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# **A VIEW THROUGH THE MOUNTAINS:** **The Peacebuilding Work of** **Zeinab Mohamed Blandia in the** **Nuba Mountains of Sudan**

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**2009 Women PeaceMakers Program**

Made possible by the Fred J. Hansen Foundation

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>I.</b>	<b>A Note to the Reader</b> .....	3
<b>II.</b>	<b>About the Women PeaceMakers Program</b> .....	3
<b>III.</b>	<b>Biography of a Woman PeaceMaker – Zeinab Mohamed Blandia</b> .....	4
<b>IV.</b>	<b>Conflict History – Sudan</b> .....	5
<b>V.</b>	<b>Map – Sudan</b> .....	9
<b>VI.</b>	<b>Integrated Timeline – Political Developments and Personal History</b> .....	10
<b>VII.</b>	<b>Narrative Stories of the Life and Work of Zeinab Mohamed Blandia</b>	
	a. Coins for Black Days .....	16
	b. Stone Soup .....	21
	c. Second Chances .....	29
	d. The Post Office .....	35
	e. Displaced .....	43
	f. Zeinab’s Vision	
	1. Women’s Solidarity Fund Groups .....	53
	2. It Takes All the Drops to Make the River Flow .....	54
	3. The Greedy Husband .....	56
	4. Across the Divide .....	61
<b>VIII.</b>	<b>A Conversation with Zeinab Mohamed Blandia</b> .....	66
<b>IX.</b>	<b>Best Practices in Peacebuilding</b> .....	71
<b>X.</b>	<b>Further Reading – Sudan</b> .....	74
<b>XI.</b>	<b>Biography of a Peace Writer – Jennifer Freeman</b> .....	75
<b>XII.</b>	<b>Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace &amp; Justice</b> .....	76
<b>XIII.</b>	<b>University of San Diego</b> .....	77
<b>XIV.</b>	<b>List of Acronyms</b> .....	78
<b>XV.</b>	<b>Endnotes</b> .....	79

## **A NOTE TO THE READER**

In the following pages, you will find narrative stories about a Woman PeaceMaker, along with additional information to provide a deep understanding of a contemporary conflict and one person's journey within it. These complementary components include a brief biography of the peacemaker, a historical summary of the conflict, a timeline integrating political developments in the country with personal history of the peacemaker, a question-and-answer transcript of select interviews, and a table of best practices in peacebuilding as demonstrated and reflected on by the peacemaker during her time at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice.

The document is not intended necessarily to be read straight through, from beginning to end. Instead, you can use the historical summary or timeline as mere references or guides as you read the narrative stories. You can move straight to the table of best practices if you are interested in peacebuilding methods and techniques, or go to the question-and-answer transcript if you want to read commentary in the peacemakers' own words. The goal of this format is to reach audiences through multiple channels, providing access to the peacemakers' work, vision, lives and impact in their communities.

## **ABOUT THE WOMEN PEACEMAKERS PROGRAM**

Made possible through a generous grant from the Fred J. Hansen Foundation, the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice's (IPJ) Women PeaceMakers Program annually hosts four women from around the world who have been involved in human rights and peacemaking efforts in their countries.

Women on the frontline of efforts to end violence and secure a just peace seldom record their experiences, activities and insights – as generally there is no time or, perhaps, they do not have formal education that would help them record their stories. The Women PeaceMakers Program is a selective program for leaders who want to document, share and build upon their unique peacemaking stories. Selected peacemakers join the IPJ for an eight-week residency.

Women PeaceMakers are paired with a Peace Writer to document in written form their story of living in conflict and building peace in their communities and nations. The peacemakers' stories are also documented on film by the IPJ's partner organization Sun & Moon Vision Productions. While in residence at the institute, Women PeaceMakers give presentations on their work and the situation in their home countries to the university and San Diego communities.

The IPJ believes that women's stories go beyond headlines to capture the nuance of complex situations and expose the realities of gender-based violence, thus providing an understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation. The narrative stories of Women PeaceMakers not only provide this understanding, but also show the myriad ways women construct peace in the midst of and after violence and war. For the realization of peace with justice, the voices of women – those severely affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from the devastation – must be recorded, disseminated and spotlighted.<sup>1</sup>

**BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER –  
ZEINAB MOHAMED BLANDIA**



Photo credit: Sun & Moon Vision Productions

Zeinab Mohamed Blandia, a Muslim peacemaker from Sudan, has been described as a “point person” for creating community and maintaining peace in the Nuba Mountains, one of the most conflict-affected and neglected regions of the world. She is the founder and director of *Ruya*, or “Vision,” an organization based both in Kadugli in the middle west region and Omdurman in the north, where she trains and cultivates fellow “women peace ambassadors.”

Uprooted from her home in the 1980s because of the war between the government and the Sudan People’s Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M), Blandia lived among other displaced people in Omdurman, across the Nile River from Khartoum. There, the displaced from opposing sides of the conflict often became “next-door neighbors,” which prompted Blandia to establish the *Tabag Alsalam*, or “Tray of Peace,” where women from different regions and diverse cultures prepared traditional meals and invited other groups to eat and “debate peacefully” the issues that were being fought over in the distant battlefield. The initial small group of women grew to include 45 groups from across Sudan.

Blandia has since taken her skills in community conflict resolution and dialogue back to the Nuba Mountains and expanded the work of Ruya. Ruya’s Women’s Solidarity Fund Groups develop the economic skills of women through traditional group activities and contemporary modes such as savings accounts. The solidarity groups include Trust Committees which identify conflict issues and engage in peacebuilding at the community level. Blandia also initiated the program “Women Bridging,” which involves exchange visits between communities in government-controlled and SPLA/M-controlled areas in Southern Kordofan State. The latest Ruya project involves training illiterate women in solar engineering and transferring that technology to other regions of Sudan that are outside the reach of government electricity services. With other women and men in the rugged terrain of the Nuba Mountains, Blandia is leading the renewal of civil society and indigenous conflict resolution methods, as well as the quest for reconciliation.



## **CONFLICT HISTORY – NUBA MOUNTAINS, SUDAN**

Like many of its African neighbors, the continent's largest nation, Sudan, is comprised of multiple tribes, languages, ethnicities and religions. However, rather than for the vibrant cultures and rich history of one of the world's oldest continuous civilizations, Sudan and its people have become known for the continent's longest civil war (1983 to 2005) and the genocide in Darfur (2003 to 2008).

In the center of Sudan lie the lush ridges of the Nuba Mountains. The Nuba people are made up of over 50 African tribes who historians believe originally sought refuge in the mountains during tribal wars and from inter-African and Arab slave raiders over the centuries. Some historians believe the tribes' ancient ancestry can be traced to the Nubian Kingdoms of North Africa and ancient Egypt, dating back as far as 2000 B.C., while others believe their origins are completely distinct from the Egyptian Nubians, having originated on the opposite bank of the Nile River. Over the centuries the mountains also became home to nomadic Arab tribes, mainly the Baggara, Misseriya and Hawazma.

The interaction between the black African Nuba tribes and the conquering and nomadic Arabs has long been one of conflict and concession. The African tribes in the mountains were frequently raided for slaves by the Egyptian and Mahdist<sup>2</sup> rulers of Sudan. However, the colonization of Sudan by the British brought little respite for the Nuba. Overstretched in the vast colony, the British gave authority to the Muslim clerics in Khartoum who sought to expand Islam's reach throughout Sudan. The majority of the Nuba tribes converted to Islam; however, Nuba of Muslim, Christian and animist faiths continued to coexist peacefully, banding together against raids by Arab slave traders. When conflicts arose between the local nomadic Arab tribes and the Nuba pastoralists, local tribal chiefs were often able to negotiate local arrangements to facilitate the tribes' coexistence.<sup>3</sup>

A history of slavery and the geographical isolation of the mountains generated stereotypes of the Nuba tribes as primitive and unintelligent people. These prejudices became institutionalized in northern culture, leading to harmful discrimination of the Nuba as one of the lowest castes of society. The government's neglect of the Nuba educational system resulted in high numbers of displaced Nuba surviving on the most undesirable of jobs – cleaning latrines. Traditionally a very proud, competitive and athletically skilled people, this negative typecast was internalized by many Nuba living outside of the mountains.

### ***Sudan's Civil Wars***

Similar to the discrimination against the Nuba, Sudan's two civil wars between the north and south also have their roots in inequalities stemming from pre-colonial times. With successive Turkish and Anglo-Egyptian colonization, international power-brokers exploited the country's human and material resources. During British colonization, Sudan was ruled as two separate colonies: The south was held to be similar to the East African colonies of Uganda, Kenya and Tanganyika, while the north was considered similar to Egypt. While the north used Arabic as the primary language of education and commerce, the southern elite were trained in English.

