebecca and her colleagues transformed their group into WAD. They originally had funding from the Dutch government, but that came to

an end with the signing of the CPA. Now, it is up to Rebecca and a very small number of others to keep WAD running.

In the meantime, Rebecca is nurturing WAD to become a strong, thriving organization. She hopes to one day build a Peace and Development Center in Malakal that would be “a home for women to impart our knowledge, education, and to do our trainings” on issues such as trauma counseling, HIV/AIDS and health, street children, and poverty. Rebecca also has plans for the center to be self-supported, using some of the income-generating skills she learned in Kenya. But the work is not easy and Rebecca knows it will take time and dedication, both of which she is more than willing to give.

At the same time, SWAN is still alive and Rebecca still a member. This organization, like WAD, is going through a transition. The dream is to have SWAN groups in each state of Sudan. “We talked about it and the women who are caretakers during this transitional period were planning to go to Juba to see how to move on slowly, to see how to establish ourselves when we have some feet on the ground, and then we can start going into the states.” Rebecca sees SWAN as representative of continuity and progress. “I think having SWAN alive, especially at the beginning [of the transition], will help to always refer to it as a successful story.”

As is Rebecca’s natural way, she is a forward-thinker on this issue too. With SWAN being present in all states and a hopeful future for WAD, she believes that the power of the two organizations possibly working together will provide an even stronger presence of women working toward gender equality throughout Sudan. WAD and SWAN will be looking to help support the women and communities with the challenges the transition brings.

The women who are returning home to their villages face a certain set of challenges. The time spent in refugee camps or in other countries with other cultural norms has changed them.

They face certain stigmas associated with their adaptation to those places.

You have women who are coming from the displaced camps who want to go back to their villages. The people who [remained] in the community feel they are the people who endured the suffering. Sometimes they don't think that others also suffered. They feel like these [returnees] are coming in big numbers and competing over present resources. Therefore, there are small conflicts that we have to continue to guard against. And when [the returnees] come, [those who stayed say], 'You are those people who are coming with money, with things from the refugee camps.' When somebody appears with clean clothes, right away they say, 'This one is not from here.' Some speak very fluent Arabic, so people say, 'Are these the ones who have been influenced by Arabs? Are they coming with Arab cultures?'

This mindset has the potential to bring back certain fears to the villagers who remained, such as the imposition of Arab culture and laws on the African communities, as has happened before.

Rebecca sees the women's organizations like SWAN and WAD taking on issues like these.

"How do we help them economically so they don't feel like the ones in the villages are poor and the ones who are coming from the outside are rich?"

Another major challenge for the women from the SuWEP network is that many were appointed to government positions both in the Sudanese government and the Government of Southern Sudan.<sup>22</sup> With the tornado effect of the agreement, many of these women needed to report to their posts, either in Juba or Khartoum, immediately, leaving them virtually no time to tend to their families' needs. As a result, many were forced to leave their children behind in the care of relatives or hired help.

Rebecca recalls running into one of her old friends, who is currently working in the government, at a training workshop in Nairobi. Rebecca teased her friend for not telling her she

---

<sup>22</sup> The CPA provided that there would be three levels of government within Sudan: the national government based in Khartoum, the Government of Southern Sudan based in Juba, and state-level governments for each of the newly created ten states of Sudan.

was coming to Kenya, joking that she thought she was too important these days to call on a simple person like Rebecca. The woman poured out her story, exasperated. She had been sent to South Africa on government business and then immediately sent to Nairobi for this training. She was living in Khartoum, but her children were still in Kenya. It was a rare chance for her to see them and sort out what she was going to do about their future. Her husband was in the government in Juba and essentially in the same position as his wife. Rebecca saw her friend's fatigue and anxiety over her children's well-being and offered to help her close up her house in Kenya so she could relocate her children to Khartoum with her.

Though Rebecca received an invitation to join the government when it was still being formed, she is grateful that she instead decided to pause and survey the potential impact of the peace on her and her family. She knew she needed time to sort out her family situation before she made any other life-impacting commitments. When she sees the situations of some of her friends now, she feels secure in the choices she has made. But she also cannot turn away from the work she has been cultivating for the last twenty years. "I have things to do. I need to write. I need to read. I need to talk."

Rebecca, perhaps as a result from her "training" in the revolution and the ever-present looming of the unknown, is taking things step by step. When she speaks of her life, she contemplates not only what has been, but what will come. "Whatever I suffered for and toiled for and sacrificed all my life, if it's coming into fruition today, then I'm proud of my past. And I'm also proud of my future."

## Bibliography

Government of the Republic of The Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Sudan People's Liberation Army. *Comprehensive Peace Agreement*. 2005.

Johnson, Douglas H. *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003.

Santiago, Irene. Foreword to *Look at the World Through Their Eyes: Plenary Speeches from the NGO Forum on Women, Beijing '95*, ed. Eva Friedlander, xix-xvii. New York: NGO Forum on Women, Beijing '95, Inc., 1996.

Scroggins, Emma. *Emma's War*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2002; New York: Vintage Books, 2004.