

RELIGION, IDENTITY, AND TRANSNATIONALISM:  
SOUTH SUDANESE COMMUNITY BUILDING IN INDIANA

A THESIS

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What I saw now was the community imperfect and irresolute but held together by the frayed and always fraying, incomplete and yet ever-holding bonds of the various sorts of affection.

-Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow*

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Beginning in the early 1990s, the United States began accepting refugees displaced by the civil war in the Sudan. Most of these refugees were from the southern part of Sudan and faced cultural, political, and religious persecution. Sudanese in the south also faced enslavement by Northerners, were denied economic development by the government, and had unequal political rights. Less than one percent of Southern Sudanese who were displaced internationally by this civil war were resettled as refugees to the United States. Only a fraction of these refugees made it to the Midwestern state of Indiana where they began new lives and slowly started forming a community.

Refugees face many challenges during resettlement in a new country, such as finding jobs and language learning. Many seek out or create migrant community organizations to help navigate life in a new society. Community organizations also help migrants to negotiate a balance between maintaining ethnic and cultural ties with incorporation into a new society. This thesis explores the ways in which a group of South Sudanese in Indiana overcomes differences and builds community rooted in Christianity. This research also aims to illuminate the importance of the community building process to the task that migrants face in negotiating a

balance between incorporation and transnationalism, and how these factors impact transnational participation.

This project challenges ideas of refugees as helpless by highlighting their roles as agents in the process of community building (see also Shandy 2007). Additionally, this study will be important for documenting and describing some of the ways in which South Sudanese in Indiana build community and incorporate into local, national, and transnational social networks. Therefore, it may also be useful to combat the negative rhetoric within national media of the need to fully assimilate foreign-born residents into the larger American society.

### **Research Questions**

Central to this study will be the investigation of the relationship between religion and community building for South Sudanese in Indiana. Christianity served a key role in the lives of South Sudanese during the civil wars. Therefore, I ask what the continuing role of religion is in the process of community building and for establishing unity for this community in Indiana. Next, I ask how the space of community and religious organizations help facilitate transnational participation, and how this is impacted by incorporation into American society. Finally, I ask why it is important for adults in this community to pass ethnic, cultural, and religious identity to children.

### **Organization of Thesis**

This thesis on South Sudanese in Indiana is split up into seven chapters. Following this introduction, the second chapter provides an overview of the literature covering migration studies concerning assimilation, anthropological studies on South Sudanese refugees in the United States, and lays the foundation of the theoretical framework of transnationalism. This second chapter also provides definitions of key terms used throughout this research. Chapter

three lays out the methods of this study, including data gathering and analysis. It also describes the sample population, field site, and research timeline. Chapter four provides background and a historical overview of South Sudanese refugees, covering colonialism, the Sudanese civil wars, and resettlement in Indiana. This chapter highlights the historical role of religion in the lives of South Sudanese. The following chapter presents the findings of this study and is split into two parts. The first section examines some of the reasons why the South Sudanese in Indiana build community, while the second section covers the religious organization. Chapter six provides a discussion of the findings and is split into three sections, examining the importance of religion to community building, the challenges and benefits of maintaining transnational social networks, and how the community creates alternative ways of fulfilling a sense of duty to give back to South Sudan. Chapter seven revisits the guiding research questions and presents my conclusions. This final chapter also discusses limitations of this study and provides further research recommendations.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

Global migrations of humans have been taking place for at least two million years when *Homo erectus* exited tropical Africa to begin what would be a worldwide expansion into every environment of earth (Jablonski 2012:47). With the eventual rise of civilization and political states came the construction of nation-states, or political states that contain a group of people who share a national identity and culture. These social and political constructions took little consideration of the societies that existed prior to nation-state building. In fact, many of the boundaries that make up nation-states cut through pre-existing societies and separated people groups from the land they once inhabited (McNulty 1995:43). Ever since nation-states began establishing boundaries, whether by geographic or political calculations, people have lived their lives, built homes, and moved in ways that transverse these borders.

Refugees are people who have been displaced – such as by war and persecution – and forced to flee to safety across nation-state borders and are unable to return. Many refugees choose to live transnationally, which can be defined as participating socially, politically and economically in multiple nation-states (Basch et al. 1994). Anthropological studies have revealed that transnational groups are not easily defined as located within a generalized category or

cultural formation because they situate their lives in multi-national fields of social connection (Kearney 1995). Globalization has created a world where borders are less of an obstacle to the flow of ideas, people, and capital. Therefore, people groups are increasingly deterritorialized and can no longer simply be understood as closed in by the strict political boundaries of nation-states (Appadurai 1996). The deterritorialization of human groups, as well as the cultural flows of a globalized world, complicates generalizations of migrants as bounded within immutable ethno-cultural formations.

Some theorize that the social lives of people within this time of transition, such as refugees, are put on hold. “This analytical framework of lost culture or meaning has undergirded the theoretical construction of refugees as unidimensional objects, rather than actors, in their own lives” (Shandy 2007:10). On the other hand, others have documented life in refugee camps demonstrating active participation in the continuing social transformation of social life even in times of transition (Brown 2008; Coker 2008). Refugees are actors and decision makers within their own lives and, therefore, must be portrayed as active agents in the construction of a sense of belonging. Others within migration studies (such as Glick Schiller 2009) have argued for a global perspective within this field of study. They argue that migration research has generally reflected the social and political stance of the nation-state in which it is performed and therefore a global perspective will break the bondage some theorists have with their own nation-state.

This study seeks to portray the agency of refugees in processes of community building. Below is an examination and discussion of previous literature concerning South Sudanese community building in the context of refugee resettlement. An overview of migration literature concerning assimilation helps in setting the stage for theorizing transnationalism and the importance of this theoretical framework to understanding transnational community building.

## **Migration & Assimilation**

Migration studies during the period extending from the 1880's to the 1920's understood migration as a global phenomenon. Studies such as Ratzel (1882) "reflected the assumptions of his times, namely, that the movements of people were normal and natural" (Glick Schiller 2009:18). The migration of peoples across the globe was understood as a result of gaining access to scarce resources. Due the unequal distribution of resources around the globe, particularly in industrialized nation-states, people increasingly immigrated to those countries where resources, such as more opportunities for employment or a higher standard of living, were becoming more centralized. But with the increase in levels of nationalist ideologies and xenophobia during and after the WWI, levels of border control and assimilationist ideologies also increased. Leo Lucassen (1998) argues that heightened political inclinations to restrict migration were due to societal beliefs that immigrants posed a threat to citizens' access to economic and political rights (McKeown 2004:174). The increasing tension caused by this discussion on migration brought the subject of assimilation to the forefront within migration studies. Migration research has oscillated between differing perspectives on the concept of assimilation, from the classic and new assimilation models to the pluralist and multiculturalist models.

The classic model of assimilation in the United States, exemplified in the work of Warner and Srole (1945), extends back to the 1920's. It promulgated an ethnocentric perspective of migrants as eventually being absorbed by a homogenous American society after having slowly adopting dominant white Protestant culture and values. This assimilationist model may have seemed logical at the time in light of the many European immigrants settling in America in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but it was built on nationalist constructions of human groups as fixed or bounded by their nation-state. During the nation-state building projects of colonialism, extending

from the 18<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the concept of the ‘ethnic group’ as bounded was constructed and subsequently incorporated into migration studies by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Glick Schiller et al. 2006:613). This political ideology also linked migration studies with the idea that individual and group identity are bounded by nation-states. As a result, this homogenization of human groups based on political boundaries set up by nation-states has since served as the main unit of analysis within migration studies.

Other trends in migration studies have countered the classic assimilation model’s propensity toward homogenization of migrants within a dominant national identity. The theoretical lens of cultural citizenship was constructed in an attempt to add to the conversation on race in the United States during the late eighties and early nineties. It proposes a broad understanding of a multi-cultural nation where individuals have the right to be different and yet equally share in a sense of belonging to a country, as well as a democratic voice (Rosaldo 1994:402). Following Benedict Anderson’s (1991) notion of imagined communities, the theory of cultural citizenship demonstrates, for example, how the Latino community in the U.S. constructs a sense of belonging to an imagined community through organized social gatherings that help to solidify their presence in the country (Rosaldo and Flores 1997:73). Cultural citizenship was used as a way to conceptualize the Latino community’s claim to cultural rights and freedoms. In this struggle for civil rights, the Latino community is not attempting to demonstrate ethnic differences, “rather, the motivation is simply to create space where the people feel ‘safe’ and ‘at home,’ where they feel a sense of belonging and membership” (Flores and Benmayor 1997:15). The construction of a cultural space demonstrates the solidarity of the community as they resist assimilation and lay claim their cultural and civil rights as people.

On the other end of the spectrum, some migration scholars argue that assimilation can have beneficial consequences for migrants, in particular, that assimilation is important for migrants to have political rights in a host country. Koopmans and Statham (2003) reject postnationalist arguments that national citizenship is becoming less relevant to migrants because non-citizens are able to access certain rights without going through the process of naturalization. Similarly, Hansen (2003) criticizes postnational scholarship, challenging their assertions that political rights as a result of citizenship have little effect on integration. Furthermore, Hansen challenges postnationalist claims that naturalization hinders migrants' ability or opportunities to maintain and cultivate ethnic identity.

Alba and Nee (2003) argue for a coalescence of the old and current ways of understanding assimilation. They define assimilation as a slow process in which the relevance of cultural and ethnic formulations decline, but do not disappear (2003:11). This definition also includes the evolution of the host society and culture as it slowly integrates aspects of the culture from incoming immigrants – in other words, a melting pot. By redefining the concept of assimilation, Alba and Nee hope to free it from the classical idea that it is natural for assimilation to occur because the primordial connection to ethnicity is bound to fade as ideas of rational individualism are adopted by immigrants of a host country (Alba and Nee 2003:16). This “new” assimilation theory, however, is simply a reformulation of the classic assimilation model as it continues to argue that migrants' lack of assimilation can be detrimental to the nation-state (Glick Schiller 2009:16).

Brubaker (2003) addresses a return of the concept of assimilation in recent migration scholarship by tracing how the meaning and usage of the concept has changed represented by case studies in France, Germany, and the United States. The “return” is not to, what he calls, the

“organic sense...[which] implies complete absorption” (2003:42). Rather, it is a return to an analytical sense that examines the extent to which immigrants become more similar to their host country. This concept of assimilation has found a foothold in migration studies in the United States starting around 1985. The twenty years prior to this period, however, were dominated by pluralist studies on the persistence of ethnic identity and culture in the face of absorption into the larger society (2003:48). Though important to migration literature, these studies tend to overlook the ways in which ethnic minorities become more similar to their host country, as well as remain connected in ways that transcend nation-state borders.

This has led to the emergence of a new transnational perspective on migration studies, beginning in the 1990's, which seeks to understand assimilation not in terms of absorption or a complete lack of integration, but a middle ground where migrants are incorporated into society while at the same time maintaining their own ethnic culture and identity through social connections that transcend nation-state borders. Hamaz and Vasta (2009) demonstrate that there has been a turning away from the assimilationist approaches in migration studies toward theoretical frameworks that reject the notion that migrants must forsake their identity from 'there' and assimilate to a new identity 'here'. These frameworks render nation-state boundaries porous. They also position the individual as agent alongside structures of power in developing a sense of belonging. Both individual agency and structural positioning influence an individual's sense of belonging (Hamaz and Vasta 2009). It is within this theoretical framework that this study aims to examine the community building practices of South Sudanese in Indiana.

### **Transnationalism**

The theory and methodology of transnationalism is built on a premise rejecting the notion that the nation-state and society are one, what Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) call

methodological nationalism, which has dominated migration studies in the past. Though the borders of nation-states may be able to physically bar some, but not all, movements of people or goods across borders, social life is able to transcend these boundaries daily through transfers of money, ideas, culture, and even relationships, with much of this occurring digitally. For these reasons, transnational studies reject the nation-state as the analytical framework, preferring to establish “new conceptual categories that no longer blind us to these emergent social forms or prevent us from reconceptualizing the boundaries of social life” (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004:1028-1029).

Transnationalism rejects methodological nationalism by situating migrants within a social space that extends across borders rather than within the borders defined by a nation-state. Transnational social networks help to establish connections between both sending and receiving countries. Not only are migrants connected with their homeland, but those who remain in the sending countries are also connected with migrants abroad. Within these social networks a cyclical exchange of ideas, culture, and even identities flow across multiple sites through networks of social relationships. As McKeown (2004) describes,

A map of the world drawn from these geographically dispersed spaces and networks would look much different than the familiar mosaic of geographically discrete territories. They make up a world of complex and overlapping flows and nodes, none of which can be entirely captured within a single national or regional history. [2004:180]

Transnational studies of migration, therefore, can be important for gaining more understanding of global migration patterns through analysis of migrant networks.

Incorporation is the term used alternatively to integration or assimilation, and is defined by Glick Schiller et al. (2006), “as the processes of building or maintaining networks of social relations through which an individual or an organized group of individuals becomes linked to an institution recognized by one or more nation-states” (614). Examples could include employment,

education, or even social standing. Securing such resources through connections with networks of social relations is evidence of migrant incorporation in one or more social networks that could be in multiple nation-states. This theoretical framework was created in order to counterbalance the disproportionate amount of migration studies centered on the ethnic group as the unit of analysis. Transnational migrants establish connections to social networks based not only on ethnic ties, but also on religious, economic and political ties.

Transnationalism helps to understand how migrants both incorporate into the host society while also remaining connected with their country of origin. Levitt (2003) provides case studies of migrants to show that assimilation and transnational practices are not mutually exclusive, but occur simultaneously. Migrants who live transnationally do not necessarily fully assimilate, nor do they live completely disconnected from their daily life in their host country. Rather, as Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) suggest, viewing trans-migrants through the lens of simultaneous connection with both host and home country seems to reflect the reality of transnationalism better (1012). “Migration scholars now recognise that many people maintain ties to their countries of origin at the same time as they become integrated into the countries that receive them. Immigrant incorporation and enduring transnational practices are not antithetical but simultaneous processes that mutually inform each other” (Levitt 2009:1225).