In 1946, in the preparations for Britain to divest its colonial power in Sudan, the British set up a North Sudan Advisory Council to govern the six northern provinces of Khartoum, Kordofan, Darfur, Eastern, Northern and Blue Nile. However, three years later the administration abruptly changed course, opting to integrate north and south Sudan in a unified county. Thus, the British created a nation state uniting two formerly distinct regions into one massive nation state with an arbitrary border. Consultation with and representation of the south in the new government was all but absent. For example, of the 800 new governmental positions created upon independence, only four were given to southerners.

When independence was finally granted in 1953, the outgoing British administration further marginalized the south by allocating language and organizational priority to the north, leaving southern politicians linguistically disadvantaged or outright excluded from the various conferences that established the modern state of Sudan. When the northern government abandoned its promise to the south to institute a federal system, southern army officers revolted, initiating Sudan's first civil war. For the following 17 years a rebellion, led primarily by the *Anya-Nya* guerilla army, occurred against the government of Sudan for regional self-determination.

Frequent coup d'états and weak leadership in Khartoum contributed to Sudanese President Col. Gaafar Nimeiry signing the Addis Ababa Peace Accord with the southern Anya-Nya rebels in 1972, granting the south limited autonomy. It was not long, however, before the government began undermining their political promises during the ensuing decade of relative peace.

The institution of Arabic as Sudan's lingua franca, as well as the subsequent adoption of Islamic Sharia law, contributed to the largely Christian and animist south's desire to preserve their religious and cultural identities distinct from the Arab north. The discovery of oil in the south provided a major catalyst to increased hostility as both north and south sought to assert their right to the lucrative natural resource.

Systematic violations of the peace agreement by the government, as well as the deeper issues of political, social, economic, religious and cultural marginalization, became the rallying cry of southern Sudanese army officers who mutinied in Bor in 1983. The soldiers from the south joined former Anya-Nya rebels to create the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M)<sup>4</sup> led by Col. John Garang. The rebel movement quickly gained popular support in the south as the Government of Sudan (GOS) launched extensive attacks to suppress the uprising and maintain control of the oil-rich region.

### ***Yousif Kuwa and the Fractured Mountains***

The Nuba involvement in the southern Sudanese conflict can largely be traced to the education and political ambitions of one man. In the late 1970s, a Nuba school teacher by the name of Yousif Kuwa began raising the issue of Nuba rights in political forums in his own state and in Khartoum. In 1981, Kuwa was elected deputy speaker of parliament in Kordofan province. He was the first Nuba to be elected to public office. Kuwa ran on a platform of promoting the equal status of Nuba indigenous culture, freedom of religion and the promotion of the social and political rights of the Nuba, such as the right to education. The ridicule and disregard with which he was greeted solidified his political ambition to end the historical oppression of his people.

As the south rebelled for a second time against northern government oppression, Kuwa aligned himself with the SPLA/M manifesto to fight for a united Sudan, for economic and social equality, freedom of religion, freedom of speech and the protection of cultural rights. He partnered with SPLA/M leader Garang and began recruiting Nuba soldiers into the movement.

Between 1986 and 1989, nominal progress toward resolving the conflict was made after Sudanese president Nimiery was overthrown in a popular uprising and, after democratic elections, replaced by the Umma party. However, three years later, as the government was about to pass a bill revoking Sharia law, the National Islamic Front (NIF) took power in a bloodless coup. Led by current Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir, the NIF revoked the constitution, banned opposition parties, immediately reinforced and expanded the Islamization of the Sudanese legal and judicial systems and declared jihad against the non-Muslim south.<sup>5</sup>

The same year, Yousif Kuwa led the SPLA/M forces that overran the mountains. His arrival was celebrated by his fellow Nuba, but brought the frontline of the conflict to the mountains. As the government engaged the SPLA/M in the Nuba region, it became evident that it would not be able to win a military victory in the terrain of the enemy. The GOS changed its strategy, cutting off all routes into the region, allowing poverty, displacement and starvation to decimate the population. Lists of Nuba intelligentsia were drawn, allowing Arab government officials to identify, arrest and interrogate Nuba leaders to gain information on the SPLA/M. Many of these detainees disappeared, never to be seen again. Villages were destroyed and the GOS armed the Baggara tribes to fight against the Nuba. In 1992, a report released by an influential group of Muslim leaders, entitled “Eradicating the Nuba,” spelled out how the civil war was being used as a backdrop for the systematic ethnic cleansing of the Nuba by the GOS.

Beyond the Nuba’s support of the SPLA/M, the campaign to eradicate their tribes was attributed to the government’s designs on the fertile soils the Nuba inhabited. As drought plagued the deserts of northern Sudan, the GOS conceived of removing the Nuba pastoralists through genocide and displacement, leaving their lands to be taken over by Arab tribes, such as the Baggara, who were more closely aligned with Bashir’s regime.

As the GOS and the SPLA/M turned the Nuba Mountains into one of the most heavily contested battlegrounds in the civil war, villages fell under the control of either government or rebel forces. The ever-shifting frontline snaked through the valleys and hillsides; neighboring villages were claimed for the GOS or SPLA/M, their inhabitants co-opted into combatants for the respective armies. With the knowledge that the majority of the Nuba supported Kuwa and the SPLA/M, the GOS employed strategies to divide the Nuba people. Supplying small arms to local chiefs, the GOS bribed community leaders to support the government – pitting Nuba communities against one another.

### ***A Lasting Cease-fire and the Comprehensive Peace Agreement***

In July 2002, a cease-fire between the SPLA/M and the GOS was finally signed. The cumulated violence of over two decades had killed an estimated 2.1 million southern Sudanese and more than 200,000 of the approximately 1 million Nuba.

The cease-fire was monitored along the frontline dissecting the Nuba Mountains, by the newly formed U.N. Mission in Sudan (UNMIS). The Machakos Protocol, named for the location of the cease-fire's signing, laid out a six-year timeline, at the end of which the south would hold a referendum on self-determination. Three years later, in January 2005, the long-awaited Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed between the SPLA/M and the government, creating a Government of National Unity that included representatives of the SPLA/M.

The Nuba, however, were left out of many of the SPLA/M provisions. When the south holds its referendum on succession in 2011, the Nuba state of Southern Kordofan and the similarly affected Blue Nile state will hold "popular consultations" to decide their future, a term that is politically unclear and holds little promise for these states to join an independent South Sudan.

### ***The Road Ahead for the Nuba***

In the years since the signing of the CPA, the GOS turned its attention to Sudan's eastern region of Darfur. Rebels fighting with complaints strikingly similar to those of both southern Sudan and the Nuba Mountains brought the wrath of Khartoum and its proxy Arab militias known as the Janjaweed. Much of the international community eventually termed the systematic killing of black Africans in Darfur genocide, and the International Criminal Court indicted President Bashir for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Meanwhile, the victims in the Nuba Mountains and south Sudan were again largely absent from the international media.

One of the CPA's most significant concessions is a provision for Sudan's first presidential, parliamentary and legislative election in 24 years, currently scheduled for April 2010. With a disputed census and reports that former armed groups are amassing weapons in the region, many observers fear the elections will be marred by violence, or worse, a full return to civil war. The government has recently been accused of fueling inter-tribal clashes that claimed hundreds of lives in the summer of 2009.

Many Nuba are unaware that they will not be included in the referendum in January 2011, which could grant full independence to the south. If the south were to split, the Nuba would remain an ethnic and cultural minority, geographically surrounded by the north.

However, despite some grim forecasts, there are signs that the country's future may be decided peacefully. The district of Abyei, formerly in Southern Kordofan, was ambiguously designated in the CPA, resulting in rising tensions between the signatories to the CPA. Following violent clashes in the disputed oil-rich district, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague was asked to step in to resolve the conflict. The court's decision – creating a boundary that awarded a major oil field to the north – was respected by all parties and violence has since ceased.





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## INTEGRATED TIMELINE

### **Political Developments in Sudan and *Personal History of Zeinab Mohamed Blandia***

- 1820-1821** Sudan is conquered by Turkey and Egypt.
- 1885** Sudan becomes an Islamic State.
- 1899** Sudan is governed by British-Egyptian rule.
- 1955** First Sudanese civil war begins, led by the Anya-Nya movement.
- 1956** January 1 – Sudan gains independence.
- 1958** A military coup by Gen. Ibrahim Abbud topples the elected civilian government.
- 1960** *Zeinab Mohamed Blandia is born in Kulba village, Greater Kordofan state.*
- 1964** Abbud is overthrown in the “October Revolution” uprising and communist general strike. A national government is established.
- 1965-1967** *Zeinab attends Khalwa Islamic preschool in Kadugli.*
- 1967** *Zeinab begins primary school in Kadugli.*
- 1969** May – A military coup brings Gaafar Nimeiry to power.
- 1972** The Addis Ababa Peace Agreement is signed between the Sudanese government and the Anya-Nya. The south becomes a self-governing region.  
*Zeinab begins elementary boarding school in Dilling.*
- 1977** *Zeinab begins secondary school in Kadugli.*
- 1978** Oil is discovered in Bentiu, southern Sudan.
- 1980** *Zeinab graduates from secondary school and passes her university entrance exam.*
- 1981** *Zeinab begins work as secretary at the provincial office of the Department of Labor in Kadugli.*
- 1983** Civil war begins again in the south between the government and the Sudan People’s Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M), led by John Garang. President Nimeiry imposes Sharia, or Islamic law.