What transnationalism does is open the boundaries that many assimilation models place around migrants. Transnational perspectives on assimilation allow space for migrants to think, live, and act in multiple locations at once. No longer bounded by the borders of a single nation-state, migrants are located within a dialectical relationship between self-identification and structures of power. It is within these multiple locations that trans-migrants construct their own sense of belonging (Hamaz and Vasta 2009). The theoretical frameworks of transnationalism and

incorporation have given rise to this idea of simultaneity and seem to portray the reality of trans-migrants' daily life in a globalized world more suitably than previous models of migration and assimilation theory.

Though the incorporation of trans-migrants into American society is undeniable, society at large continues to overlook their incorporation into social networks that extend transnationally. For some, like World Magazine columnist Jamie Dean (2013), assimilation into host country is the sole necessity for migrants to establish a sense of belonging. This sort of assimilationist ideology has long called for refugees and other migrants to blend into American society. This fear-based, xenophobic rhetoric heaps impossible expectations upon migrants to forsake their identity from 'there' and assimilate to a new identity 'here'. The lives of trans-migrants are not so black and white even though the pressure to assimilate is consistently promulgated by the media and perpetuated in everyday conversations. Though incorporation into society is a necessity for migrants to survive, complete assimilation is not.

### **Community**

The individuals in this group use the term *community* interchangeably for both the formal organization and the group of people itself. This community organization has registered as a 501(c)(3) non-profit known as the South Sudanese Community Organization in Indiana (SSCOI). They have also established a religious organization and have separate administrative boards for the SSCOI and the religious organization. The term *community*, therefore, refers to these formally established institutions and this group of people. Because the name of the religious organization has been a contentious issue amongst individuals of the group, the term *religious organization* is used in place of a formal name.

For South Sudanese refugees, community building is important for a variety of reasons. As Fuglerud (1999) notes, organized ethnic communities provide security, companionship, and opportunities to strengthen ethnic ties and to pass along heritage to children (Colson 2003:5). South Sudanese have been studied in terms of how community building can function as both a way to cope with mistrust of other non-Sudanese ethnic groups (Coker 2008) and as an avenue of establishing peace between Southern Sudanese ethnic groups cohabiting a refugee camp (Brown 2008). Studies on South Sudanese transnational women's organizations highlight the importance of community organizations in establishing avenues for refugees to continue to participate politically and economically back home (see DeLuca 2007; Erickson and Faria 2011).

Scholarly studies with groups of South Sudanese refugees that have focused on community have oftentimes failed to provide sufficient attention to the importance of transnational social ties in building group connections in resettlement. Holtzman (2000) provides an examination of Nuer South Sudanese resettlement in the United States. In his assessments of Nuer "adjustments" to life in America, Holtzman argues that South Sudanese refugees must "reforge the bases and the nature of community" in resettlement (2000:49). He aptly explains that Nuer community building "is not something confined to the early years of resettlement, but is an ongoing process that will continue into the future" (2000:49). Holtzman, however, stops short of discussing the transnational social ties that contribute to the building of a community for South Sudanese diaspora, which are key aspects of community building. He briefly mentions some ways Nuer attempt to maintain transnational social ties, such as writing letters, remittances, or phone calls, but reduces these as being extremely taxing on refugees in the United States, and does not include any discussion on the impact these transnational transactions have on both sending and receiving ends of the spectrum (2000:41). Though he briefly discusses some of the

ways in which Nuer maintain transnational social ties, he does not give enough attention to how these help shape the processes of belonging.

Lim (2009), on the other hand, demonstrates South Sudanese remittances provide cyclical benefits on both the sending and receiving end even though the transnational practice causes financial strain for the senders. She argues that South Sudanese remittance sending practices are based on cultural values of providing and caring for family. Refugees in the diaspora feel a sense of “increased responsibility” to provide for those back home (2009:1039). Therefore, the benefits are twofold in that they serve to fulfill the emotional needs of the diaspora to fulfill this sense of duty to care for family, while at the same time providing much needed assistance for family and friends back home.

Several other studies also focus on fiscal transnational activity, including the role of social support in influencing and easing the financial strain of South Sudanese refugees sending remittances (Johnson and Stoll 2008) and the importance of remittances for the purposes of both maintaining social networks and providing for those in need transnationally (Shandy 2006). Shandy (2007) also records some of the political and economic ways in which Nuer in the United States participate transnationally and demonstrates how this influences life in America, such as when women used their own income as remittances to “improve their social standing” (122). Examples like these demonstrate how transnational social ties help shape the processes of community building and belonging for South Sudanese in the diaspora. My research builds on this growing body of work by using a transnational theoretical framework to examine community building amongst South Sudanese in Indiana.

## **Agency**

Culture, as defined by Lassiter (2014), is “a shared and negotiated system of meaning informed by knowledge that people learn and put into practice by interpreting experience and generating behavior” (43). Gupta and Ferguson (1997) suggest culture be understood as something that is not only shared and negotiated, but also as historically and politically constructed. They further argue that the notion of culture as static has been altered by globalization, therefore there has been a shift in anthropological thinking away from the essentialist view of culture.<sup>1</sup>

The capacity of individuals to be active in processes of cultural change and identity formation is known as agency. This ability to produce changes is manifested through practice, or in other words human action (Ortner 1984). Gupta and Ferguson (1997) demonstrate that through place making and resistance, transnational people are negotiating their identities. The creation of space should be seen as a place in which members of a transnational group negotiate identity in relation to the “social and political processes of place making,” and not simply a projection of their local identity (1997:6). Flores and Benmayor (1997) explain the importance of space in facilitating acts of resistance for migrant groups to construct identity, feel a sense of belonging to a local community, and claim cultural rights. The theoretical frameworks of transnationalism also theorize the use of space, particularly as it relates to facilitating transnational participation and serving as a place to construct a sense of belonging (see Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). A “sense of belonging” is a subjective feeling of connectedness within a group, community, or even space that can extend beyond or be situated within nation-state boundaries (see Hamaz and Vasta 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> This understanding of culture as monolithic and its representation within anthropological scholarship has also been criticized by scholars of the “New Ethnography” in their analyses of ethnographic writing (see Clifford 1983; Clifford and Marcus 1986).

For migrant groups coping with the challenges of assimilation, processes of negotiation become a vehicle for expressions of agency. Social construction theory, as explained by Danico (2004), holds that the individual has an independence to decide how to act. Therefore, individuals have agency in self-identification. The individual decisions made by members of a group help to negotiate and shape the group identity. This understanding of identity stands in contrast to that of assimilationists who view identity as immutable (2004:50).

There are several anthropological accounts of agency within South Sudanese contexts. Hutchinson (1996) builds upon the work of Evans-Pritchard with Nuer in Sudan to demonstrate the ability of individuals to act within the processes of cultural production and change. She demonstrates how South Sudanese syncretized Christianity with indigenous religions. Holtzman (2000) provides an account of some of the difficulties Nuer refugees face as they integrate into American society, presenting Nuer refugees as active, rather than passive, agents in the processes of community building. Holtzman describes Nuer refugees as “reforging” community in America no longer based on traditional lines of kinship, but along new lines, such as the common experience of resettlement and survival in America (44).

More recently, there have been other ethnographic studies of South Sudanese in the context of resettlement that have also sought to demonstrate the agency of refugees. Marlowe (2012) examines what South Sudanese men in the Australian diaspora mean when they refer to themselves as “walking the line”. These men switch between identities, such as ‘Sudanese’ and ‘Australian’, at any given time, which calls into question monolithic understandings of identity and demonstrates the agency of individuals to shape identity. Shandy (2007) explains that upon arrival to the U.S. Nuer refugees are faced with minimal access to well-paying jobs due to race,

lack of education, as well as cultural and language barriers. Nevertheless, Nuer refugees secured better employment opportunities through social networks and gaining an education.

Shandy (2002) calls for anthropologists to explore the agency of people in converting to new religions and how these new ideologies are practiced in the diaspora. Comaroff and Comaroff (1997), on the other hand, argue that focusing too much on attributing agency risks overlooking the influence of structures on human practice. Comaroff and Comaroff account for the negative impact of colonialism and Christian missions on Southern Tswana, while also demonstrating their agency in appropriating Christianity. In her study of South Sudanese former refugees in Australia, Wille (2013) supports Comaroff and Comaroff (1997) arguing that structural positioning influences an individual's subjective sense of belonging. Therefore, in demonstrating the agency of South Sudanese refugees it will be important to acknowledge the influence that structures, like religion, have in shaping a sense of belonging.

### **1.5- & Second-Generation Transnationalism**

The question of assimilation is an important one for the South Sudanese in Indiana. The various ways they resist and choose to incorporate into a social network are connected with the ways in which they participate transnationally. The degree, however, to which a person or group incorporates and is engaged in transnational practices varies and is situation and context dependent (Levitt 2003; Morawska 2003). The South Sudanese in Indiana are connected, but not every person is connected to the same degree. Some individuals are much more connected with South Sudan than are others, whether through news via the Internet, sending remittances, return journeys, or frequent communication with family and friends back home. Some first generation adults rarely engaged in transnational participation, though they may still claim social ties with

South Sudan. These individuals are connected more indirectly with home through those individuals who are more actively participating transnationally.

These ties are important for 1.5- and second-generation children to have connections with their own or their parents' country of origin. 1.5-generation children are those who immigrated as small children in their formative years while second generation children were born after resettlement in the host country. In terms of ethnicity, the 1.5-generation see themselves as being "somewhere in between" their country of origin and host country, but can switch between which group they are identifying with, e.g. family or friends, ethnicities within origin or host country, and local or national identities (Danico 2004:15). Trans-migrants raise children in multiple social networks that can be situated locally, nationally, and transnationally. Studies show that children of immigrants tend to "embrace the norms and institutions of the place where they are raised" (Levitt 2009:1239). There are many benefits for raising children in transnational social networks, such as creating emotional ties back home and equipping future generations to contribute to origin countries.

Morawska (2003) argues that second generation migrants tend to incorporate into local society more and show less participation transnationally than their parents of the first-generation. Rumbaut (2002) agrees, demonstrating that less than ten percent of second-generation migrants sustain transnational participation into adulthood. The degree to which 1.5- and second-generation children actually participate in these transnational social networks varies, however, and is dependent on the context of the individual. Danico (2004) demonstrates that 1.5-generation Koreans in Hawaii differed from their first generation parents in many sociocultural factors, such as language, attitude toward incorporation, or even ease of incorporation. Many of these factors influenced the degree to which 1.5- and second-generation Koreans participated

transnationally. Family relationships and the media can also contribute to the degree to which 1.5- and second-generation children incorporate and participate transnationally. Faria (2014) argues that many South Sudanese refugee parents in America feel a sense of duty, heightened by feelings of guilt for their resettlement, to give back to their country of origin. Many parents attempt to encourage transnational participation within the 1.5- and second-generation, such as contributing back in South Sudan.

### **Transnationalism & Religion**

The early approaches of anthropologists during the period of colonialism were set within a monolithic framework of culture that solidified a civilized/primitive dichotomy within anthropological understandings of religion and society (Bowie 2006; Hefner 1998). However, in a world that renders boundaries porous through processes of globalization and migration the world religions of modernity cannot be understood as closed systems of meaning. Rather, as Hefner (1998) demonstrates sociological and anthropological studies on migration and religion must have a global perspective. Local and global expressions of religion are subject to the influence of globalization on the local, national, and international levels. Due to globalization, local cultural ways are opened up to the global flows of people, ideas, and capital across national and international borders, which makes it difficult to understand localized expressions of religion as closed or unadulterated (1998:99).

While much of the previous research in transnational migration studies has focused on how migrants are incorporated into a host society, and most studies on South Sudanese have primarily examined fiscal transnational activity, with the exception of Shandy (2007) where she only briefly links remittances and religion (157), studying religion through the lens of transnationalism is a growing branch of research. Early studies of religion within migration

studies tended to focus on providing social welfare to newly arrived migrants and the effects of religion on assimilation (Menjívar 1999:591). Transnational studies of religion, on the other hand, attempt to provide a “counterbalance” to these previous studies of religion that focus on assimilation (Levitt 2003:849).

Transnational activity can be conducted in various ways that include, but are not limited to ethnic group affiliation, such as political activism, financial pursuits, or even non-ethnic social ties. Religious practices are also a prominent way migrants remain connected transnationally. Because religion is a global phenomenon not bound by borders, religious practices can be conducted within religious space that can be physically located in one place, but can extend transnationally through social networks. Levitt (2004) describes the importance of religious organizations and space for trans-migrants. Religious organizations provide space for trans-migrants to participate transnationally with others of the same faith by hosting traveling religious leaders, raising and sending monetary assistance, organizing religious pilgrimages, or even practicing religion in ways “that affirm their enduring ties to a particular sending-country group or place” (2004:5). Establishing a transnational religious organization “enable[s] migrants to stay connected to their sending communities at the same time that they are incorporated into the U.S.” (2004:14-15).

Some migrants start their own religious organizations because there are few such organizations when they arrive in a host country. The formulation of religious organizations can be based on a number of factors, such as ethnicity, national identity, denomination affiliation, or even geographic location. They can vary in size, as well as in level of institutionalization; for example, some may establish a formal institution, while others may have more resemblance to an

informal gathering. These organizations provide a space for migrants to facilitate religious practices using a common language and based on a shared set of values and beliefs.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods**

#### **The Community & Field Site**

For this research, I worked with a group of naturalized South Sudanese refugees living in Indiana. This group is regularly involved in one another's lives on a daily and weekly basis, but on the first Sunday of each month they gather in the centrally located town of Hamilton, Indiana for a religious worship service.<sup>2</sup> The primary field site of this study is located at a church in this central location. Hamilton is a small Midwestern town approximately 85 miles from Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. Hamilton is a central location at which South Sudanese residents of Indianapolis, Bloomington, and Columbus, Indiana, have chosen to gather for a Christian worship service. The church in which this group meets is the United Methodist Church in Hamilton (UMCH), which they are able to use on the first Sunday of each month at no charge. The group has access to all amenities of the UMCH building. The UMCH building is the predominant field site, but further research was also conducted at the homes of participants from the Columbus, Bloomington and Indianapolis areas. Other sites located outside of the UMCH church included other churches in the Columbus and Indianapolis areas, or commercial venues

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<sup>2</sup> Due to the small size of the city, church, and group, pseudonyms have been applied to participants, as well as the city and church central to this field study in order to protect the identities of this group of South Sudanese in Indiana.

the group rented for community events, such as memorial services for the deceased, and restaurants.