*Zeinab builds the Kulba Social Development Center.*

- 1984 *Zeinab begins studies at Ahfad University for Women, in Omdurman, the city opposite Khartoum on the Nile River.*
- 1985 Nimeiry is overthrown in a military coup. A Transitional Military Council is formed.
- 1986 General elections bring Sadiq al-Mahdi to power as prime minister. A coalition government is formed.
- 1988 *Zeinab marries Ahmad Omar Kuku.*
- 1989 The National Islamic Front overthrows the government in a coup.  
June – Omar al-Bashir assumes the presidency.  
*April – Zeinab’s daughter, Eman, is born.*  
*May – Zeinab graduates from university with a bachelor’s degree in Family Science.*
- 1990 *Zeinab’s husband Ahmad is arrested by state security forces. Zeinab flees the Nuba Mountains to the internally displaced peoples’ (IDP) camps outside Khartoum.*
- 1991 The security situation in the Nuba Mountains deteriorates further and disappearances become commonplace. The displaced flee to Kadugli and Khartoum as villages are destroyed by the government or SPLA/M forces.
- 1992 *Zeinab begins working with the organization Concern, managing women’s centers in the IDP camp of Dar Es Salaam, on the western border of Omdurman.*
- 1994 *Zeinab forms the Community Development Committee in Dar Es Salaam IDP camp.*
- 1996 *Zeinab begins Tray of Peace activities in IDP camps in Omdurman.*
- 1997 *Zeinab hears a rumor that Ahmad may have been moved to a prison in Ad-Damazin in the far east of the country. Zeinab and her brother-in-law make the first of many journeys in the hopes of finding him.*  
*Zeinab begins work in Gadarif State.*
- 1998 The United States launches a missile attack on the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum, alleging it was being used to produce chemical weapons.

A new constitution is endorsed by over 96 percent of voters in a referendum.

***Zeinab begins her master's degree at Ahfad University for Women in Omdurman.***

**1999** President Bashir dissolves the National Assembly and declares a state of emergency following a power struggle with parliamentary speaker, Hassan al-Turabi. Sudan begins exporting oil.

***Zeinab receives the Hugh Pilkington Scholarship to continue her master's degree.***

**2000** ***Zeinab begins work with the Sudan Agency for Relief, Rehabilitation and Development. She travels to Kadugli on an assessment mission for the agency. It is the first time she has returned to the Nuba Mountains in a decade.***

December – Incumbent Bashir is re-elected for another five-year term. The main opposition parties boycott the presidential elections.

**2001** ***Zeinab forms the organization Ruya, or "Vision."***

February – Islamist leader Hassan al-Turabi's party, the Popular National Congress (PNC), signs a memorandum of understanding with the SPLA/M. Turabi is arrested the next day, with more arrests of PNC members in the following months.

July – After the failure of peace talks between President Bashir and SPLA/M leader John Garang, the government accepts a Libyan/Egyptian initiative to end the civil war.

November – The U.S. extends unilateral sanctions against Sudan, citing its record on terrorism and rights violations.

**2002** January – The government and SPLA/M sign a landmark cease-fire agreement in the Nuba Mountains.

July – Talks in Kenya lead to a breakthrough agreement between the government and southern rebels on ending the civil war. The Machakos Protocol provides for the south to seek self-determination after six years from the signing of a final peace agreement.

**2003** February – Rebels in the western region of Darfur rise up, claiming the area is being neglected by the central government.

***Zeinab is appointed chairwoman of the Nuba Network, an organization of Nuba intellectuals based in Khartoum.***

***Ruya opens a branch office in Kadugli to relocate their activities to the Nuba Mountains.***

**2004** January – The government army moves to Darfur to quell the rebel insurgency; hundreds of thousands of refugees flee to neighboring Chad.

March – A U.N. official accuses pro-government Arab “Janjaweed” militias of carrying out ethnically targeted killings in Darfur.

May – The government and southern rebels agree to power-sharing as part of a peace deal to end the conflict. The deal focuses on the allocation of oil and non-oil wealth.

September – U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell describes the government-backed killing in Darfur as genocide. The United Nations says Sudan has not met targets for disarming pro-government militias and must accept outside help to protect civilians in Darfur.

***Zeinab moves back to her home village of Kulba in the Nuba Mountains after being displaced for over a decade.***

**2005** January – The Comprehensive Peace Agreement is signed by the government and the SPLA/M. The agreement includes a permanent cease-fire and accords on wealth and power-sharing.

***February – Ruya begins a pilot Women’s Solidarity Fund Group exchange called “Bridging Women.”***

March – The U.N. Security Council authorizes sanctions against those who violate the cease-fire in Darfur. The council also votes to refer those accused of war crimes in Darfur to the International Criminal Court.

July – SPLA/M leader John Garang is sworn in as first vice president.

August – Vice President Garang is killed in a plane crash. His death sparks deadly violence in the capital between southern and northern Sudanese. Garang is succeeded by Salva Kiir Mayardit.

September – A power-sharing government is established in Khartoum.

October – An autonomous government is formed in the south.

**2006** ***February – Bridging Women is expanded to include 32 women from four villages. The exchange trip lasts two weeks.***

May – The government in Khartoum signs a peace accord with the main rebel faction in Darfur, the Sudan Liberation Movement. Two smaller rebel groups reject the deal and fighting continues.

August – Sudan rejects a U.N. resolution calling for a U.N. peacekeeping force in Darfur, saying it would compromise national sovereignty.

October – Jan Pronk, the head of the U.N. mission in Sudan, is expelled from the country.

November – The African Union extends the mandate of its peacekeeping force in Darfur for six months.

Fighting breaks out in the southern town of Malakal. Hundreds are killed in the heaviest fighting between northern Sudanese forces and the former southern rebels since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement.

## 2007

***April – Ruya holds the third annual exchange of Bridging Women. Leaders of Women's Solidarity Fund Groups tour 17 villages.***

Sudan says it will accept a partial U.N. troop deployment to reinforce African Union peacekeepers in Darfur, but not a full force.

May – The International Criminal Court (ICC) issues arrest warrants for a Sudanese government minister and a janjaweed militia leader suspected of war crimes in Darfur.

July – U.N. Security Council Resolution 1769 authorizes a 26,000-strong peacekeeping force for Darfur. Sudan says it will cooperate with the United Nations/African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID).

October to December – The SPLA/M temporarily suspends participation in the national unity government, accusing Khartoum of failing to honor the Comprehensive Peace Agreement.

## 2008

March – Intense fighting breaks out between an Arab militia and the SPLA/M in Abyei, an oil-rich town on the north-south divide.

April – Counting begins for a national census, a vital step toward holding democratic elections after the landmark Comprehensive Peace Agreement.

June – President Bashir and southern leader Salva Kiir agree to seek international arbitration to resolve the dispute over Abyei.

July – The International Criminal Court's chief prosecutor calls for the arrest of President Bashir for crimes against humanity and war crimes in Darfur. The appeal is the first request to the ICC for the arrest of a sitting head of state.

October – Allegations that Ukrainian tanks hijacked off the coast of Somalia were bound for southern Sudan spark fears of an arms race between the north and former rebels in the south.

November – President Bashir announces an immediate cease-fire in Darfur, but the region's two main rebel groups reject the move, saying they will fight on until the government agrees to share power and wealth in the region.

December – The Sudanese army sends more troops to the oil-rich state of Southern Kordofan, claiming that a Darfur rebel group plans to attack the area.

**2009**

March – The ICC issues an arrest warrant for President Bashir on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur.

***Two members of Ruya's Women's Solidarity Fund Groups travel with two other women from the Nuba Mountains to Barefoot College in India to learn solar engineering.***

May – An estimated 250 people in central Sudan are killed during a week of clashes between nomadic groups fighting over grazing land and cattle in the Nuba province of Southern Kordofan.

June – The leader of South Sudan and Sudanese Vice President Salva Kiir warns that his armed forces are being re-organized so they are prepared for any return to war with the north. His remarks follow claims that the central government is supplying arms to ethnic groups in the south.

Sudan's presidential election, due to take place in February 2010, is postponed until April after the recent census is disputed.