All participants of this study identified as Christian prior to resettlement in the United States. Christianity has grown to become a significant part of this group's identity. In fact, Christianity is now practiced by a majority of people in South Sudan who adhere to a variety of denominations (Brown 2008:24). The religious community in Indiana is not affiliated with one single Christian denomination, though the largest denomination represented is Catholic.

### **Research Timeline**

From August 2012 to May 2014, I attended religious gatherings with the South Sudanese community in Hamilton. Because the community only formally meets once a month for the worship service there are a limited number of meetings at which I was able to conduct participant-observation. Furthermore, some meetings were canceled due to lack of availability of attendees. Therefore, I conducted participant-observation in field sites outside of these meetings. I attended approximately twelve meetings in Hamilton not including community events at other locations or personal visits to residences. The meetings are scheduled to begin at 1 p.m., but members usually arrive between 1 p.m. and 2 p.m., and continue to arrive throughout the service. The meeting usually begins around 2 p.m. and lasts until 5 p.m. or later. I typically arrived by 1 p.m. and stayed until after the service had concluded and the last person closed the building. Occasionally the group would have community events, such as potluck dinners, after the service ended, which provided opportunities to interact with other members of the community in a more relaxed environment than the religious services provided.

### **Data Collection**

Participant-observation is a primary ethnographic fieldwork method that involves both participation in people's lives and systematic observation of their activities (Bernard 2011:265). Specifically, in this research, I spent a large amount of time participating in worship services and practicing religious customs with research participants. I also spent a significant amount of time observing the group in their interactions with one another. The time spent doing fieldwork was an opportunity for me to build a personal relationship with the members of the community. Building this rapport helped me to gain trust with participants, which led to more access into their daily lives. As my presence became more normal the problem of reactivity was reduced, though never completely resolved (Bernard 2011:265). One of the limitations of this study was the amount of opportunities to conduct participant-observations with the community during the religious services. In order to counterbalance this limitation, I conducted participant-observation in participants' residences, as well as at community events held outside of the religious services.

I kept a field notebook with me at all times in order to quickly note observations, which were recorded as frequently and in as much detail as possible. However, due to the nature of participant-observation detailed notes are not always possible. Therefore, all field notes were elaborated within 24 hours in order to achieve as much accuracy as possible. Though I only speak English, I attempted to gather nonverbal information, like hand gestures, facial expressions, and reactions, when my informants were speaking to one another in other languages, such as Arabic or indigenous languages. I also followed up these conversations with questions about their content.

Finally, participant-observation is beneficial because it equipped me to understand the meanings of my observations, which in turn enabled me to ask more meaningful questions (Bernard 2011:266). However, participants were always the best source for understanding my

observations and the interviews. Collaboration between the participants and myself has been essential to representing this community accurately and allowing their voice to be heard. If I lacked understanding of an observation, or misunderstood something I overheard I was able to openly talk about these things with close contacts, which helped mold my understanding and interpretations.

My interlocutors were comprised of all community members who were willing to participate and who fell within the criteria of eligibility. Typically, three to four families and two to three singles will attend any monthly religious meeting. Children attend with families but were not included in the research sample. Informants were collected through snowballing. Informants eligible for this study had could be male or female, and had to be between the ages of twenty and eighty. Individuals who did not meet these criteria of eligibility were not able to participate.

Along with participant-observation I also conducted individual interviews, follow up interviews, a focus group, and a free listing exercise with informants (see Appendices to review interview protocols). Informal interviews were conducted during participant-observation with both males and females in the group, but were not audio recorded. Informal interviews were not the primary form of interviews I use in my research, but were useful in gathering information that eventually built the foundation for my semi-structured interviews. The informal interviews also provided a broad base of conversations with at least twenty individuals. Semi-structured individual interviews and a focus group were also conducted, but used an interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions. The individual initial interviews were conducted in person between January and February 2014 with seven males and two females. These semi-structured interviews were scheduled individually with participants at a mutually agreed upon time and were conducted in the homes of participants, lasting between one and three hours. The individual

interviews were audio recorded. A free listing exercise was also used during each initial interview to examine group perceptions of what it means to be an American and a South Sudanese. Follow up interviews were conducted with three participants in March 2014, and one taking place in November 2014 over the phone. I conducted a focus group interview on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014. The focus group included eight male and three female respondents who had attended a community event located at the UMCH.

Interviews were transcribed for coding and data analysis. I began transcribing audio recordings of individual interviews as they were completed. Transcriptions of interviews included every “um”, “you know”, and “like” common to everyday language. These transcriptions were later edited for readability. When I use a quote from an interview some, but not all, of these colloquialisms have been edited out to focus on the content and lessen the distraction of the reader (Narayan 2012:75). Data analysis and coding were also conducted as recordings were transcribed. I developed a simple coding system that I used to identify patterns in the transcribed interviews, which I then entered into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis. The coding system consisted of abbreviated keywords like identity, community, religion, economic, etc., to identify patterns within the interviews. More keywords were added to this list during the process of analysis as new patterns emerged.

After the data of the initial interviews had been analyzed I used the results to formulate more questions that I then used to conduct in my follow up interviews. During this period I requested feedback from participants on the patterns and results I found in the data. The interview questions were primarily open-ended so as to allow participants freedom to fully express what they had to say and to bring up topics that I may have overlooked. I also used probes in order to encourage participants to elaborate on an answer. In order to ensure

consistency of data each set of interviews followed the same set of questions in the form of an interview protocol. When new questions were formulated I consistently posed the same set of new questions to each informant in subsequent interviews. All interviews were completed by the end of April. Write-up of the findings commenced after all the interviews were complete.

Participant-observation also continued to be conducted throughout the writing process.

For the free listing exercise participants were given paper and a writing utensil and asked to list traits they associate with being American and South Sudanese. I used probes to encourage participants to list as many traits as possible. For example, if a participant listed traits X, Y, and Z, I returned to each trait and asked them to list other traits that are similar to X, then Y, and so on, until the participant could think of no more traits to list (Bernard 2011:224-225). Each list was analyzed in order to determine the salience and rank of each trait listed. The rank of a listed trait was determined by how early it was listed. The frequency and rank of a listed trait determined the salience of that trait (2011:347-348). The results were then entered into a spreadsheet for analysis. The results of which were presented to participants of the focus group so that the group may participate in the interpretation of the results. Finally, the results of the free listing exercise were compared with the results of the focus group in order to investigate group perceptions of characteristics, behaviors, attitudes, and values associated with what it means to be American and South Sudanese. The free listing exercise revealed that the salient traits associated with South Sudanese were generally negative (things they wanted to change or work on), while the salient traits associated with Americans were things they valued or wanted to incorporate themselves.

The focus group was intended to promote discussion of how individuals in this group perceive what it means to be an American and a South Sudanese. There were eleven participants

in the focus group. As the moderator I presented the results of the individual free listing exercises and then posed the discussion questions. I used probes to keep the discussion going and attempt to include everyone into the discussion. I also conducted participant-observation and record nonverbal cues, reactions, and behaviors (Bernard 2011:172-176). The focus group was used to collaborate with participants in the interpretation of the listing exercise results and to promote further discussion of what it means to be American and South Sudanese. The group discussion took place prior to presenting the results of the free listing exercise for analysis. This was intended to reduce the possibility of the group discussion mirroring the results of the individual free listing exercise. However, since the participants knew each other and both male and female participants were included the possibility that they modified their answers in order to fit-in had to be considered. Therefore, the results of the free listing exercise and the focus group were also compared with one another.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Background**

Any study on the South Sudanese must be situated in their long history of violence, oppression and forced migration. This section provides historical background while also demonstrating the role of religion in the lives of South Sudanese. Historically, Christianity is largely a colonial import to African countries that was at times imposed on indigenous populations and used as a tool of evangelism (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997), and in particular within South Sudan (Edward 2007; Pitya 1996). Religion, however, served several important roles in the lives of southern Sudanese. The appropriation of Christianity by South Sudanese in the late twentieth century was an important step in resisting the Arabization (Arab ethno-cultural imposition) and Islamization (forced Islamic socio-political system) of the Sudan by the government (Hutchinson 1996; Jok 2007; Pitya 1996). It also served as an avenue to build community and solidarity among different Southern ethnic groups (Brown 2008; Shandy 2002, 2007). It must be noted, however, that though religion was a factor contributing to the civil war in Sudan, it was not the only factor, nor even the main factor (see Aleu-Baak 2012; Haynes 2007; Jok 2007). Not to mention, South Sudanese people were building community with one another long before Christianity was introduced into Sudan (Beswick 2004; Evans-Pritchard

1940). Too often the civil war in the Sudan is reduced to dichotomies of religion or race that do not demonstrate the complexity of contributing factors. A host of political, economic, and socio-cultural factors contributed to the war and must be understood in order to fully comprehend the conflict Sudanese people experienced. But for the purposes of this project I will place particular emphasis on the historical role of religion in the lives of South Sudanese because it is essential to understanding how the South Sudanese in Indiana build community and participate transnationally.

### **Colonialism**

In 1821, the Turko-Egyptian Empire colonized the Sudan, marking a half-century of increased slave raids and exploitation (Deng 1995; Pitya 1996). These Islamic invaders used the North as a base to extract natural resources and to capture Sudanese to enlist into the Egyptian army (Deng 1995:46-47). These people, however, were not considered slaves, as this European-backed administration had outlawed slavery. This newly established government imposed high taxes in the Sudan, which subsequently increased the need to produce revenue that predominantly came through the slave raids conducted by Arab groups known as the Baggara (1995:48-49). The revenue produced through taxation was not returned through any services, but were sent to Egypt, which created great resentment towards the government (1995:48). As a result, Sudanese people in the North and South of Sudan resisted this administration (1995:10-11). During this period in the Sudan, which at that time was considered an Islamic state, missionaries officially began evangelizing but had very limited success despite Christianity's presence in the region of Nubia since the early 1<sup>st</sup> century (Brown 2008; Pitya 1996).

In 1885 a revolt occurred placing an Islamic leader, known as the Mahdi, in power. Though those in the South did not convert to Islam, the Mahdi used religion as a tool to unite the

country against the Turko-Egyptian invaders (Deng 1995; Pitya 1996). However, slavery of the South continued primarily because the Mahdi had promised the Baggara ethnic-groups freedom to conduct their slave raids unhindered by government regulations in return for their efforts in overthrowing the Turko-Egyptian administration (Deng 1995:50). Southerners refusal to convert to Islam also contributed to the increase in slave raids (1995:11). During the reign of the Mahdi missionaries were forbidden to evangelize in the Sudan and were forced to leave (Brown 2008; Pitya 1996). General Charles Gordon, a British Christian abolitionist who served as the governor of Sudan during the Turko-Egyptian occupation, was killed by the Mahdi in 1885, which brought about British public demand for Britain's involvement in the campaign to colonize and end slavery in the Sudan (Brown 2008; Deng 1995; Pitya 1996).

In 1898, slavery in the Sudan was contested when the country came under the control of the British (Beswick 2004:196). Britain reluctantly took control of the Sudan in order to prevent French colonizers from gaining control of the Nile Valley, which would have interfered with the interests of another British colony: Egypt (Deng 1995:52). The entrance of British colonizers angered the North and brought relief to the South as slavery was outlawed, though not completely abolished (Jok 2001:75-76). In an attempt to abolish slavery, the British established the Closed Districts Ordinance, through which they governed the two regions separately and unequally. The British governed the Sudan along these lines, which did inhibit slave raids but prevented the South from becoming economically developed (2001:16-17). "In so doing, British colonial policies planted the seeds of disunion in a country with such remarkable ethnic diversity, pitting northerners versus Southerners and 'Arabs' versus 'Africans'" (Abusharaf 2002:50).

Though the British colonizers resented the North for having humiliated them in the defeat of General Gordon, the North was still politically, socially, and economically developed, while the South was left grotesquely underdeveloped by the colonial power (Deng 1995; Pitya 1996). The British colonizers saw the Islamic North as volatile and dangerous compared to the South, who was easily subjugated through violence (Pitya 1996:728-729). British colonizers feared that Christian missionaries in the Sudan would upset the Islamic North. Therefore, in order to appease the politically powerful North, Christian missionaries were allowed to evangelize only in the “pagan” South (1996:728). Later, missionaries were allowed to work in certain places in the North where Christians resided, but were allowed to provide only educational and humanitarian services to Muslims in those areas (Deng 1995:54).

British attempts to remain present in Egypt’s Suez Canal were influential in bringing about the end of their colonization of the Sudan. The British agreed to grant the Sudan independence in hope of maintaining troops in the Suez Canal, which was a pivotal position for them in the eastern Mediterranean (Louis 1985). British colonization of the Sudan officially ended in 1956 with the northern part of the Sudan being left with “all political and economic power” (Beswick 2004:196). Southerners feared that with the exit of British colonizers the North would begin to subjugate the South. Southerners requested that the British postpone leaving the Sudan until after the South had “gained an equal level of education and economic development with the North,” rather than leaving them defenseless (Jok 2001:76). This request, however, was ignored and a decade before the British ended colonization in the Sudan they did away with the Closed Districts Ordinance in an attempt to unite the country and integrate the South into the Northern polity. However, the separation of the North and South left Southerners disconnected and politically powerless. The British had established no policy to protect the South from being

exploited by the North, nor did they establish any meaningful structures for Southern society (Brown 2008; Deng 1995; Pitya 1996). “The Northern political elites considered Southern Sudan a colonial territory, and that they were its new colonial rulers” (Pitya 1996:678). With the exit of British colonizers the South was left to defend itself against the political, religious, and economic attempts of subjugation by the Northern militaristic Arab-Islamic government of the Sudan (1996:656-690).

### **Civil War**

Officially civil war began in 1955 as the people of southern Sudan were resisting the attempts of subjugation through the Arabization and Islamization of all of the Sudan by the Arab-Islamic government based in northern Sudan (Deng 1995; Jok 2007; Pitya 1996). In 1955, southern Sudanese revolted against the government of Sudan because the North was attempting to eradicate Christianity and traditional religions from the South (Pitya 1996:743-744). The government was also attempting to subjugate the South by restricting their political voices (Aleu-Baak 2012; Pitya 1996) and by equipping Arab militias called the Murahaleen to conduct slave raids (Jok 2007:181-183). The South’s uprising provided the government of Sudan the opportunity to invade southern Sudan and, with the help of British colonizers, suppressed the revolt (Pitya 1996:673).