***September – Zeinab travels to the United States for two months to participate in the Women PeaceMakers Program at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice.***

**NARRATIVE STORIES OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF  
ZEINAB MOHAMED BLANDIA**

**Coins for Black Days**

In the remote mountains of central Sudan, storm clouds gathered like tribes had for centuries, seeking shelter in the lonely peaks. The tribes and the mountains were both given the name of Nuba. At one time these mountains had been a place of refuge.

The old woman squinted at the pewter horizon, shading her eyes from the wind rushing through the neem trees. She watched with a familiar knot in her stomach as the storm raced up the Kulba valley, funneled by the lush mountains embracing them. Above her hung the last stubborn strip of blue sky.

Her daughter paused beside her, balancing a toddler on her hip. “Where are those children?” Frustration and worry mingled in her voice as she shaded her eyes from the glare. With a great gust of wind, the rain-shadow engulfed their small cluster of houses. Tree branches bowed, snapping small twigs as dust devils swept across the yard. Between the claps of thunder they could hear the approaching crescendo of rain drops hitting uncountable blades of grass, cascading over soaked earth, saturating the valley.

The grandmother’s old eyes peered through the gray mist at two muted figures bobbing toward them out of the distance. Zeinab and Ibrahim came running up the path toward their mother and grandmother, trying in vain to dodge the first fat drops plummeting from the sky.

Zeinab’s short white headscarf clung to her forehead in transparent rain-soaked spots as she ran toward her grandmother. “*Kosal!*” her grandmother chided, using a Nuba pet-name for the third born. “Where have you been?” Zeinab ran into her arms, but her mother swatted at them. “Get inside all of you!”

The family crowded into the warmth and shelter of the circular thatched *tucul*,<sup>6</sup> watching the rain pelt the muddy earth as the storm overwhelmed their compound. Zeinab began helping her mother serve the lunch she had prepared onto large communal serving plates. “How was *Khabwa*<sup>7</sup> today, Zeinab? And your classes, Ibrahim?” their mother asked over the din of the storm.

“Good,” Zeinab replied. But their mother’s gaze fell on Ibrahim’s averted eyes. “Ibrahim?”

Ibrahim scowled at the far side of the room. His mother turned to Zeinab. “What happened?”

Reluctantly, Zeinab revealed her older brother’s latest misbehavior at school. “Ibrahim! Why must you be so hot tempered?” His scowl deepened. He longed for the rain to stop so he could join his father and the other men to eat lunch, away from the women.

The storm passed as quickly as it had come and soon the sun was slanting between broken clouds as the last drops of rainwater pooled and dripped off the drenched thatch roof. Ibrahim



sulked out of the door to the tree where the men were gathering. “Zeinab, bring their food,” her mother called.

Zeinab gripped the plate of chicken and vegetable stew and made her way cautiously, careful that her small feet did not slip in the slick earth.

On the ground between her father and uncle sat steaming plates of sorghum and goat from her father’s other wife. Their neighbors would likely join them, their wives bringing additional plates for the men to share.

“*aSalaam ‘Alaykum*, Baba. *aSalaam ‘Alaykum*, gentlemen,” Zeinab greeted them, laying her mother’s contribution beside the other dishes. She ignored Ibrahim’s scowl and returned to her mother’s home to join the women for lunch.

Within an hour the sun was already strong, steam rising in a haze from the wet earth. Zeinab returned to the shade of the mango tree, where the men reclined like a pack of satiated lions, to collect the plates.

Bent over the tub of dishes, Zeinab cleaned and rinsed each plate carefully. She heard Ibrahim approach – 12-year-old footfalls and the soft scratch of a branch he dragged across the dirt. “You have a big mouth!” he growled.

Zeinab stuck her lip out, “What do you want me to do, lie to Mama?” Even five years his junior, Zeinab was stubborn enough to stand up to her older brother.

Ibrahim’s temper flared – who was his little sister to speak back to him! He swung the stick at Zeinab, grazing the arm she raised to protect her head. The scratch began to sting, small droplets of blood peaking through her razed skin. “There! That will teach you.”

Coming back from their father’s house their mother heard Zeinab’s cry. “Ibrahim! What are you doing? Don’t beat your sister!” Their mother didn’t approve of disciplining children like they did at school, so Ibrahim would get no support for his actions from her. He wished his father was around. “Sorry, Mama.”

“Take the goats out to the mountain and cool off!”

“Yes, Mama.”

From inside the *rakuba*,<sup>8</sup> Zeinab heard her grandmother calling her. “Kosa!” Hiding her red eyes, Zeinab hurried to her grandmother’s side. “There, there,” she soothed her favorite grandchild. Zeinab snuggled her small body into the old woman’s arms, inhaling her soft, familiar scent. Taking a plate from behind the counter her grandmother presented it stealthily to Zeinab. “Here, I kept something for you, just like our wise ancestors say: You must keep the coins from the white days for the black days. This is to brighten your black day. Now wipe your eyes and don’t show anyone.” She smiled conspiratorially.

Zeinab looked at the special dish of meat swimming in groundnut sauce with large eyes. She hugged her grandma tighter, “Thank you, grandmother!” The old woman chuckled, her milky eyes crinkling.

Zeinab finished her small plate while her grandmother went out to see what Zeinab’s little sister Hawa was getting into. Alone in the kitchen, Zeinab noticed the bowls of rice, sugar and flour stocking the cupboards. In the corner was a full tin of oil. The rainy season had been productive that year and her mother had been able to sell a lot of the family’s harvest at the market. Zeinab looked through a stack of containers and found a small metal can. Carefully, she poured some of the oil from the larger tin into her small can, then sealed it tightly. Peeking out of the rakuba she saw her grandmother trying to stop Hawa from chasing the chickens. Ibrahim, her mother, and her eldest brother Talib would all be away from the compound for some time. Zeinab tucked the can deep into the folds of her dress then snuck across the yard, glancing right and left for a place for her treasure. She found a wooden stool and moved it to the rear of the family’s round hut. Standing on tip-toe, Zeinab nestled her tin in the thick grass thatch of the roof. As the stool began to sway she toppled to the ground with a proud smile beaming across her face.

That night her mother called Ibrahim into the house where the women slept. He was old enough to be with the men now, but she did not allow him to miss their evening ritual. The evenings were sacred. Outside the tukul’s high, open windows the chirping cicadas began their nightly song. Her mother, grandmother, Ibrahim and Zeinab congregated on the mattresses where the women slept. Zeinab sat cross-legged with her younger sister on her lap. At 2 years old, Hawa could not sit still for longer than five minutes, but in Zeinab’s arms she snuggled down, watching the flicker of the kerosene flame cast the family’s shadows on the mud walls. Zeinab’s eyes followed the ribbon of lamp smoke permeating the thatch roof and thought smugly of her tin.

Though no school had taught her to read and write, Zeinab’s mother possessed an abiding knowledge of the needs of the soul. Through nightly lessons on kindness and compassion she sought to raise her children to be conscientious stewards of humanity.

Her lessons in nonviolence usually started with Ibrahim. “Ibrahim, why must you be so aggressive? I am trying to raise you different from the other children. You know I do not like beating. It is not a good way to socialize children.” Zeinab looked slyly at Ibrahim, pointing at the scar on her top lip, a souvenir from a serrated can he had thrown at her when she was still crawling.

Their mother ignored them and continued, “When you are beaten it makes you more aggressive.” At these words Ibrahim stole a sidelong smirk at Zeinab, pointing to the scar on his temple, a relic of the same incident and evidence of one of his mother’s only violent outbursts. Crazy by her infant daughter’s gushing lip and agonized screams, she had taken a cane to her son, causing the gash. She recoiled in horror upon seeing his blood and promptly rushed both children to the hospital.

As Zeinab and Ibrahim bemoaned their respective scars, their mother told the children again of the need for patience, understanding and dialogue to resolve their disputes.

The children’s yawns drew the lesson to an end. Ibrahim kissed his mother before venturing back to the men’s hut. Hawa was already sleeping with a heavy head on her sister’s lap. Their

grandmother shifted next to Zeinab. “How are you Kosa *Maadeh*?” It was her special name for Zeinab. She was the third born – the first girl after her two elder brothers – but her grandmother’s addition of “Maadeh” changed the pet name into a crown little Zeinab longed to wear. It meant “great woman” and reminded her of her hero, Pato. “Can you tell me the story, grandma?”

“Which story?” her grandmother feigned memory loss with a laugh.

“Pato, of course! Grandma, please?”

“Well, all right ...” and the old woman began the Nuba legend of Pato.

*A long time ago, a powerful chief ruled the Kadugli tribe and her name was Pato. She was a tall, strong woman and a natural leader. She resolved disputes fairly and people respected her decisions. She ruled her people with consideration and kindness. She was an excellent farmer, and after each harvest she shared her food with the poor of the village. The people of Kadugli listened to and admired her and she ruled them for many, many years.*

*But there were some people who were jealous of Pato. The brother of Pato’s co-wife sought to rule Kadugli tribe himself. As the years passed, he tried to get people to agree to overthrow Pato. But the people were loyal to Pato and refused to oust their beloved leader.*

*However, even though Pato was a brilliant leader, there were some men who felt threatened by having a woman chief. Her brother began saying to them, ‘We are men, why is a woman ruling us? We are the ones who have the power; we are the ones who make the decisions at home. We cannot leave this woman to rule us! In all the tribes around ours men are ruling, so why do we have a woman ruling us here?’ Even Pato’s husband was secretly jealous of his wife’s power. A man, he should be the head of his household, and yet his wife was the chief of the village. Her brother planted seeds of discontent and eventually convinced these men to work against her. Slowly, they began to make problems for Pato in the village.*

*Pato’s other brothers soon learned what these men were doing and began fighting with them. The tension was splitting her community. Pato was a peacemaker and it pained her to see violence carried out in her name. She could see that there would soon be bloodshed in her family and yet she knew she had the power to prevent it. In order to protect her family’s unity, she decided that she must resign as chief.*

*She called a large meeting with representatives from throughout the tribe. When she announced her resignation many people argued that she must stay, but she insisted that she was getting to be an old woman now and it was time for someone else to lead the tribe. With poise and grace she handed power to her treacherous brother.*

*Pato had shown the courage to place commitment to the good of her community above personal gain. Like a true leader, she was prepared to sacrifice her position to prevent bloodshed in her family and in the tribe.*

As Zeinab's eyes drooped toward dreams of the tall, powerful chief of her ancestors, she heard her grandmother's words coaxing her again, "You must be like Pato, my little Kosa Maadeh. You must be like Pato."



The dry season was languishing across the arid valley, the unrelenting sun toasting the mountain tops a deep brown. The ochre earth of Zeinab's family's fields lay in stark opposition to the abundant green of the previous season. The rains were late again and with each passing week the stores from last season's harvest dwindled.

Zeinab's father came back from the fields, frustrated again. The stress of meeting his family's needs was wearing on him. They barely had enough for their family, let alone for Zeinab's mother and her co-wife to take to market to sell. Peering out of the kitchen rakuba, Zeinab saw his slumped figure approach from the valley. From her seat beside the fire her mother muttered, "Your father will not be happy today. There is no oil to cook dinner with. Zeinab, fetch me some more water. We will have to make some light broth to eat with our sorghum tonight."

Zeinab saw her pained expression. She ran out of the rakuba into the late afternoon heat, checking carefully to see where her family members were around the compound. Once she was sure she was out of sight, she dipped back to the corner of the compound, behind their hut. She carefully positioned the stool to climb up and reach deep in the grass roof to find her can of oil. Hiding it in her skirt, she ran to fetch the water and return to her mother. She set the heavy clay water pot on the floor and then reached into her skirt. "Mama, will this help?"

Her mother opened the can. "Zeinab! Where did you get this from?" Her mother's face lit with joyful relief at the sight of the oil. But her brows rose in suspicion.

Zeinab smiled smugly, "Nowhere."

"Zeinab ... " Her mother fought to remain concerned with the oil's origin, but her gratitude for such a timely gift overwhelmed her.

Watching her mother hurriedly preparing the dinner, Zeinab bounced out of the rakuba, beaming.

A couple of weeks later, as the family struggled to offer their children breakfast, Zeinab appeared with a cloth bag of sugar. She skipped around the compound, noting the pile of onions hidden behind the heavy iron tub, the bags of flour she had nestled among the thatch roof, the tins of oil buried in the ground, and the innocuous calabashes tied to the ceiling of their hut as decorations, filled with her precious stores of sugar.

From that time on, Zeinab always kept her secret stores stocked. And later, when she earned real coins, she put some aside to help her family make it through the black days. As the years passed Zeinab's mother no longer cared where Zeinab got her rations. But when the rains failed or the war came, it was to Zeinab they turned. "Zeinab can you find us a little something?"

As Zeinab grew from a little girl of 7 to complete her schooling, she tried to live up to her mother's teachings of kindness and compassion. She realized maybe her grandmother was right, maybe Maadeh was a crown she could earn. Maybe she could grow up to be like Pato.

### Stone Soup

The trunk of the *haraz* tree<sup>9</sup> stood like a giant's forearm plunged into the earth, the ripples of muscle and bone visible in its undulating wood, the roots planted in the ground like fingers stretching deep into the brown soil. In contrast to the sleek trunks and heavy canopies of the nearby mango, neem and tamarind trees, the haraz looked lonely and abandoned, its inordinate girth supporting an awkward crown of gnarled, bald branches.

The women approached in the late afternoon heat, gravitating to the broad shadow the tree's trunk cast across the dirt. Draped in a kaleidoscope of fabric they created a rainbow mosaic spotted amongst the raised roots. News of their families, their neighbors and their small village passed between them with the enthusiastic chatter of gossiping schoolgirls. As the wind carried their voices up through the leafless canopy, the tree's branches swayed, lending an expression of gratitude from the old tree to this new congregation.



After the elation of passing her completion exams, Zeinab's final school semester had ended in disappointment, her dreams of going on to university quashed by her father's fears. How could he allow his daughter to venture alone to the foreign metropolis of Khartoum? Her mother had argued for her: Zeinab was not like other girls! She had passed her exams and was more able and willing to go on to university than her brothers. If allowed to go, she would be the first member of their family to obtain a university degree. But Zeinab's father was unable to see past the mountains rimming their valley; daughters must stay close to home.

Attempting to numb the ache of her disappointment, Zeinab tried to fill her days working in her family's fruit orchards and tending her mother's garden. But her mind languished. After a few months she sought out her classmates – teenage girls who had also finished secondary school with no prospects for further education. Without preoccupation their minds would fall to marriage and families, their dreams of vocations and independence wilting before the next rains.

With her friends considering suitors and fears that she might be next, Zeinab seized on the conviction that what her tiny village of Kulba needed was a good dose of civic mindedness to benefit the health and wellness of the community. Zeinab gathered her friends to propose the idea that once a week they sweep debris from the small roads that wound through their village. They had time, why not contribute to beautify their village for its residents? While they were at it, had they ever noticed the problem of dirty water pots? The way some women neglected these crucial containers for drinking water, it was no wonder they were plagued with diarrhea! Why not create a Health Day, when they could go door-to-door scrubbing any of their neighbors' pots that were in need of cleaning?

Zeinab was able to round up 10 of her friends for her altruistic volunteerism. The girls became well known in the village, their neighbors stopping to thank them on the street for their hard work. Soon more young women sought to join Zeinab's community service. At the local water pumps and in the market, rustles of advice spread eagerly: The women of Kulba must keep a close eye on the vessels for their drinking water! As a matter of pride, women began scrubbing their water pots daily, lest Zeinab's girls deem *their* water pots in need of cleaning. With clean swept paths, sparkling water pots and healthy children, a subtle glow of pride soon emanated from the little village of Kulba.

Zeinab had found a vocation for her school-less days and in the process become the accidental leader of a team of 20 of her peers. As she led the group along their weekly route through the village, ideas began to percolate. Why stop at a Health Day? Perhaps the women whom they were visiting in their houses would like to be involved with a group activity as well? Zeinab noticed that many of the women were doing their own sewing and mending of torn clothes. Perhaps they would like to get together as a group and improve their skills? Tentatively, Zeinab proposed the idea to her friends: Would your mothers, aunts or grandmothers like to meet together to learn embroidery?

At their next Health Day, the girls returned with a resounding response: All the women they asked wanted to take part! Zeinab was both thrilled and daunted. At 19, organizing her school friends was one thing, but leading an embroidery group for their mothers? She had nothing to offer them, only an idea that in coming together they could benefit each other. She was offering them a stone and hoping to make soup.<sup>10</sup>

Zeinab walked agitatedly through Kulba's winding streets, carrying a bulging sack of produce back from Kadugli market. She gazed vacantly at the familiar curves of the village's mountainous backdrop, her thoughts consumed with where she could hold her first sewing class. The late afternoon sun was relentless, penetrating the thin fabric of Zeinab's floral *tobe*,<sup>11</sup> beads of sweat collecting on her temples to join the rivulets running down her body. The road passed an abandoned store, roofless and jagged from a bad storm the previous year. In front of the dilapidated building stood an old haraz tree, its swollen trunk casting a merciful swath of shade across the road. Zeinab slowed as she passed in its shadow, basking in the momentary reprieve. Inhaling the cooler air, she paused. The tree was easily located. Perhaps the shade its trunk cast would suffice until they found a more permanent place. Their lessons could begin there.



Zeinab inhaled deeply, trying to calm her jumpy nerves. Thirty-three women sat attentively, their eyes on the teenage girl standing before them. Addressing the gathering, Zeinab proposed her plan. They had no money, no materials, no chairs and no building in which to meet. But they had this tree. If the women had scraps of cloth around the house, the ones they were going to throw away, they could bring those. If they each had a needle and thread, they could bring those. Maybe together they could make something of nothing.