Beginning in 1958, as persecution of Christians in the South increased, foreign Christian missionaries focused efforts on training indigenous converts through religious education for the task of establishing self-sustaining church communities in the Sudan (Pitya 1996:703-714). Indigenous missionaries, however, were unsatisfied with foreign missionary efforts to allow Christianity to be practiced alongside their cultural beliefs and practices. As a result, indigenous missionaries began teaching the gospel in light of their cultural beliefs and practices, which was

more appealing to other southern Sudanese who did not see the two in conflict with one another (1996:740-743). In fact, according to Pitya (1996), “the dialogical process led to further clarification, expansion and consolidation of faith among Southern communities” (722). By 1964, all Christian missionaries were forced to leave the Sudan and Christianity was left in the hands of the small, but growing, number of indigenous missionaries mostly in the South, but also in the North (1996:643-649).

In 1962, a guerrilla warfare style rebellion, known as the Anyanya, formed and began to attack where the South had been occupied by government forces (Pitya 1996:690). A bloody civil war waged for ten years until the Addis Ababa Peace Agreement was signed and war finally ceased (1996:58). But over the course of the next decade a number of factors began to push the country back into a state of armed conflict. This hostility grew out of the South’s rejection of continued political restriction by the government in the North as well as its institution of Islamic law, *shari’a*, thereby abrogating the Addis Ababa Agreement (Beswick 2004; Brown 2008). As Jok (2001) notes, “these laws undermined the religious diversity of the country, and the South bitterly opposed them” (13). Furthermore, Southern Sudan had poor leadership that was unable to solve the problems that fueled inter-ethnic tensions in the South (Brown 2008:18). Moreover, the South was still very underdeveloped and not receiving adequate government assistance when oil was discovered there, leading to further exploitation by the government (Beswick 2004; Brown 2008). As a result, in 1983, a second civil war erupted.

With the abrogation of the Peace Agreement came the rise of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army/Movement, a rebel movement consisting of a military wing (SPLA) and a political wing (SPLM) (Deng 1995:13). This movement can be distinguished from previous militia movements like the Anyanya by its goal of national unity, rather than secession. “They

sought to liberate the whole country from discrimination and to foster the creation of a new Sudan in which everyone would enjoy full equality of status and opportunities. Whether this was the real objective or a camouflage for secessionist objectives, is debatable” (1995:173). This goal of a unified, secular, democratic Sudan, however, was never actualized as the North declared *jihād* in the South in response to the SPLA/M’s continued resistance to the Arabization and Islamization of the country (Aleu-Baak 2012:14-15).

The conflict resulted in tragically large amounts of deaths and displacements. In 2001 estimates placed the displaced at approximately four million with two million having perished (Marlowe et al. 2013:5). By 2005 estimates calculated that between five and seven million Sudanese had been displaced internally, with approximately 703,500 having been displaced internationally (Shandy 2007:46-47). Of those who were displaced internationally and made it to refugee camps in countries like Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, only a minute portion was actually resettled, predominantly in the United States, Canada, and Australia. The massive amounts of death and displacements from the civil wars resulted in broken lineages that had devastating effects on social cohesiveness and communities (Abusharaf 2002:54).

The signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 initiated South Sudan’s final leg of its journey to independence. Though talks of peace began in 1996, a famine in 1998 delayed all progress (Haynes 2007:314). As the fighting between the North and South spread closer to neighboring countries,

government forces encountered not only several thousand soldiers of the SPLA but also six other opposition armies, which had recently organized themselves to fight together under a single command. The threat of a wider conflict, amounting to a struggle for the whole of Sudan’s identity—either strictly Arab-Islamic, or secular and multiethnic—prompted peace initiatives from Libya and Egypt, and from Africa’s intergovernmental Authority for Development. [Haynes 2007:314-315]

Oil also played a major factor in bringing about the peace talks. Fighting had increased in the mid-1990s as the North began exploiting the South's oil reserves (2007:315). The peace agreement, which was negotiated and signed by the SPLA/M and the Government of Sudan, was an attempt to come to terms on splitting oil wealth equally between the North and the South (2007:315). The peace agreement was also intended to unify the country under one secular government (Aleu-Baak 2012:15).

Part of the CPA was a 2011 referendum that would “confirm the unity of the Sudan by voting to adopt the system of government established under the Peace Agreement; or to vote for secession” (Comprehensive Peace Agreement 2005:8). The vote, cast in January of 2011, made U.S. national headlines: “Over 99 pct in Southern Sudan vote for secession” (Fick 2011). The article also states that over ninety-nine percent of the South Sudanese diaspora in the U.S. also voted for secession. On July 9, 2011, South Sudan officially seceded from the Sudan becoming the world's newest nation (see Figure 1). The signing of the CPA did not end all fighting and left two important issues unattended: determining the border and how the two sides would share power (Haynes 2007:315). However, it was important because it established the avenue through which the South was able to vote for its independence.

Spanning a period of two decades, beginning in 1989, Christianity experienced unprecedented growth to include around sixty to seventy percent of all Southern Sudanese (Brown 2008:24). The civil war in the Sudan, which is oftentimes “portrayed as a religious battle between Muslims and non-Muslims—is also a competition for economic resources, with religion—and ethnicity—important factors in deciding who gets what” (Haynes 2007:312). Largely a result of failed British colonial rule southern Sudan was marginalized socially, economically, and politically by the government of the North. Christianity provided an avenue by which southern

Sudanese accessed humanitarian aid (Hutchinson 1996:347), though it was not the only avenue through which humanitarian aid was received (Edward 2007). Churches provided material and educational services, as well as spiritual support for displaced Southerners, which contributed to the appeal of converting to Christianity (Edward 2007:122).

**Figure 1 – Map of South Sudan**



Source: <http://www.britannica.com/place/South-Sudan/images-videos>

### **Growth of Christianity in Southern Sudan**

Education was also an important factor contributing to the spread of Christianity in the South. Church-established education and skill-training programs for Sudanese refugees in Cairo, Egypt, provided greater opportunities for children and adults to become economically self-reliant, with some churches giving priority to church members (Edward 2007:123). Through education Southerners began to reclaim the political voice that the government of Sudan had silenced. According to Philip Pitya,

After initially rejecting Christianity as a foreign, Western import and an instrument for colonial domination, the Southern communities recognized the power of the Christian

institutions, particularly schools, in the new colonial society and sought to use them to promote their own liberation. They realized that Christianity connected them to a world larger than their traditional ethnic communities and added strength in the struggle for political freedom, economic justice, and cultural survival. [Pitya 1996:722]

Education added political appeal to Christian conversion by enabling South Sudanese to resist the government of Sudan. The rise of Christianity that accompanied the second Sudanese civil war, therefore, is to be seen as a political response to the government's abrogation of the Addis Ababa Peace Agreement (Hutchinson 1996:312-314). "This coercive government program (that was designed to suppress southern Sudanese calls for greater political autonomy) unwittingly transformed the act of Christian conversion into a powerful political statement of rejection and independence" (1996:312). Because the government of Sudan had politicized the religion of Islam, identifying as Christian became a way for Southerners to resist the forced Arabization and Islamization of the Sudan (Brown 2008; Shandy 2002). This attempt to subjugate the South actually backfired and served as a catalyst in the expansion of Christianity and political resistance to the government (Brown 2008; Hutchinson 1996).

Christianity also played a socio-political role in the lives of southern Sudanese by helping to establish unity between Southern ethnic groups in their resistance to the Arab-Islamic government of Sudan (Brown 2008; Shandy 2002). The New Sudan Council of Churches, a religious organization representing all Christian denominations in the Sudan, served as a peace negotiator that facilitated reconciliation between Southern ethnic groups and pressured the SPLM to seek peace, which contributed to the eventual signing of the CPA (Brown 2008:251-252). The importance of Christianity to South Sudan's political and social wellbeing cannot be overstated, as "southern Sudanese churches...facilitated communal stabilisation, national resolution and the road to southern Sudanese peace" (2008:253).

### **South Sudanese Resettlement in Indiana**

The participants of this study were either displaced internally in South Sudan or into refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya. During the civil war, some of the participants were already living in northern Sudan either working, going to school, or both. The majority of them eventually sought refuge in Egypt through passages in the north where they then lived for two to four years working and applying for resettlement through the United Nations. After years of applying for resettlement, those who were accepted were relocated to the United States. Whether by direct resettlement or secondary migration to be closer to family and friends they ended up in Indiana where they have now lived for over a decade later (see Figure 2). Most have naturalized as citizens, are employed or going to school, have been married, and had children.

**Figure 2 – Map of Indiana**



**Source:** <http://wwp.greenwichmeantime.com/time-zone/usa/indiana/map/>

Beginning in the early 1990's, the United States increased its resettlement of Sudanese refugees in response to the growing numbers of displaced from the conflict in Sudan. Sudanese resettlement in the United States exploded after 1989, largely reflecting an increase in U.S.

foreign interests regarding Sudan at the time, rapidly increasing thereafter (Shandy 2007:52). By 2006, more than twenty thousand Sudanese had been resettled in the United States (Shandy 2006:29). Southern Sudanese refugees were resettled across the United States, including cities as various as New York, Atlanta, San Diego, Omaha, and even Fargo, North Dakota. According to 2013 census data, there are now an estimated 40,000 Sudanese living in the United States (American Fact Finder).

Sudanese refugee resettlement in Indiana increased dramatically starting in 1999 around the time when the story of the “Lost Boys” began gaining international media attention (see Table 1). During the period extending from 1983 to 1998 only seven Sudanese refugees were resettled in Indiana (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services). In the subsequent years, 1999, 2000, and 2001, there were 11, 12, and 10 Sudanese refugees resettled in Indiana respectively. This represents nearly a 400 percent increase of the number of Sudanese refugees resettled in Indiana from the previous decade and a half over the course of three years. From 1999 to 2014 there have been 205 Sudanese refugees resettled in Indiana, with 34 resettled in 2004 alone. These figures, however, do not include Sudanese secondary migration patterns in and out of Indiana.

Though many South Sudanese fled Sudan to escape ethnic and religious persecution, war, and both political and economic marginalization by the northern Government of Sudan (Abusharaf 1998), many arrived in Indiana only to find themselves financially unstable and dealing with a new economy much different than what they were used to in Sudan. Much like Sudanese in other Midwestern states, newly arrived refugees to Indiana who lack education are typically limited to unskilled, low paying, undesirable jobs, which has led many to rely on welfare to survive (Erickson 2012; Holtzman 2000; Shandy 2007). At the same time, refugees in

America also found themselves in a position to maintain social networks and shape social and political life transnationally through remittances (Shandy 2006).

**Table 1 – Number of Sudanese Refugees Resettled in Indiana 1983-2014**

Fiscal Year	Number of Refugees
1983-1998	7
1999	11
2000	12
2001	10
2002	1
2003	22
2004	34
2005	17
2006	7
2007	2
2008	0
2009	1
2010	20
2011	6
2012	24
2013	20
2014	18
<b>Totals</b>	
1983-1998	7
1999-2014	205
1983-2014	212

**Source:** <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/archived-office-of-refugee-resettlement-annual-reports-to-congress>

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/refugee-arrival-data>

**Data retrieved January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2016**

Arrival in America for many refugees can be a difficult and overwhelming period of transition. Refugee resettlement in the United States is predominantly facilitated through non-governmental agencies, such as Christian organizations, volunteers, and refugee resettlement organizations. Much of the work these agencies do is centered on assisting newly arrived refugees to achieve financial stability and acclimate to life in a new country as quickly as possible.

The South Sudanese in Indiana are mostly located in and around Indianapolis, with other pockets of South Sudanese located in Columbus and Bloomington. In 2005 the group began meeting in one another's houses to pray, worship and study the Bible together. During this time a number of South Sudanese friends and family began to settle in Indiana. This group of South Sudanese swells and shrinks with the movement of individuals or families to and from Indiana, or as children are born. According to the community president, as of 2015 there are twenty-seven families who make up this group, totaling eighty-seven men, women, and children. Spanning ten different ethnic groups, this ethnically and culturally diverse group originate from all three regions that make up South Sudan: the southern region of Equatoria, Bahr el Ghazal in the northwest, and the Greater Upper Nile in the northeast. The Dinka, with twenty-seven individuals, and Luo ethnic groups, with twenty-four individuals, make up the majority of the community at 31 percent and 27.6 percent, respectively. There are nine Azande (10.3 percent), eight Bari (9.2 percent), and Fujulu (7 percent) and Kakwa (7 percent) both have six. The Balanda, Moru, and Nuer (2.3 percent each) ethnic groups each have two individuals, while there is only one Bongo (1.2 percent) who participates in the community.

After six months, this small but growing group decided to seek larger space for their worship services and began meeting at a United Methodist Church (UMC) in Bloomington, Indiana. They met together at this location until in 2007 they agreed to begin meeting at a UMC in Indianapolis. This move occurred in order to accommodate the majority of people who were living in the Indianapolis area. The group met for worship at this church for about two years, during which attendance progressively dropped. In 2010 the meeting was moved to a UMC in Hamilton, Indiana, in order to provide a more central location for the residents living in both Bloomington and Columbus, Indiana. This central location is supplied free of charge by the

church and is where the community has continued to meet for worship on a monthly basis. What began as a small group of people meeting together for prayer, worship, and spiritual development eventually grew in to an independent division of the SSCOI.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Findings**

This chapter presents a review of my findings based on my field research. Through my time with this community I've begun to gain a sense of the tenacity and deep faith of this group. These findings, however, do not comprehensively illuminate the many facets of this group's life together as they build community and engage in transnational activity. Furthermore, these findings are intended to represent, not define, this group's voice, though there was no sweeping, unilateral perspective reflected in the group. Split into two parts, this chapter provides an overview of the South Sudanese community organizations in Indiana. The first section examines the South Sudanese Community Organization in Indiana (SSCOI), uncovering some of the reasons for the formation of the community. It emphasizes the group's desire to find common ground. The second section surveys the importance of a religious organization for the community. By highlighting the key role of Christianity in the lives of South Sudanese in Indiana, it ultimately concludes that religion is used as a tool for producing unity.