And so the women began to meet in the evenings by the old haraz tree. With scraps of fabric, needles, thread and words they found how they fit together. From nothing their mosaic was sewn.

As the months passed there were some evenings when Zeinab was not able to go. She had demonstrated her embroidery knowledge, which the women had absorbed and were now eager to develop. Yet, she soon learned her absence was noted by the women. “Where is Zeinab?” Without her they lacked direction. “What do you advise us to do?” A generation their junior, she had earned their respect, and along with it, the responsibility to lead their group.

Every evening as the sun shifted through its arc, the women took their needles and cloth and swiveled around the trunk, following the tree’s shadow. Around 5 p.m. the rays would hit the broken wall of the old store, casting a larger patch of shade for their group. Together, they made a nightly migration to sit against the crumbling bricks and continue their sewing.

Zeinab noticed the group’s movement around the arborous sundial to the shade of the dilapidated building. The women had been meeting for over a year and while they sewed, discussions of their lives, families, communities and problems were woven into their sessions. As Zeinab considered their nightly migration, an ambitious plan began to take form.

She made some inquiries and the following week presented her idea to the women. “You see this broken building we get shade from? After that storm, the owner opened another shop in Tafere and abandoned this building. It is now the property of the government; it doesn’t belong to anybody. What is stopping us from going to ask the government, ‘Your broken shop, do you need it or not? If you do not need it, please can we have it to hold our activities in?’”

The women were thrilled with the idea, but asked tentatively, “Who will go?” Their eyes fell to Zeinab.

That night Zeinab lay wide-eyed in her bed, butterflies carousing in her stomach. How could she, a girl of barely 20, approach the government? The next morning she dressed smartly, draping the azure fabric of her brightly patterned robe over her head and around her body. She had woken early, relieved to find her nerves calming as a plan formed. She remembered that her uncle worked in one of the government departments. She drank her morning tea and ventured out on the tree-lined road between her village and Kadugli, her confidence growing.

Zeinab reached the wide entrance to the government buildings and headed in the direction of her uncle’s office. Looking up from his desk, he was surprised but happy to see his niece had come to pay him a visit. Zeinab entered the crowded room, greeting her uncle and his colleagues before broaching the reason for her coming. She explained the women’s group she had been leading and their interest in the broken store by the old haraz tree in Kulba. Intrigued, her uncle offered to introduce her to the administrator in charge of public property. Zeinab beamed.

Together, they left his office, staying under the shaded veranda that linked the offices, out of the afternoon glare. Making their way along two cement-block buildings, they came to the administrator’s office. Steeling herself in front of the open door, Zeinab took a deep breath and entered. Her uncle made the formal introductions. Then it was Zeinab’s turn. “Sir, I have come on behalf of the Kulba women’s group to ask for that small shop that has been broken for a long time.” Zeinab hesitated, eyes on the floor, wondering if he would send her away right then. Zeinab stole a sidelong glance to see whether he was pointing to the door.

“Hmmm,” he nodded, allowing her to continue.

“Uh, well sir, you see we have been meeting in the shade of that building to do some activities in the evenings. Since no one is taking care of that building, we were hoping we could rehabilitate it to use for our meetings.”

Again, no dismissal came. Zeinab watched in shock as the man smiled. “Yes, I think that is possible. We have no money or plans to use that building, so if you can use it, it is yours.”

Zeinab could not believe her ears. Thanking him profusely, she nearly tripped out of his office into the afternoon sunshine. What an achievement! She raised her scarf to hide the stubborn smile lifting her cheekbones to the heavens.

At 4 o'clock, she stood shifting her weight from one foot to the other, waiting impatiently for the women to assemble. She could not wait to pass on the day's good news! As soon as everyone had arrived, Zeinab announced that their request was successful – the building was now theirs! The response was ecstatic, the women so proud of their young Zeinab. But no sooner had the cheers died down than the questions began. “Zeinab, how will we rehabilitate this building? We have no money or resources. We have nothing.”

One by one, suggestions were put forth. “Should we make a roof with local materials?”

“No. The building is cement, it needs metal sheeting.”

“Perhaps we should contribute to pay for this building as we did for the sewing?”

“But some of us have no money to contribute like others.”

“Maybe we can contribute a bit and also ask others to support us?”

Then the idea came. They had been successful with their first request; why not approach the government again? The government had many departments, surely one or two could help the women with some small things. Zeinab sat down to write a list. “The department of forests, they have a lot of wood. Maybe they could provide us with doors and windows.”

She put her pen to the paper and in her neatest handwriting wrote: Department of Forests – doors and windows.

“We need labor to help us fix the cement bricks that are broken, put in the windows and doors and lay the metal sheeting. Perhaps the Construction Department could provide us with labor.”

Under Department of Forests, Zeinab listed Construction Department – labor.

“Why not go to the Department of Water and Cooperation to see if they have some scraps of metal sheeting?”



Department of Water and Cooperation – metal sheeting.

“Who can give us cement to repair those bricks? Maybe that administrator for public property can give us cement. Let us ask him!”

Administrator – cement.

Armed with their list, Zeinab returned to the government offices early the next morning with one of the women, the large, jolly Umjima. At each office they introduced themselves and made their requests to each of the departments. Astoundingly, one by one, each of them said yes. Leaving the administrator’s office with their final request, Zeinab and Umjima broke into giddy laughter at what they had achieved. Hips swaying, they sang their way out into the afternoon sunshine and along the canopied route back to Kulba.

A few weeks later the spectacle began. Head down, the donkey plodded forward, slowly dragging the cart of cement bricks from the administrator’s office to the old haraz tree in Kulba. Seeing their first building materials trundling toward them, Zeinab and the women let out cries of celebration.

The next day, metal sheeting arrived from the Department of Water and Cooperation. The growing crowd of idle villagers had taken up their spectators’ post beside the haraz tree, commenting on what was considered bustling development in their small village. On the third day, it was the Department of Forests’ turn to send the cart piled with a heavy wooden door and four windows. The spectators wondered if it was the same poor donkey pulling the cart. Finally, Zeinab, the women and a loyal congregation of villagers watched with pride as a team of laborers from the Construction Department transformed the abandoned store.



Every evening as the late afternoon light filtered through the dust kicked up by meandering donkeys and passing bicycles, a vibrant parade of Nuba women began to arrive at the restored building. They came carrying mats or stools on which to sit. As their numbers swelled inside the small building, their laughter filled the room, escaping from the doors and windows into the afternoon haze.

Eventually, word of this unusual gathering reached the Department of Social Welfare. Clad in a crisp suit, Ismail Tawir watched the kaleidoscope of tangerine, emerald and magenta shawls entering the small building. He waited until the parade had dwindled to a few late stragglers before approaching the large wooden door. The chatter from inside paused at the knock before footsteps approached to let him in. Zeinab greeted their visitor, inviting him in. “aSalaam ‘Alaykum. My name is Zeinab Blandia. You are welcome.”

“Wa-Alaykum aSalaam. I am Ismail Tawir, section head of the Department of Social Welfare.” There was a rustling of whispers as the women registered the pedigree of their visitor. “I heard what you were doing here from a colleague. Do you mind if I observe your activities?”

“You are most welcome!” Zeinab beamed, eagerly offering Mr. Tawir a seat.

As the evening drew to a close their guest approached Zeinab. “Miss Zeinab, your women here are working very hard indeed. You have a great thing here. Can you come by my office tomorrow and we discuss this?” Curious to learn what the Department of Social Welfare could want with her small group, Zeinab agreed.

The following morning, Zeinab returned to the government offices, crossing the dirt courtyard to the Social Development Office. Making her way along the shaded veranda, Zeinab peeked into open doors to find the correct office. Finally, Zeinab spotted a tan suit of approximately the right size hunched over a stack of papers. “Mr. Tawir?”

“Ah, Miss Blandia, aSalaam ‘Alaykum. Welcome!” He gestured a knobby finger toward an empty seat on the other side of his desk. “I am so glad you came. It was a pleasure to see your group last night. These women are working seriously! You have done a good job. This is the first social center I have ever seen!” Zeinab’s eyebrows rose. Social center? Ismail continued eagerly, “In our department here I am heading the section for vulnerable groups and social development centers. But we have never seen a social development center!”

Zeinab tried to interrupt that, strictly speaking, theirs was not a social development center, but Mr. Tawir’s words spilled out excitedly, “But as of now the building is quite plain, don’t you agree? We must develop it to have it sanctioned as an official social development center. It will be the first development center in the province!” He was almost talking to himself now, floating on his pride at discovering what would clearly be a prized addition to his CV.

Eventually, Zeinab got a word in edgewise and they began discussing plans for how to build her small group in their small building into the first social development center in all of Greater Kordofan. Taking ample credit for his discovery, Mr. Tawir began broadcasting the women’s group’s existence, encouraging people to observe their meetings. Before long, an official shiny sign was being erected beside the Kulba Social Development Center.

Fortunately, Mr. Tawir continued his lobbying beyond the mounting of the sign. Within a few months he had succeeded in getting the center into the Department of Social Welfare’s annual budget. As a donkey cart strapped with tables and chairs arrived at the center, Zeinab began pondering what additional community activities the center could house.

The women chose to open a kindergarten in the building in the mornings, which many of their own children began to attend. The women then discussed the need for a space for youth to meet and stay out of trouble in the evenings – a youth club was born. Ecstatic over their new meeting space, the youth collected money to purchase a kerosene lantern, enabling them to play cards and discuss the concerns of adolescent minds late into the night.

Next to the old haraz tree now stood the well-kept and well-frequented Kulba Social Development Center. Through the morning air, children’s songs played through the open door; in the afternoon the women’s laughter rose from the windows, and as night fell, bright rays of the kerosene lantern shone from under the metal sheets carrying the fervent voices of youth into the warm, starlit night.



As the center's popularity grew with each passing month, the center was threatening to outgrow its small room. Children's toys and school materials lined one wall, the youth's lantern, drum and box of supplies crowded the far corner. With the walls being taken up with the other groups' needs, the women were scrunched like schoolchildren along their desks. The hope of holding an exhibition of the women's crafts was unthinkable – the visitors would not even make it in to the room. Zeinab considered their situation. They had no money with which to build an extension. But she did have an idea. At the following meeting she made her proposal to the women: "It has been now two years since we built our small building. We have expanded our activities to benefit our children and the youth in Kulba. But really, these children need a room to play and have their school materials. The youth need a room to keep their things. And we also need our room, as in the near future we will be holding an exhibition of our work!"

The women let out cries of support. They were all looking forward to the exhibition and desperately wanted the space to show more of their work. Zeinab continued, "We would need bricks to build these rooms. Unfortunately, Social Welfare cannot pay for those bricks. But I have been thinking. The parents of the children in our kindergarten, will they not want to do something to benefit their kids? And the youth who are benefiting from this building, would they not also want to contribute? And us, why don't we come and participate so we can have more space?"

The women murmured their agreement; Zeinab beamed.

Zeinab proposed that they come together for an open brick-making camp. If they held the camp for one month they could make enough bricks to build three additional rooms and quadruple their small space. Tentatively, Zeinab asked who among them would be willing to make a month-long commitment. All of the hands in the room rose. Umjima stood, "We must all participate. We will mobilize the people to do this. Our husbands and children can join us."

"Thank you," Zeinab smiled. "Since this camp will be for long hours every day and you are mobilizing the community, I will take the initiative to see how we will feed ourselves." Explaining the community's ambitions for the center, Zeinab convinced the Youth and Sport Department to support one daily meal for the camp's 50 volunteers.



The rising sun lit the thick tree canopy, the din of bird chatter clashing with dawn's serene glow. Zeinab plodded her way through the slick mud of the riverbank, a plastic whistle dangling from her neck. By 7 a.m. all 33 women had arrived at the site of the camp. At 10 a.m. the men finally arrived. "Tweeeet!" screeched Zeinab's whistle. There was much work to be done.

Men bent and heaved, sinking their spades into the soft earth along the river, filling vats with the sweet-smelling clay. Women made the slippery journey through the mud, filling empty pots with water, then balancing their heavy load up the banks to the vats to be mixed. Covered in dirt, moisture soaking their shirts and brows, the youth poured the clay mixture into the metal and wooden molds. Elders stood by, diligently tending their responsibility to turn the older bricks to complete the drying process.

From the grassy knoll above the riverbank, the aroma of boiling meat and steamed sorghum wafted through the damp, humid odors of earth and sweat, eliciting grumbles from the bellies of the laborers. Children, scolded for playing, returned to their assigned task of offering water and tea to the working women and men. When the women cooking signaled that lunch was ready, the camp broke in a collective need for refueling. The children dutifully carted plates of sautéed vegetables, boiled goat, steamed rice, bean stew and *kisra*<sup>12</sup> to the two patches of grass where the men and women were seated. The camp's steady hum of workers' grunts, the *ka-chink* of shovels hitting dirt and the slosh of water pouring from jugs shifted temporarily to the melodic intonations of friendly banter, mouths chewing and children's laughter.



At the end of the month, 33,000 bricks lay stacked in three dozen pyramids lining the bank. But the work was far from complete. With the first drop of rain, the bricks would dissolve like sugar cubes. Some of the men were professional builders; they were able to direct the bricks to be stacked to form the stove that would fire them. But how to get the wood?

The men offered to harvest the wood, but how could they transport it to the riverside? Again, Zeinab returned to the Youth and Sport Department. "We have made the bricks, now they must be fired. We have mobilized men to cut the trees, but could you assist us with a vehicle?"

Again, the answer was yes.

Amidst the forest's pungent odors of pine and eucalyptus, two dozen men swung machetes with the soft, rhythmic *ka-thunk* of chipping wood. By the third day towering stacks of timber lined the dirt road. Two lorries arrived to transport the loads to the riverbank, where the men covered in the sticky balm of sweat, sap and sand transferred the logs from the flatbed to the brick stoves. As the sun rose the following morning, the kilns were lit, flames cackling inside three dozen burning temples. By nightfall their bright embers lay nestled in the smoking pyres.

Together, the volunteers built three adjoining rooms to the small building. As the long halls and covered verandas rose around the small room, Zeinab turned to Ismail, a twinkle in her eyes, "We have made the bricks and built the buildings, so now the doors, windows and metal sheeting for the roof are now the responsibility of Social Welfare." Ismail's apple cheeks rose and fell with laughter, "But of course, Zeinab."



Zeinab stood in the dimming twilight as the last of the women bid her farewell, beginning their journeys home for the evening. The youth were arriving at the center, entering their new room with whoops of celebration. They were sure to be in there until the early hours that night. She shifted the stack of papers in her new manager's office. The next day would require a dedicated morning of organization before she began to plan for the women's upcoming public exhibition. Finally, they would be able to display the fruits of their dedication and hard work: their crafts and the social development center itself. As the stars began to twinkle in the heavens, Zeinab closed her eyes and thanked God. Like soup from a stone, all of this they had created from nothing.

*Alhamdulillah.*<sup>13</sup>

## Second Chances

Ismail Tawir peered out the window at the sunlight illuminating the retreating rainclouds. That morning his view had been obscured by a two-hour deluge. After the deafening roar of the rain hitting his office's tin roof, he was surprised the sky had spared any drops for the rest of Kadugli. Finally, the clouds were dispersing, giving way to an afternoon of radiant blue sky and the chance to resume his work. Just as he opened his file there was a polite knock on his door. Looking up in a huff, he saw a cascade of black fabric framing the mocha-skinned face of a smartly dressed woman. She stood tall and confident, carrying a leather briefcase – the picture of urban sophistication.

“aSalaam ‘Alaykum,” he welcomed her.

“Wa-Alaykum aSalaam,” she replied. “My name is Amna Sadig Badri from Ahfad University for Women, in Omdurman. I am heading a project that seeks to research women’s activities in Greater Kordofan state. I was wondering if your office knew of anyone we could meet?”

Ismail smiled, “Actually, we have a social development center, just near here in Kulba. It is headed by a girl called Zeinab. You should meet her and see the work she is doing.”

Together Amna and Ismail made their way along the leafy road to the social center in Kulba, but Zeinab was not there. Turning around, they passed to Zeinab’s home through muddy streets, dodging the small lakes that filled the contours of the rainy season roads. But Zeinab was not there either. Zeinab’s mother directed them to the government offices where Zeinab had started work as a secretary. Returning to Kadugli, Amna and Ismail finally found Zeinab in the Department of Labor. Ismail happily made the introductions, “Zeinab, I would like you to meet Amna Badri from Ahfad University for Women, in Omdurman. Ms. Badri, may I introduce Zeinab Blandia.”

The next day, Amna interviewed Zeinab at the social center. At their first meeting Amna had failed to explain the nature of her research, so Zeinab assumed she was a contact of Ismail’s, perhaps a potential donor for the center. They discussed the work and impact of the social center, but Amna’s real interest seemed to be how a girl of only 19 had been able to empower local women and mobilize her community to create such a place.

Amna’s visit had awarded her a glimpse into the Nuba’s unique culture, their lush valleys shielded by mountains that both protected and isolated its proud, vibrant and neglected people. However, meeting the young leader who had founded the center had been her most intriguing discovery.

At the conclusion of their interview, Amna thanked Zeinab. “Unfortunately, we are not in a position to help you in the center, but we want to help the state with some scholarships.”