#### **South Sudanese Community in Indiana**

In 2012, the president of the community took time to register the community as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization under the name South Sudanese Community Organization in

Indiana. This section takes a look at some of the reasons why South Sudanese in Indiana build community with one another. The purpose of building community is not to recreate life in Sudan, but to establish a space where they can negotiate what it means to be South Sudanese both locally and transnationally. The community can pull resources together to support one another, or to give back to South Sudan, family, and friends through remittances or projects. The community is a space where they can transmit knowledge, ideas, culture, and identity to their children and each other. Furthermore, creating a community helps them to find common ground and establish unity amongst a culturally and ethnically diverse group.

### *Creating Support Networks*

Beginning in 1999, there was an increase in number of Sudanese refugees resettled in Indiana. Upon arrival to the United States refugees receive a lot of guidance and assistance through mostly non-profit organizations and some government programs. They receive life skills lessons like budgeting and learning about general household items. They even receive help finding and keeping employment. But following this initial period of resettlement refugees must learn to sustain themselves. Many turn to family and friends for mutual support as an answer. Deng explains, “When we came here, the first thing we established was to try to find where most of our siblings were. Cause with you being here it is easier.” Chol highlights the importance of finding and creating a support system, saying, “You have to work, you have to pay bills and do all these kinds of things. It’s a lot of struggle. Plus people just came from [South Sudan] and don’t have any family members here. It’s a real struggle. You have to keep your head up and survive.” Secondary migration in search of a support network is a common practice for South Sudanese refugees in the United States (Holtzman 2000; Shandy 2007). Many upon resettlement immediately begin seeking out family and friends and then relocate nearer once they have the

resources. Even today South Sudanese continue to migrate in and out of Indiana to be nearer family and friends.

As people settle into lives close to this group they find support, such as a helping hand moving, a car ride to work, or a few hours of childcare to search for a job. Describing support networks, Mikel explains, “how you respect people, what you do for them, how you treat them and speak to them, that is your credit [with others]...we build [community] up so we can support each other [here].” These acts of kindness foster reciprocal relationships that form a support network whereby the group can meet these types of tangible needs. “The importance of a community is first to help themselves where they are,” says Deng. “So to me the importance of [community] for us [in Indiana] is to help when some of us have a problem.”

Without community support many refugees would not have adequate access to the resources they may need, such as securing employment and transportation. According to Emmanuel, “We said, ‘Let’s come and do a community,’ so that we can help each other in so many ways here in United States or things related to our country back there.” Community, therefore, is important for working together to support one another on a local level, as well as extended family and friends transnationally. Providing support for each other also paves the way for the community to achieve some of their communal goals of funding projects in other South Sudanese communities in the United States and in South Sudan. Simon went on to say that the community in Indiana raised money to send to another community of South Sudanese in Ohio because they were lacking in health care.

Pooling resources as a small community can at times be difficult. Early after resettlement when the group was first starting to build relationships with one another they did not have the resources to immediately send remittances back to South Sudan. As Elia explains, “We are the

only state where there are not a lot of Southern Sudanese. But when you go to other states there are a lot. Maybe in Nebraska now the tribe is there, we have around ten thousand South Sudanese... We [get together] to try to encourage ourselves.” Though acting transnationally by giving back to South Sudan is a prominent desire for most in the community, many feel that they do not have the resources to make an impact, as Deng says,

When you find South Sudanese communities around the United States their first goal is thinking that they can do something to help South Sudan. They can't. It's something they don't realize yet but they will realize later... There is nothing we can do to change anything in South Sudan financially because our money can never be enough to do anything.

Deng, like many refugees, has experienced limited access to resources vital to securing finances for both living expenses and remittances. Though Sudanese refugees received services from local church volunteers and refugee resettlement agencies upon arrival to Indiana, access to resources important to helping themselves as well as family and friends have remained limited.

Education, for example, was a prominent goal many adults expressed they had hoped to achieve, not only for themselves but also for their children. Nearly every person in the community mentioned the importance of furthering their education or career training in order to gain access to resources, such as money, technology, and knowledge, that are important for securing their own financial stability and allowing them to send back remittances. But balancing both work and education proves too heavy a load for some and they find themselves choosing one or the other. Sometimes the income from one job alone does not cover all of the bills, rent, and other expenditures, so a second job may end up replacing education. Chol felt like work required too much of his time to finish school as he concentrated on providing for his wife and two children, as well as sending remittances back home. He explains, “If you have a family you cannot quit work and go to school. Plus, we have people back home who count on us, too. They

think if we are here we are making enough money so we can support them when they need it. And it's not that easy." Mikel, also, could not afford to send remittances while also going to school so he chose to work instead of finishing his education. There is a disconnect between those receiving remittances and the actual cost it takes for trans-migrants to set aside this money from their own financial obligations. Mikel continues,

So when you come to America they know that there is money there, but it's not what it [seems]. Right?! Because they think that the money is easy to get over here in America. But they don't know that you are paying the bills with the money you make and you are paying rent, and if you have a car you have to pay for insurance and gas and if you break down you have to fix it. So all those things people back home don't know. They expect you to do something. So I just try to do what I can do in my ability to help them. So I choose to work.

Though setting aside this money may mean making financial sacrifices or even withdrawing from school, many continue to send a portion of their income back home to support relatives in Sudan and South Sudan. Though sending these remittances causes financial strain for the South Sudanese in Indiana, many willingly continue to struggle for the sake of giving back in ways that directly impact the wellbeing of those back home. Reminiscing about when he first arrived to America as a refugee, Deng says, laughing to himself, "So when I came here, I knew for sure work was going to be my best friend." The irony in this statement does well to capture the conflict between incorporating into American society and participating transnationally many South Sudanese in Indiana continue to struggle to resolve.

Though assimilationist ideology sees these remittances as negatively impacting refugees financial standing in the U.S., Shandy (2009) asks us to consider the difficult choice refugees face when considering that they have family and friends in need who continue to live back home in another country (151). The value of giving back to friends and family transnationally remains strong for many South Sudanese in Indiana. Both providing a support network for the group, as

well as achieving the means to give back transnationally were prominent reasons for establishing the community in the first place.

### ***Transmission of Culture & Identity***

As important as it is to provide for family and friends back home, remittances are not the only way this group attempts to give back transnationally. The maintenance and transmission of culture and identity to children has also emerged as a significant value for the adults in this community (Faria 2014). Though many parents are concerned about the influence of American culture on their children their concern is not that they will pick up American cultural values and customs at all, but that they will “lose their identity”, as many, such as Kako, often say: “...the children that are born here will lose their identity as South Sudanese.” Adults do not want their children to completely forget, or in many cases simply know nothing about their South Sudanese heritage. Adults accept that they and their children will incorporate new cultural values, beliefs, and customs while living in the United States. But as parents, they hold certain values and beliefs about raising their children and want to give them guidance on how to make sense of the many messages they receive daily. “Not to protect them from completely becoming American,” says Emmanuel, “but we try to [teach them] to know our background and to keep our traditions and customs so they can be familiar with all these things...Part of the culture is just very important, the kids can learn this culture.”

At home parents stay connected with social networks that extend beyond American borders through YouTube clips, phone calls, emails, or family and friends visiting from South Sudan. These transnational connections also allow parents to keep children in touch with ethnic and cultural ties to South Sudan. Mikel plays YouTube clips of celebrations and music videos for his children in order to introduce them to music and dances from Dinka artists. Chol’s cousin

from South Sudan periodically visits Indiana to see family and work. He provides updates on family and events happening back home in South Sudan and is able to take money back to family and friends. Language learning is also important for creating affective ties to South Sudan. Some adults, such as Mikel, prefer to teach children indigenous languages in their homes, such as Dinka, because Arabic reminds him of war and persecution back home. Others in the community, however, prefer to teach children the language of Arabic because it is more commonly spoken by the general South Sudanese population.

When the group gathers for community events children also hear indigenous languages, eat South Sudanese cuisine, learn Bible stories, or experience other culturally specific practices, like singing and dancing. Though many of these various customs are experienced at home, community events create an experience on a larger scale with other South Sudanese friends and family. As children play together they are able to practice their language skills in either the indigenous language of a parents' ethnic group or in Arabic, the common language of Sudan. Adults prepare traditional food, like the wheat based flat bread used for dipping into stews or holding meat commonly known as *kissra* or the peanut butter based lamb stew called *mulah full*, and teach the children its name in the various languages.

Passing this sort of knowledge down to another generation takes intentionality and a lot of effort. Birthday parties, prayer services, holidays, and memorial services are just some examples of community events that parents use to pass down culture and identity to children. Faria (2014) described South Sudanese women as “lean[ing] on the community” for these types of events as opportunities to “[nurture] affective ties to home” (1057). Occasions like these can range from fun and social, to serious and reflective. Whatever the case, when the community gets

together it provides a space for the group to teach children about heritage. “It’s very important to keep our culture,” says Chol,

If we don’t do that the culture will be gone and it’s hard to restore when it’s gone...[K]ids won’t know the background from where they come from. So we try to show them that this is where we come from and this is our culture... When we came here we had to learn American culture... Kids see [American culture] at school with them and on TV, so they do not need to practice it because they already know it.

For Chol, teaching children the cultural practices, values, beliefs, and identity of their ancestors is an essential aspect of building community. The physical space of community gatherings is important to facilitating these processes of establishing ties back home. By establishing these affective ties to home, parents are able to tap into transnational social networks together with their children.

Faria (2014) discusses how parents invest in their children with the hope that they will in turn give back transnationally in ways that directly result in the material wellbeing of South Sudan. She cites examples of second-generation youth returning to South Sudan for a period of time to invest into the development of the country. “[T]hrough parenting, they are producing new practices of long-distance citizenship in the next generation” (2014:1058-1059). Likewise, the South Sudanese in Indiana invest in their children with the hope that one day they too will in turn give back to South Sudan and its people.

At the same time, particularly for this small, cash-strapped community, giving back transnationally is not always material, such as building schools, providing food, or sending remittances, but can oftentimes be abstract, like maintaining and transmitting ethnic and cultural ties to children. Though they have now lived in the United States for over a decade, have naturalized as American citizens, and have incorporated into American life in many ways, they continue to maintain political, economic, and religious connections that transcend nation-state

borders. “We are kind of in between,” says Kako. “We are going to adjust because we are going to spend the rest of our lives here...but there is always something that is not right...[South Sudanese identity] is still in you.” For adults in this community, teaching children about ethnic and religious identity is understood as a form of giving back to South Sudan. “Our identity will be kept. We are Southern Sudanese in the United States,” explains Emmanuel.

We all ran from war and a bad situation, but we have come to the end of the war,...shall we just come and sit like this without paying back?...There are so many ways we can pay back. If we don't do things to benefit them [materially] at least we have to keep our identity and at least we have to [represent]...[T]hat will lift their name back home. It will lift the South Sudanese name high; to be respected.

By working together as a community locally to teach children about shared ethnic and religious identity, the South Sudanese in Indiana are able to contribute transnationally to the larger global community of South Sudanese. And by encouraging the 1.5- and second-generations to also engage transnationally, the group hopes to continue these practices for generations to come. In the end, though the group as a whole does not always have the material resources available for transnational participation, they are able to give back in other ways they find meaningful and impactful.

### ***Finding “Gathering Points”***

This community of South Sudanese consists of many individuals who come from very diverse backgrounds, with differences in ethnic group affiliation, indigenous languages, religious beliefs, and even geographic areas that make up South Sudan. Highlighting the diversity of South Sudanese, Mikel explains, “South Sudan does not have one culture. There are different cultures. My wife has a different culture, and I have mine.” He is attempting to demonstrate how diverse the SSCOI is by showing that even he and his wife, whom he met after resettlement in Indiana, come from different ethnic groups.

However, like other South Sudanese communities in the U.S., they are drawn together by common ethnic and cultural ties (Holtzman 2000:44). Though the individuals within this community are culturally and ethnically diverse, they also have many common cultural practices and beliefs. Arabic is a common language the community uses during most community events. When worshipping together songs are sung in Arabic so that everyone can participate. Some foods and cooking styles, as well as dances and songs, are common amongst individuals with different ethnic group associations. They also share experiences, though in different ways and to different degrees, of religious, cultural, and ethnic persecution, as well as economic exploitation from the government of Sudan, and they all share geographic origins rooted in southern Sudan. For the most part, the group strives to form this community based on a shared religious (Christian) and national (South Sudanese) identity.

At the same time, deep-seated interethnic tensions are also present in the group. Many people refer to themselves and others as belonging to a tribe. This association of individuals with a certain ethnic group is a major distinguishing factor that can potentially drive a wedge between members of the group. Ethnic groups are typically associated with a particular region in South Sudan, but in reality these boundaries seem to be more fluid than fixed as many in the community oftentimes confer with each other about which group belongs to which region. Nevertheless, they know these historical relationships and geographic boundaries associated with each ethnic group, and at times some continue to associate behaviors and attitudes with these categories, which can lead to negative stereotypes, prejudices, and tribalism. “Sometimes there are disagreements,” explains Kako. “We all come from South Sudan but we come from different places. One of the things that is bringing South Sudan down is tribalism. So when we come from different tribes, sometimes that is what makes us go up and down [as a community].” The strain

on relationships caused by tribalism can result in a breakdown of relational ties within the group. Tribalism is not the only adversity the community must manage, but it is deeply embedded in ways of thinking and acting toward each other and can be difficult to uncover and resolve.

Some examples commonly cited within the group are the levels of education and ability of particular ethnic groups. Dinka are said to be prideful because they believe they are naturally born leaders.<sup>3</sup> Comments about physical appearance, namely tall height, also add to the phenotypic association with Dinka pride. Equatorians, on the other hand, describe themselves as more educated, humble, and open minded. Further examples of prejudiced thinking include: Equatorians get things done, while uneducated Dinka cannot; Dinka perpetuate tribalism, whereas Equatorians push for unity. Obviously not every person may believe, much less audibly speak such prejudices, and many may not even realize they hold these negative stereotypes. Some of these judgments may have some truth to them, but they are nonetheless overgeneralizations that can lead to vitriolic attacks rooted in tribalism.

Mikel argues that identifying with a particular tribe should be downplayed for the sake of community. This is a technique used to produce unity and solidarity. “I’m a Dinka,” he explains, “but it doesn’t mean I can only associate with Dinka, because in Indiana Dinka is only about ten percent; the rest of them are different tribes. And I associate with them. So I identify myself as Southern Sudanese. But the tribe, that is not a good thing if you want to be in a community.” As Mikel notes, individuals can identify with an ethnic group, but for the benefit of the community it is better to identify together as South Sudanese. This is one of the ways the community is used to bridge the gap between ethnic groups. The issue, however, is that tribalism is deeply engrained

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<sup>3</sup> For the participants in this study, this partly stems from the fact that many Dinka held high-ranking positions in the Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) during the civil wars, such as Dr. John Garang who helped pave the way for independence, as well as in the new government of the Republic of South Sudan (ROSS), such as the current president of South Sudan, Salva Kiir Mayardit.

in thinking and may occur unintentionally. In reality Dinka make up thirty percent of the community, which makes those who are one of very few of their own ethnic group feel as if they are excluded, and many times they are. So even if the community as a whole tries to downplay tribalism many still feel the effects, whether it occurs intentionally or unintentionally.

Furthermore, the political turmoil that began in South Sudan in 2013, particularly the dispute between President Salva Kiir, a Dinka, and former Vice President Riek Machar, a Nuer, dredge up deep-seated animosity between Dinka and Nuer, adding stress to the already fragile relationships that exist between South Sudanese ethnic groups in Indiana. Both leaders seem to be “ beholden to the interests of their political bases - which are populated by divided and proud ethnic communities” (Maru 2015). Witnessing these divisions in the government of South Sudan influences how community is shaped in Indiana. Because the transnational connection goes both ways, so that both the sending and receiving ends of migration can be affected, the South Sudanese in Indiana not only shape, but are also shaped by events, beliefs, and actions from their country of origin.

At the same time, these imagined ethnic and regional boundaries of South Sudan became blurred as South Sudanese refugees were resettled in America. “Before arriving [in the United States] we knew communities in terms of tribe,” explains Deng, “So when I come to the United States it became bigger.” Deng, describing what it was like arriving in the United States and how those boundaries began to vanish, says, “America makes us more close to each other than when we were at home in [southern Sudan] because those communities and societies were so defined and so specific. But now in America it’s less specific...[Whereas] in Sudan since I have my family and tribe...those lines are hard to erase.” Resettlement in America knows no such boundaries or lines. They were placed in cities across the United States. “But now, here [in

America],” continues Deng, “we have a gathering point, the Sudanese community, where I am able to be a part of it, Equatorian are able to be a part of it, and Nuer are able to be a part of it.” Mikel agrees, saying, “Here in America it is a little bit easier because people are getting educated. People are getting to know individuals from other tribes.” In the hope of one day returning to South Sudan to “detrribalize our region,” Deng says, “The more we gather here the more we are in harmony and we can spread that and say, ‘Equatorians as a people are not bad.’” Building community and establishing unity amongst this ethnically and culturally diverse group in Indiana reflects their hopes of a unified South Sudan.

### **The Religious Organization**

Led by a group of four women huddled over a single page of printed lyrics the small congregation of nine either sits or stands as they follow along with the song. Someone is handed a tambourine to tap along to the beat. Others clap along, sometimes to their own syncopated rhythm. The small female choir of four is situated next to the podium behind which the worship service leader, who was chosen at the beginning of the meeting, also sings along. The chorus repeats, “Shukuru, Yesu,” (Thank you, Jesus) several times. Behind him a large framed picture of Jesus with open arms seems to receive the praise of the worshipers. There are around thirty cushioned folding chairs situated in a concentric semi-circle before the podium. Some of the empty chairs become occupied as others slowly filter in late. It's the first Sunday of the month and as usual the worship service was scheduled for one in the afternoon. As usual no one arrives until two at the earliest. The meeting consists of whoever shows up on this particular Sunday, which can vary from as low as one to as many as thirty or forty if it is a big event, such as hosting a traveling pastor from South Sudan.

Across the hall, just to the left of the main sanctuary of the church, children play and entertain themselves with toys and coloring books in the nursery. Occasionally, a mother will exit the room to check in with the children, sometimes returning a few minutes later consoling a child in her arms. The refrain continues, “Shukuru, Yesu.” Sporadic backup vocalists repeat, “Yesu,” in the background. The room is small with only enough room for the chairs, the podium and one long table in the back on which nothing but a copy of *The United Methodist Hymnal* rests unused during this worship service. The church was gracious to provide a space for this group of South Sudanese to meet for worship once a month. From time to time, the pastor or a congregant of the church will drop in to attend the service. The group reciprocates with a friendly welcoming and by including them as much as possible in the worship. A printed page of Arabic lyrics, transliterated using English characters, is passed around to everyone.

After the worship songs end, but before motioning for everyone to take his or her seat, the leader of the service says a prayer in Arabic and indicates for the preacher to take the podium to begin his teaching. Simon, one of two elected preachers for the community’s religious organization, opens his Bible to the book of 1 Kings and begins reading aloud. Upon completion of the lengthy passage in Arabic, he then proceeds to paraphrase the scripture in English to accommodate all in attendance. The teaching is on unity, which is a pertinent message for a small diverse group of South Sudanese attempting to build a community together in America.

The country of South Sudan itself is very diverse ethnically, linguistically, and religiously, including Islam, Christianity, and indigenous religions (Akol 2007:7-10; Beswick 2004:9). Says the community president at the time, “There is one thing you need to know about the South Sudanese Community of Indiana, we always overcome obstacles. We always come together regardless...of the differences of diversity and religion.” Though the Indiana

community is small, demographics vary widely. With numerous ethnic groups, languages, geographic origins, and even historical inter-ethnic group hostilities it is easy to see how building community on a local level in a foreign country can be challenging for this group of South Sudanese.

This section reviews the religious organization in Hamilton. I first describe the spiritual importance of Christianity in the lives of this group during the civil war. I then examine the building of the religious organization in Hamilton, detailing some of its troubles, why it started, and its importance to the community. I then consider some of the compromises the group makes for the sake of unity. I end by discussing how the community uses religion as a tool for unity.

### ***The Role of Christianity During the Civil Wars***

During the civil wars of Sudan many Southerners turned to Christianity in an attempt to resist the government supported Islamization of Sudan. Before the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed in 2005, southern Sudan had been desolated as a result of the civil war and exploitation by the north, receiving little aid. Villages and homes were burned, and people were without food or had fled to refugee camps or to Khartoum in the North. Southerners who lived in the North, particularly in the capital city of Khartoum, experienced discrimination in places of work, education, and throughout daily life. This discrimination was based on skin color, geographic origins, dialects, religion, and basically any non-Arab distinguishable characteristic. While living and working in Khartoum, Mikel experienced discrimination and explains why being Christian was important to him: “The Arab will force us to be Muslim. If we [convert to Islam] then our identity would be lost. So we need to be different from them. [Christianity] tells them that we were different from them.”

Though economic exploitation, persecution, and an absence of political representation all contributed to the causes of civil war and the split of the country, many of the South Sudanese in Indiana saw Christianity as one of the main reasons why the country split. “The Christian people were praying for years without giving up,” explains Emmanuel, “They asked God to give them their way, whether to be together, or separate.” Some see South Sudan’s independence as a result only God could have brought about, as Kako explains, “When the peace came, I believe that was an answer from God.” But conversion to Christianity was not simply just a political move to resist the Government of Sudan and the spread of Islam. Important as this political move was, the spiritual component of finding meaning and having hope during the civil wars was just as significant. “No matter how hard it is,” says Kako, “they still have a strong faith that nothing will happen because of Jesus; because of our religion. Jesus is always there.” Many placed their trust in religion to protect them and their families and allow their country to have peace. “It is human nature,” says Deng, “when things are not going very well, people turn religious.” For this group, their experience of institutionalized religion and discrimination in Sudan highlights the importance of continuing to identify as South Sudanese and Christian in America.

### ***Obstacles to the Religious Organization***

Attendance for the SSCOI’s religious organization is inconsistent and at times dwindling to the point that the community will forgo meeting at all during a month if not enough people show up. Waning attendance has been attributed to many things, like laziness, old run-down cars, or the fact that services are uninteresting and boring. More serious are objections some have to denominational differences or the fact that many struggle financially and have to work on the weekend, and paying for gas to drive to Hamilton becomes expensive. Though there are many reasons why individuals may lack commitment to meeting in Hamilton for religious services,

tribalism is often cited as a motive. “Just because Equatorian people started this church, doesn’t mean others can’t go,” says Alek, a Dinka. Kwaje, an Equatorian, immediately supported Alek’s assertion by frankly stating, “It’s tribalism.” Chol describes a bleak picture of the animosity that exists between adults in the community, saying, “The people still identify themselves by their own tribes and this thing will not go away soon. This is a long time thing. But maybe the kids who were born here in the U.S., they might not know the difference. But the grown people, it’s still on their mind...it’s not going to go away.”

According to the acting president for the SSCOI administration at the time, even though there are nearly ninety South Sudanese, including adults and children, who are listed as part of the community, the average attendance to Hamilton currently is around eight adults and six children. She attributes busy working lives to low attendance, saying,

There are too many commitments in this country. We have no time to socialize. It’s not like back home in Sudan where you work from nine until two, and then the rest of the evening is the time you have to go socialize...Imagine, the husband is the only source of income. He works two jobs and has no weekends. And the mother with four or five children is stressed out and has no time to go and socialize.

Many in the community struggle financially and must work multiple jobs, which can become a strain on a person’s ties with the community. Additionally, since Hamilton is centrally located between Indianapolis, Columbus, and Bloomington, all attendees must commute using their own resources. The president for the religious organization administration in Hamilton explained that life in America for many in the group can be overwhelming and time consuming, saying, “We are not all in one city...Suddenly the life here just pulled people away.”

### ***Reasons for the Religious Organization***

As the religious organization administration struggles to raise attendance, they maintain that the religious meetings continue to be important for uniting the community as a whole. For

some, meeting in Hamilton for worship is important for studying the Bible together. Simon, one of the preachers in Hamilton, explains, “As a community we need the Word of God so that whatever we do, or if there is a disagreement, we have to go to the Bible to see what the Bible has to say about the topic we [are discussing].” The religious organization was also established in order to teach children about Jesus and spiritual salvation through Bible stories. As Simon explains,

It is important to practice the religious life to our kids, and also to practice our way of life to them, and then teach them to follow our tradition at the same time as our community. We are there for one reason, to deepen our faith in Jesus Christ, to have bible sharing, to talk about history, to talk about how kids will accept Jesus in their life.

Elia, the president overseeing the religious organization administration describes the importance of Christianity in his life and its use within the community, saying one of the reasons Hamilton was formed was “to let our children have some connection between them and us. That is why we created this; to have something to let us meet once in a while for that.” The religious services in Hamilton are a way in which the group creates a space for the next generation to learn about the cultural roots of their parents. “[Meeting for worship] is our only place for the kids to know themselves,” says Chol, “that they are from a different place. If we don’t do that the kids will not know, even the adults will not know themselves; who they are.”

The religious community is also important because it provides a way to give back to other South Sudanese, for example by gathering money through offerings to send to other South Sudanese communities in other states or to send money back to South Sudan to fund projects. Other studies have also shown religious organizations have served as conduits for remittance sending (see Ha 2002). Religious organizations provide space to facilitate religious practices that can extend transnationally. Another way is through prayer, which can extend both ways. The South Sudanese in Indiana are on the sending and receiving end of prayers. These religious acts

of intercession connect this group with non-migrants back home through belief in a common deity. The community also connects with other South Sudanese communities in the United States by hosting a South Sudanese traveling preacher for a weekend retreat. They invited other South Sudanese communities from Kentucky and Ohio to participate in the event. The communities even gathered monetary gifts to present to the guest preacher.

These religious gatherings also serve as a time for building relationships. For some, spiritual growth isn't as important as simply building stronger relationships with each other and strengthening community ties. Mikel, for example, receives more spiritual growth from the worship service held at his home church. He says, "We have to stick together...It's not because I need to worship, I go [to Hamilton] for our own benefit...to support one another...I'm doing it to build up the relationship between Southern Sudanese [in Indiana]... There are some of us there who really want to pray. [But not me], because I can go over here [to my home church] to pray."

According to Alek,

This church was started because they wanted to bring all the Sudanese people together to have church once a month. Everyone goes to their American church every Sunday...but at the end of the day as the Indiana community we have to have something to bring us all together. It doesn't matter if you are Dinka, or Equatorian, or Shilluk, or Jur. We have to learn to stay together as Sudanese people. That's the biggest issue we have here in Indiana.

Most would agree that meeting together strengthens the overall community by building stronger relationships beyond ethnic lines, but the religious organization continues to struggle to increase attendance. This largely has to do with ideological differences rooted in Christian denominations and is one of the main causes for division in the community, as well as the religious organization.

### ***Denominational Differences: Bible Sharing vs. Church***

Particularly for Catholics, these religious meetings are not considered legitimate church meetings. “[As a Catholic] when it comes to my church I have a special thing I have to follow” says Simon. “If we go [to worship] according to the denominations we cannot go together. But if we call ourselves to focus on the Bible then we can agree on going together.” Roman Catholic doctrine teaches that the Roman Catholic Church is the one true Church (Pius XI 1928). Any religious meetings that members of the Catholic Church attend within the community are not believed to be in accordance with Roman Catholic doctrine, and are therefore not viewed as legitimate church meetings.

This has caused tension as some Protestant members of the religious organization view the activities in Hamilton as an opportunity to establish a community church, something they feel personally called to do. They believe it is valuable for strengthening the SSCOI itself, as well as establishing their name amongst other South Sudanese communities across the United States. As a compromise the religious organization administration decided to elect two men, one Catholic and the other Protestant, to serve as preachers. In selecting religious leaders from different denominational backgrounds the Hamilton community is attempting to overcome their differences in beliefs. In another compromise, the Catholic members of the community suggested the name “Bible sharing”, as opposed to calling it church. Bible sharing references the act of studying the Bible together without undermining their doctrinal beliefs about the sanctity and authority of the Roman Catholic Church.

In 2011, the religious organization administration held a vote determining the worship service would be called Bible sharing. Though this decision passed, some still referred to the religious services as a church. Emmanuel, who is affiliated with the Protestant United Methodist denomination, is one of two elected preachers for the religious organization. He says, “When we

established the Hamilton church community, we are now known across the United States...that opened us to other South Sudanese churches.” In particular, within states like Kentucky and Ohio where there are other South Sudanese communities with churches. “I believe,” says Kako, “that the church in Hamilton has made Indiana known to other South Sudanese communities in other states because each state has a South Sudanese church and they try to connect through them.” One of the issues ailing the community in Indiana is that it does not have enough residents to establish a community church of one denomination. In states like Kentucky and Ohio, multiple community churches have been established because they have a much larger base of residents to form congregations.

For Emmanuel, having a community church provides a space for the community to become stronger. “A lot of people felt like they were in a box. Going to work and coming home. But now we can have activities, we can visit each other, we can have occasions.” According to him, the SSCOI became stronger once they began meeting for worship together because the group now had a space for community events that fostered relationship building amongst South Sudanese at local, national, and global levels. The religious organization provides space for the group to host traveling pastors from South Sudan, send remittances or other monetary assistance to South Sudan or other South Sudanese communities in the United States, and even pray for family, friends, and the nation of South Sudan. All of these examples foster ethnic, cultural, religious, social and economic ties transnationally.

Catholic members of the community do not disagree that building relationships with other South Sudanese whether locally, nationally, or globally is important. In fact, members of the Catholic denomination make up nearly half of those in attendance to Hamilton worship services. Actually, some of the Catholic members of the community have even dropped the

debate over naming the religious organization for the sake of unity. “In our hearts we know it is Bible sharing,” says Mikel. “But in order for us to accept them in, we let them say whatever they say. And we can even give it a name [like church]. But will that be real for us? That is a question we ask ourselves [as Catholics].” Mikel explains that as Catholics they personally view Hamilton as a Bible study. Simon agrees by quoting scripture, “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them” (Mt 18:20 NIV). They use this verse to show that gathering as Christians for worship is church, just not a religious institution with authority like that of the Catholic Church, which is consistent with Catholic doctrine.

Speaking of the New Sudan Council of Churches, an interdenominational coalition of churches working together to build solidarity and unite across denominations in South Sudan, Simon explains, “The same thing we are doing here [in the United States], they are doing there [in South Sudan], also.” In the end, compromises are made so that the community has the opportunity to grow and build stronger ties across ethnic and denominational lines.

### ***Religion as a Tool for Unity***

The threats this group faced to their ethnic and cultural identity throughout their long history of oppression and persecution in Sudan, as well as the pivotal role of religion in their lives during that time, serves as an impetus for continuing to identify as South Sudanese and Christian in the diaspora. Though religion was used by Sudanese national religious organizations as a political tool of unification during the civil wars (Brown 2008:251-252), it also served to meet the spiritual needs of Southerners, such as providing hope and answers to prayers. The role the South Sudanese church played in their lives during the civil wars was significant and is frequently referenced, as Kwaje states, “Regardless of our diversity, not only will the church bring us together, but it will give us the chance of renewing the strength we used to know back

home. The strength of the church.” This statement recalls the ideals of solidarity between Southerners that religious leaders promoted during the civil wars. In all actuality, solidarity was not always a reality amongst Southerners, neither during the civil wars nor during the post-Referendum political unrest of South Sudan.

During a service in Hamilton Simon delivered a teaching on unity using the story of God’s displeasure with King Solomon and the subsequent splitting of the Kingdom of Israel, found in 1 Kings 11. Simon taught that the split occurred because King Solomon was no longer following the Word of God. "Unity without Word of God cannot stay longer," Simon instructed, translating his sermon from Arabic to English. Simon was teaching that the community must listen to the Word of God if they hope to remain unified and not end up splitting into “tribes,” referencing the Israelite kingdoms. Likewise, during a memorial service for a deceased man in the community a prominent preacher from a larger South Sudanese community church in Kentucky was asked to speak. “I pray that Southern Sudanese do not look like they are Dinka or Nuer, or from Ekuatoria or Bahr el Ghazal, but that we are one, one in Christ, one people.” Upon proclaiming this, the pastor received much praise and applause. Unity as Christians, both argued, is more important than what differences may exist between South Sudanese ethnic groups.

Affiliation with a particular ethnic group is not in itself negative or destructive. In fact, like many immigrants, refugees, and native people in America, taking pride in one’s own ethnicity and culture is a common way to honor heritage. It is when differences in ethnic affiliation begin to divide the group that this becomes a problem. “[Christianity] is the bond that we have between us,” explains Kwaje.

We have tribes, we are a very diverse community. We have Dinka, Nuer and other tribes. If we don’t have Christianity we would have tribalism. And that is an easy thing that can divide us. But we always try so hard to put Christianity first. Christianity is a religion of

unity. It is something that brings us together. Something that makes us look at things in life that are bigger than us and tribalism.

Christianity is valued above all else, including affiliation with either ethnic group or national South Sudanese identity, as central to the process of building community for South Sudanese in Indiana. “[Practicing Christianity] increases our unity,” says Simon. “For example, we come from different areas of South Sudan. There are many tribes. This will unite us more than normal community.” Though a shared national identity as South Sudanese is a major factor in the formation of this community, religion is treated as the greater solution to resolving differences and establishing unity.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Discussion**

The building of this small community of South Sudanese in Indiana is centered on common ground that looks back to the inklings of solidarity found amongst Southerners during their rebellion in the civil wars with the Government of Sudan. Since arriving to the United States this community has created a gathering point rooted in shared identity that centers on identifying as South Sudanese and Christian. In an attempt to unify themselves in spite of their differences they build community based on these historical, albeit fragile, shared ties. This discussion chapter consist of two parts and attempts to flesh out some of the key themes revealed within the findings of this study. The first section discusses the importance of Christianity for negotiating differences and building community for South Sudanese in Indiana. The second section examines the confliction of feelings toward transnational participation many in the community experience due to incorporation in American society, but ends by highlighting the benefits of maintaining these transnational social networks. Lastly, the third section demonstrates that the community creates alternative ways of fulfilling a sense of duty to give back to South Sudan by using the religious organization to influence the ongoing process of identity formation in the lives of their children.

## **“Shared” Responsibility: Negotiating Religious Community & Identity**

During the period when the SSCOI was debating the proper title for the religious organization, many in the group were left with a sense of disillusionment due to the infighting and quarreling occurring along denominational and ethnic lines. Participation in the religious organization and worship services declined as a result. Nonetheless, a core group of community leaders, diverse in denomination and ethnic affiliation, continue to preach the importance of Christianity as the foundation of the community and the unification of the group. They reason that Christianity can act as the common bond that unites this ethnically and denominationally diverse group under a national and religious identity of South Sudanese and Christian.

While members of this community attend home churches on a regular basis in their respective geographic areas, Hamilton provides a central location for the community as a whole to worship together. The religious organization based in Hamilton provides a space to study Scripture as a group. More specifically, they meet, much like other transnational religious organizations (see Levitt 2003), in order to understand the Scriptural spiritual teachings and precepts for life in a common language more familiar than English, something their home churches are not equipped to provide. Speaking in Arabic, the most common language among the most people in the community, makes it easier to interpret the teachings for their individual lives, as well as for the community as a whole. Many, if not most, individuals in the community have struggled at one point to understand and apply the teachings they receive from the English-speaking ministers of the churches they attend on a regular, week-to-week basis. Meeting together to discuss the Bible is important for instructing the group on how to live peaceably with one another, as well as within society, because these religious scriptures provide the values and

moral standard by which all Christians are to live. The ability to discuss these matters in Arabic lessens misunderstandings and increases solidarity.

Communing like this integrates religion with daily life, cultural practices, thought patterns, and perspectives. In other words, Christianity is considered part of how one identifies him or herself, as Levitt (2003) points out, “Religion plays a critical role in identity construction, meaning making, and value formation” (851). Identity formation is made stronger when it occurs within relationships, which epitomizes the Sudanese customary value of caring for others (Lim 2009:1036), and is reflected in the many references to “sharing” – e.g. Bible sharing – within the community. By “sharing” in the teachings of the Bible the community participates in the process of meaning-making together and discusses how these teachings are applicable in daily life.

Identifying with the teachings and communal values of Christianity help shape individual, as well as group identity. By defining themselves as Christians they look to a higher authority that transcends ethnic and denominational differences in order to create a sense of oneness with each other that ideally produces stronger ties to community. Though there are obvious distinctions between individuals that can be potentially divisive, creating such strong ties to the community solidifies a social space in which the group can both create new communal goals and experiences, as well as build commonality on past experiences tied to South Sudan. While religion has emerged as a prominent tool for establishing the “gathering point” at which the community can communicate effectively, it is the act of partaking in the shared responsibility of negotiating how to handle ethnic, cultural, and denominational differences that enables the South Sudanese in Indiana to build meaningful community with one another.

Though at times stagnant, the religious organization is important for the community because it helps them to stay connected with social networks both locally and transnationally.

Remaining connected to transnational social networks allows the group to stay in touch with the country of South Sudan and other South Sudanese people. It creates ways to establish stronger cultural ties amongst the group as they live in America and ultimately provides avenues to connect future generations with these ethnic and cultural ties. In connecting with each other in these ways the group can continue to build community as they negotiate what they believe are appropriate ways for South Sudanese to live in America.

### **Difficult Decisions: Maintaining Transnational Social Networks**

Integral to this process of negotiating what it means to be South Sudanese in America is incorporation into American society. Incorporation, particularly through employment, has a way of producing feelings of ambivalence toward transnational participation that many in the group experience. The fact that the South Sudanese in Indiana have incorporated into American society is indisputable. Employment in auto factories, attaining undergraduate and graduate degrees, establishing a line of credit through a local bank, or purchasing a house are all ways the individuals in this community have incorporated into American society. Religious practices demonstrate another sphere of incorporation that this group inhabits locally, such as tithing to home churches or congregational prayer. Though incorporation into American society does not equate to complete assimilation, it does impact continuation of transnational participation.

As a transnational community, this group of South Sudanese-Americans face the difficult, and at times complicated, decisions of maintaining social networks both within and that transcend the nation-state boundaries of the United States. Many in the community experience conflicted feelings over their desire to achieve financial stability in America while meeting obligations to send remittances and other types of support back home. Faria (2014) argues that many in the diaspora experience feelings of “ambivalence” as a result of an increased sense of

duty to the fledgling country of South Sudan (1060). Using Blunt (2003, 2004), Faria (2014) argues that this sense of duty is heightened by feelings of guilt that many South Sudanese experience while living in the diaspora (1056). Because the South Sudanese in Indiana do not have the resources to make frequent return visits, much of their transnational activity is figurative, rather than literal (Lim 2009:1028). In other words, they predominantly participate transnationally from a distance through remittances or emotional connections.

Remittances are important because they provide much needed assistance for family and friends back home. At the same time, they help to maintain important ties to transnational social networks (Shandy 2006). These social networks provide the emotional connections that the South Sudanese in Indiana desire, and are rooted in a shared cultural value of responsibility for one another. These emotional connections give refugees in the diaspora a sense of “increased responsibility” to provide for those back home (Lim 2009:1039). The good standing that these transnational connections maintain within these social networks benefit the South Sudanese diaspora should they ever decide to return home (see Lim 2009). Therefore, the benefits of maintaining transnational social networks are twofold in that they serve to meet the emotional needs of those in the diaspora to fulfill this sense of duty to care for others, while at the same time strengthening the ties connected with these social networks.

### **Overcoming Feelings of Ambivalence: Alternative Forms of Giving Back**

Remaining connected with social networks on the transnational level is important for community building at the local level. Community space provides access to these social networks in which the community is able to maintain, shape, transmit and practice shared ethnic and religious ties. Such intentional efforts by this group are important to achieve a number of objectives, such as child rearing and giving back to South Sudan. Child rearing is an important

aspect of daily life for adults in the community. Many children in the community were born in the United States post resettlement and therefore have no prior experience of their parents' country of origin. Whereas this may be lost on some of the children, it is acutely important to adults that the 1.5- and second-generations have knowledge of their ethnic and religious heritage, culture, and identity. Parents give guidance to their children by teaching beliefs, customs, and behaviors they associate with ethnic and religious identity they believe will lead to living a moral and successful life. Adults in the community sometimes use what they describe as a "loss of identity" to explain the Americanization of 1.5- and second-generations and why they stray from these shared beliefs and practices.

The Americanization, and subsequent reshaping of identity, that occurs in the lives of 1.5- and second-generations has a great impact on the social networks of these children. As a result, parents take action to resist these structural processes that contribute to the shaping of their children's identity. Faria (2014) describes how parents speak of their home country in ways they feel will teach children good ways of living. Parents then use this as a "corrective tool" to realign children with the morals and values of "a romanticized rendering of South Sudan" (1058). But for most of the children in the community, particularly those born in the United States, the only experience they have (and may ever gain) is that which is provided through the efforts of well-meaning parents and adults in the community. This is why making an intentional effort to create space through community organizations to facilitate these processes of shaping 1.5- and second-generation identity is so highly valued. For the parents, teaching children shared ethnic and religious identity helps to balance out the overwhelming presence of American culture in the lives of their children.

Because religion is a prominent way this group attempts to contribute to the shaping of their children's identity, the religious organization provides a space to shape identity. Parents use worship services in Hamilton to teach their children Christian values from the Bible, such as, unity and peace, which directly relate to the community building process. These religious beliefs and values are elemental to how they identify themselves. For most in the community, Christianity is not only religious beliefs and a way of life, but part of who they are as a person. So when parents speak of their children as "losing identity" they are speaking not only of their ethnic roots, but also referencing religious identity – those Christian beliefs and practices parents hope to transmit. By using the space of the religious organization the community attempts to influence the ongoing process of identity formation in the lives of their children, thereby fulfilling the emotional need to give back to their home country and people.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Conclusion**

For the South Sudanese community in Indiana, community building is rooted in a shared national and religious identity. For such a small, and yet diverse group of people building community has not been without its difficulties. Therefore, this project has attempted to illuminate why and how this group builds community. The focus of this study has been twofold. First, I have sought to show how this South Sudanese community in Indiana has foregrounded religion in the process of building community and creating unity. In so doing, I have demonstrated their agency in this process. Second, I have attempted to demonstrate that remaining connected with transnational social networks is important for community building. I have detailed some of the ways the South Sudanese in Indiana participate transnationally and that transnational social ties help shape this group's processes of community building. This brief section revisits these guiding research questions and presents my conclusions.

Community building is an important process for this community in terms of both remaining connected with transnational social networks and incorporating into local and national social networks in America. This community is settling down here, but also remaining connected there. Setting roots in the United States, while fostering cultural and ethnic ties to South Sudan.

Community organizations help this group to meet economic, social, and spiritual needs in daily life locally, while at the same time connecting them in these same ways transnationally. The community organization is important for establishing common purpose and communal goals, such as child rearing, worshiping as a community, or eventually having a community center to serve the needs of the group. Adults in this community expressed that they want to create a support system for one another and also to have better means to give back to South Sudan. They also want to have a space to teach their children about their heritage. The South Sudanese Community Organization in Indiana and the religious organization in Hamilton serve as space to facilitate such communal goals. This community of South Sudanese, however, is very diverse and faces the difficulties of maintaining strong community ties. Due to ethnic, cultural, and denominational differences the community struggles at times to remain cohesive.

Part of the process of community building relies on staying connected with transnational social networks that allow the group to maintain ties to shared ethnic and cultural heritage. These attempts to find commonality based on shared ethnic ties to South Sudan are important, particularly for the process of sharing these ties with children. This community values giving back to family and friends in South Sudan. Their ability to give back transnationally, however, can be impacted by financial obligations in the United States. Though transnational participation is costly, the benefits of maintaining these transnational social networks motivates the community to continue to give. Giving back materially, such as through remittances, though is not always possible. Therefore, this community finds alternative forms of giving back, such as teaching children about heritage.

Such practices help to maintain the emotional connection between sending and receiving countries for South Sudanese in Indiana, while at the same time abating the feelings of guilt that

many in the diaspora experience. Without these transnational connections the community would not have as much access to avenues that help them to share in commonalities as South Sudanese. At the same time, these transnational ties expose this community to continuing tribalism back in South Sudan. These deep-seated stereotypical attitudes of some ethnic groups against other ethnic groups have created tensions within the group. Therefore, they must work together to overcome the differences that exist between them as South Sudanese.

Though their attempts to create unity have not always been met with success, the group is resolute in this common purpose. Religion has emerged as the key instrument in their efforts to establish unity amongst the group. The religious organization allows the community to create a space where the group can determine common purpose through religious teachings and practices, such as the teachings on unity and the calls for detribalization. Religious identity is important to creating social ties that strengthen the community. By using religion as the foundation of community building, they are attempting to bind unity with religious commonality. The group appeals to the supremacy of religious identity in order to transcend ethnic and denominational differences for the purpose of creating a sense of oneness.

However, Christianity is not what creates the unity and cohesiveness required to have a community, but serves as a vehicle for conversations about differences to occur. This is demonstrated in the ways that individuals and groups within the community had to make compromises for the sake of the overall cohesiveness of the community, as can be seen in the ongoing negotiation of whether the religious organization is a community church or simply Bible sharing. Therefore, their ability to effectively negotiate differences and handle the problems that arise is what enables this group to mold themselves into a meaningful community. It is this productive tension which allows the group to negotiate meaningful ties with one another.

This community is imperfect and continues to struggle overcoming differences. But it is exactly that struggle that demonstrates this group's ability to build community. Their involvement within this process of negotiation reflects their agency as interlocutors to address their differences in effective ways that bring about unity. For this group, community space has proven to be vital for cultural persistence and creating a sense of belonging. This process of community building, based on shared belief in Christianity, enables this diverse group to have a community that serves to meet the needs of its members.

### **Limitations & Further Research**

By focusing on the South Sudanese in Indiana, this study did not compare how other immigrant groups use religion as a tool for unity. Further studies on the use of religion as a tool for unification should include other immigrant groups and could expound on the effectiveness of this process, which will add to literature within both anthropological and religious studies. For the South Sudanese in Indiana religion serves as a cornerstone of creating lasting ties that transcend deeply engrained differences. And yet, the group continues to struggle to overcome their divisions. Religion may prove useful in bringing people together, but as a system of belief it is still employed by fallible people. By focusing only on similarities to build unity the South Sudanese in Indiana gloss over many underlying prejudices they have toward each other that should be dealt with. Therefore, further research on alternative ways the group can establish unity, such as the impact of the practices of inclusivism, may prove beneficial.

Due to the small size of the community there were a low number of participants. Also, participant criteria of this project limited participation to adults only. As a result the perspectives of the 1.5- and second-generation were not accounted for within this study. Other studies conducted with large South Sudanese communities in the United States have demonstrated many

of the same factors contributing to disunity found amongst the South Sudanese in Indiana. Further studies comparing and contrasting South Sudanese communities of various sizes could shed light on the gray areas left uncovered within this study, such as the voice of the 1.5- and second-generation and the importance of larger denominational churches in establishing unity.

Finally, due to a lack of access to female participants, particularly within a private setting, this project was not fully capable of examining some of the most potentially controversial subject matter revealed within the community. Some women are attempting to use community support networks and a potential community center to achieve their own goals of establishing an environment of mutual respect between genders, as well as equal opportunity for women in both social and economic spheres of life, such as pursuing an education. These mothers benefit from education by developing better English speaking, reading, and writing skills. This allows for them to complete everyday tasks, for example, like helping their children with homework, reading notes or permission slips from school, and filling out medical forms. Oftentimes women in South Sudanese communities have to rely on children for literacy support since their children have a better grasp of the English language (Perry 2009:257). Creating a community in which men respect the roles women play in the community, raising children, managing households, and as wage earners requires challenging the current positions of power men attempt to control over women. Further research should also be completed on the ways that women in this group use the community to challenge gender roles and contribute to the shaping of the community through forms of resistance to the established power structure.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

#### Name and Contact Information –

#### Introduction to the Interview

This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes. For purposes of accuracy, with your permission, this interview will be audio recorded. I will begin by asking you background questions so that I can know a little more about you. Then I will ask you questions about your life in the United States. After that we will talk about religion, community, then identity, and end with a free listing exercise, which I will later explain to you. Remember, you do not have to answer any questions that would make you feel uncomfortable and you may also discontinue the interview at any time. Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study.

#### Background

What is your name? What is your age? Where were you born?

How would you identify your ethnicity?

*[ethnicity: self-identification based on language, ancestral geographic area, political and economic interests; i.e. German, Japanese, Columbian, Dinka, Nuer]*

Are you married? Is your spouse also South Sudanese? How did you meet?

Do you have children? How many? What are their ages?

What is your highest level of education? Where did you go to school? What did you study?

How did you make a living before you came to the United States? Are you currently employed?  
Does your spouse have a job?

#### Life in the United States

When and how did you come to the U.S.?

What were some of the expectations you had of living in America upon your arrival?

Looking back, how did those expectations play out? *[Did your expectations hold true?]*

How and why did you come to live in Indiana? When did you come to Indiana?

#### Religion

If any, what religion do you identify with? Do you practice this religion on a regular basis? How often? When and where?

**[For Christians]**

Have you always been a Christian or did you convert from something else? How did you become one? Is your spouse and children also Christian?

Why did you become Christian? Are there any benefits to practicing Christianity?

What are the fundamental tenets of Christianity? How does a person learn these beliefs?

Are you a member of a church? Does it have any affiliation to a particular denomination? Why did you choose to become a member of this denomination? What sets this denomination apart from other denominations?

Has Christianity been important to South Sudan in any particular way? Has Christianity been important to you as a Southern Sudanese in any particular way?

Has Christianity become a part of how you identify yourself? In what ways?  
*[identity: selfhood; individuality; how you see and understand yourself;]*

### **Community**

How long have you been part of this community of South Sudanese in Indiana? How long have you attended worship services with this community? Was it always in Franklin, IN?

Why did you decide to meet for worship with this community?

Do you serve any roles within this community? (For instance, president, vice president, secretary, etc.) Do you serve any roles with this religious community that meets in Franklin?

Why is building community with other South Sudanese important to you?

### **Identity**

How would you describe your identity?

Has the way you identify yourself changed since living in the United States?

**Free Listing Exercise** – during this exercise I will give you a pen and paper and ask you to list as many traits that you can think of that are associated with certain identities. List all the traits you can think of that could be associated with being “American”.

List all the traits you can think of that could be associated with being “South Sudanese”.

### **Wrap-Up**

Is there anything I have not asked about your feelings, opinions, or values about what we have talked about today that you would like to share or any points you want to emphasize?

**Thank you for your time, your openness, and your willingness to be interviewed.**

## Appendix B

### Follow Up Interview Questions

#### Name and Contact Information –

##### American Dream

-How do you define the American Dream? How did you learn this?

-How do you achieve the American Dream?

- Can you be successful without achieving the American Dream? In what ways?

##### Bible Sharing & Franklin

-I am not sure when the conflict over whether to call it church or Bible Sharing started. Was this before or after the move from the Meridian street church in Indianapolis?

##### Community, Social Relationships & Unity

-How does the SSCIN build community with SS communities in other states?

-Why is a church so important for the SS community in IN?

-How is conflict in the community handled? How is compromise reached?

-What do other South Sudanese communities call their religious gatherings?

-Was denomination important in SS? How important is it now in America?

##### Children & Parenting

-In what ways do you use community to teach your children their heritage?

##### Discrimination, Persecution & Racism

-Have you ever experienced racism or discrimination of any kind in America?

-If so, what do you think it was based on? Skin color, accent/English ability, immigrant/refugee?

-Does tribalism still occur within the community?

##### Christianity & Religion

-Is Christianity the only way to achieve salvation/go to Heaven? Can people go to Heaven without Jesus?

##### Identity

-Can identity change as you encounter cultures and peoples from different parts of the world?

## **Appendix C**

### **Focus Group Questions**

1. As a group, discuss your ideas of what characteristics, behaviors, attitudes, and values you associate with what it means to be an American.
2. As a group, discuss your ideas of what characteristics, behaviors, attitudes, and values you associate with what it means to be a South Sudanese.
3. Present the results of individual free listing exercises.

## Appendix D

### Consent Form

#### **Title**

Religion, Community and Identity: Southern Sudanese Approaches to Cultural Negotiation in the U.S.

#### **Study Purpose and Rationale**

This project will explore ways in which a group of naturalized South Sudanese refugees shape identities and examine the structures that facilitate this process. Central to this study will be the investigation of the interrelationship of religion, community, and identity. This study will be important for documenting and describing processes of identity negotiations among refugees, including some of the ways in which they have agency. By examining these processes of negotiation within this South Sudanese-American community we might begin to better understand the capacity of refugees to think, strategize, and appropriate various structures, identities, and spaces within different environments.

#### **Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria**

To be eligible to participate in this study you must be between twenty and eighty years of age. If you refuse to sign this Consent Form you will be disqualified from participating in the study. Also, if you decide to opt-out of the study at any point in its duration, any information you provided will be considered invalid and will not be used. No individuals will be included in this study that would be defined as vulnerable by the standards of the IRB.

#### **Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw your permission at anytime for any reason without penalty or prejudice from the investigator. There is no compensation for participation in this study. Please feel free to ask any questions of the investigator before signing this form and at any time during the study.

#### **Participation Procedures and Duration**

For this project, you will be asked to participate in individual interviews, a listing exercise, and focus groups regarding the topics of this study. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions, as they are intended to allow you to communicate your own thoughts and beliefs. Interviews will last between 45-60 minutes.

#### **Audio Tapes**

For purposes of accuracy, with your permission, the interviews will be audio recorded. Any names used on the audiotape will be changed to pseudonyms when the tapes are transcribed. You also have the option to permit the interviewer permission to record the interview through written notes and decline the use of an audio recorder.

#### **Data Confidentiality**

During the study written field notes will be taken. Pseudonyms, rather than personal names, will be used in all written field notes. All data will be maintained as confidential and no identifying

information, such as names, will appear in any publication or presentation of the data. All questionnaires are completed anonymously and will not be compared with any participant interviews in an attempt to identify respondents.

### **Storage of Data**

Written field notes and hardcopies of questionnaires will be stored in a secure location at the residence of Jacob Hibbard. The key that associates the participant's name with a pseudonym will be created and securely stored as a digital file on the password-protected computer of Jacob Hibbard indefinitely – or until new research renders it irrelevant, at which time it will be destroyed. All audio files of interviews will also be stored on the researcher's password-protected computer. Only Jacob Hibbard and his faculty advisor Jennifer Erickson will have access to this data.

### **Storage Length**

Cultural information is relevant throughout time because culture is always changing. This means that as time goes by cultural information can be interpreted and applied differently in contemporary settings. For this reason any data collected during the duration of this research project, whether recorded by means of audio-tapes, written field notes, or on digital documents, will be kept indefinitely – or until new research renders it irrelevant, at which time it will be destroyed.

### **Benefits**

An important objective of this research project is that it be applicable. Applied Anthropologists seek to use the results of research to address social problems and issues, and to promote change in culturally acceptable ways. This study seeks to problematize monolithic understandings of cultural identities, such as ethnic, religious, and national identifications, which can challenge stereotypes and reduce discrimination. Therefore, participants may also benefit directly through participation in this study as this study produces knowledge that may be applicable to their own communities.

### **Risks or Discomforts**

The only anticipated risk from participating in this study is that you may not feel comfortable answering some of the questions. You may choose not to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable and you may withdraw your participation from the study at any time.

### **Counseling Services Contact Information**

Should you experience any feelings of anxiety resulting from your participation in this study there are counseling services available to you through the counseling services provided by Choices in Counseling, located in Franklin, IN. They can be contacted at (317) 346-6252.

### **IRB Contact Information**

For one's rights as a research participant, you may contact the following: Office of Research Integrity, 2000 West University Avenue, Teachers College, Room 409, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-5052, or at [irb@bsu.edu](mailto:irb@bsu.edu).

### **Consent**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in this research project entitled, “Religion, Community and Identity: Southern Sudanese Approaches to Cultural Negotiation in the U.S.” I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate. I understand that I will receive a copy of this informed consent form to keep for future reference.

To the best of my knowledge, I meet the criteria for participation in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant’s Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Researcher Contact Information**

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