Zeinab’s breath caught. In the years since her graduation, Zeinab’s vision of entering the esteemed halls of university, books in hand, remained a stubborn memory. All the opportunities a degree would hold for her beyond her village of Kulba, perhaps even beyond the Nuba Mountains, lay crushed under her father’s refusal. Zeinab had felt lost, betrayed by a man who traditionally supported his daughter’s education as much as his sons’. But when she was alone, when the slants of early morning sunshine warmed her face, when she found her feet trailing through the wet grass on

the way home from the social center, her dream snuck back, a nagging unrequited refrain. She knew she could succeed at university. And she knew her life would be forever changed if she did.

“We have three scholarships to award to women from the Nuba Mountains – two for students to study nursing in Iraq and one for a bachelor’s degree in Family Science at Ahfad University in Omdurman. Since you sat for examinations, you could apply.”

Zeinab’s eyes were alight. “*How?*”

“Try to apply to the government. This is the only way I can help you, I am sorry I cannot do more.”

With that, Amna stood to leave. Zeinab walked her to her vehicle, feeling a kindred connection to this stranger from the capital. Amna represented what Zeinab longed for: independence, education and opportunity. Thanking her profusely for coming to visit and, especially, for the news of the scholarships, Zeinab watched Amna wave a fond farewell.

Zeinab found herself at the gate of her family’s compound, too excited to notice her feet taking her there. To the west, the copper sun dropped lower in the sky as Zeinab rushed to tell her mother the news. The chance of a scholarship! That night Zeinab’s eyes remained open, thinking excitedly about her application. Somewhere in the back of her mind glinted a pin that had the potential to burst her swelling hope. She pushed her father’s face out of her thoughts. Now was the time for optimism; she would cross that bridge with him later.

Shortly after the first hint of dawn glowed behind the valley’s eastern mountains, Zeinab was dressed and preparing tea for her family. She hurried to work, counting the laborious minutes until her break when she could make her way to the Department of Education.

Approaching the long cement building, Zeinab passed under the metal overhang to the shade of the veranda. Department notice boards hung like canary and white patchwork across the exterior wall. She made her way down the long checkered wall, then turned and repeated her search, scanning each board in vain for news of the scholarships.

Perhaps the information was posted inside. Zeinab entered the administration office and quickly spotted the secretary. “aSalaam ‘Alaykum. My name is Zeinab Blandia. I am here to apply for the scholarship to Ahfad University!” she announced eagerly.

The woman across the desk’s jaw dropped. Composing herself, she looked at Zeinab quizzically, “How do you know about that? We just learned this morning. It is not even posted yet!”

“Oh.” Zeinab was surprised but undeterred. “But this is wonderful news! Can’t you advertise today?”

“I’m sorry miss, but we have not advertised it yet and I do not know when we are planning to. You must wait until it is official so that everyone has the opportunity to apply equally.”

Deflated, Zeinab left the education office. Nevertheless, it was only a matter of time. Zeinab resolved that stalking the notice boards would be a daily priority.

Two days later it appeared. In black chalk on a bright mustard board, Zeinab saw the words she had been waiting for: Scholarships for Women.

All eligible women in Greater Kordofan state were invited to apply for the three scholarships. Zeinab hurried into the administration office to pick up an application package. The deadline was set for two weeks hence.

Zeinab worked diligently on her application, reviewing her materials over and over. Five days before the deadline she submitted her application. She knew her father would never allow her to go to Iraq, so she placed her application carefully in the box marked “Ahfad University – Omdurman.”

She walked home slowly that night. The women at the social center were thrilled that she had applied. They discussed her father’s previous refusal and tried to offer what advice they could. As the evening sky darkened, Zeinab thanked the ladies as they headed to their homes. She was grateful for their support, but passing along the twilight roads she imagined the village gossip that would soon fill Kulba’s mud-brick *tuculs*: “Have you heard the young Blandia girl is applying for university? In Omdurman! I wonder if she will be accepted. *Inshallah*.<sup>14</sup> But her father will not allow it ... so unfortunate.” She knew she would only have until morning before the whispers found his ears. She must think of how she could approach him so he would understand.

That night she waited until the evening meal had been served to the men under the neem tree’s leafy branches. Their bellies full with plates of *kisra*, sauce and roasted goat, Zeinab approached her father. Bending low to collect the plates, she took a deep breath, “Baba, can I talk to you?”

Her father turned from his conversation to look at his daughter. “What is it, Zeinab?” The men stilled, sensing that the coming topic was a serious one. Nerves launched Zeinab to begin with the highlight of her plea, “You see, Baba, in Omdurman there is this university, Ahfad University for Women ...”

Her father’s brow lowered immediately. “Zeinab, we have had this conversation.”

She had chosen the wrong point. She had only moments before the final dismissal she so feared. This time it would sever her hopes for further education permanently. “No Baba, wait! There is a scholarship!” The words registered; slowly the eyebrows began lifting, from anger to inquisition. Carefully, Zeinab proceeded from the beginning, telling her father every detail of meeting Amna and the scholarship for which she had applied. She was asking for his blessing. *If* she was the successful candidate, would he consider allowing her to go?

Her last words were greeted with thoughtful silence. Then one of her neighbors piped up, “It sounds like a wonderful opportunity. What pride it would bring to your family, Mohamed.” An elderly uncle disagreed, “Hmm. I don’t like the sound of a young girl going by herself to Omdurman. Where would she stay? Who will care for her? Do you want her married to an Arab

whose family you will never meet? He'll whisk her away before you can see her again!" One of her brothers agreed, "She'll be too old to get married by the time she finishes!"

Her older brother Talib stood up for her, "Zeinab is too smart for those men. Let her go."

Zeinab's father was swept up in the fray, considering the pros and cons, listening to the counsel of the men around him, considering what family he could rely on in Khartoum and what benefits there would be for Zeinab remaining in Kadugli.

Zeinab's hopes swelled with each vote in favor and sank with each point raised against. Finally, Mohamed Blandia fell silent. Zeinab looked fervently at her father's thoughtful expression. "Well, Zeinab, a scholarship would certainly be a significant achievement for you and this family. If you are given a chance like that, we have to support you to go."

Zeinab threw her arms around her father, "Thank you, Baba!"

The old man laughed and hugged her. "Still, we must wait and see whether you are awarded this scholarship. Inshallah."

Yes, Zeinab thought, inshallah.



On the day following the deadline, Zeinab nearly ran the whole way to Kadugli. She ran up to the veranda at the Department of Education, trying to catch her breath before the checkerboard of notices. The announcement was pronounced in bold black lettering: Scholarship Winners. But something was wrong. Under the heading was written, simply, Iraq. Two names were listed. Two girls whose dreams of higher education were about to become a reality. But where was Zeinab's name? Where was the scholarship for Ahfad University? Zeinab read the sign over and over, then walked into the office. At the largest desk she saw the director of the department, Muktar El Mardi. She approached his desk, trying to slow her steps, "Mr. Mardi, my name is Zeinab Blandia. I have come inquiring about the scholarship to Ahfad University."

"Ah yes, Miss Blandia." He knew her. He folded his pudgy hands and looked up at Zeinab. "I'm afraid we have not awarded the scholarship to Ahfad University."

Not awarded? Zeinab's head began to spin with questions, only few of which left her lips, "What? Why?"

Muktar continued patiently, evidently expecting Zeinab's confusion and disappointment. "You see, when we closed the application deadline, there was a problem."

"A problem?"

"We opened the box for applications to Ahfad and found only one application. Yours."



A smile lit Zeinab's features, but Muktar was quick to correct her budding optimism, "I'm afraid we cannot award a scholarship with only one application, Miss Blandia. There is no competition. We will have to reopen the contest."

Zeinab's heart fell.

She must wait another week to see how she fared among the newly recruited candidates. The advertisement was reposted more widely than before. The days ticked by.

Zeinab's eyes had barely closed through the night when she heard the morning birds calling to the dawn. It was the sunrise she had been waiting for, the one that would herald her dream of going to university, or end it.

She did not run to Kadugli that morning, or dawdle. She walked with purpose as a mother approaches labor – with the anticipation of her greatest joy mingled with fear of an incredible loss. Along Zeinab's route the trees emitted the fragrant scent of new buds. She calmed herself with their scent. But the wind whispered through their boughs, ushering her on. As she came around the road's bend to the education offices she saw the crowd milling against the checkered wall. She climbed the dirt and scrub incline to approach the building. A face from the crowd turned to look at her. Then another. "Zeinab!" Zeinab looked past them, trying to see what they had seen. "Congratulations!"

Zeinab's heart stopped, then started again – racing excitedly in her chest. Her feet quickened their pace as more bystanders turned to congratulate her. She had to reach the board, though she could already feel her feet lightening, her soul soaring. Yes, there it was, the letters bold and beautiful – Scholarship to Ahfad University for Women: Zeinab Mohamed Blandia!

Inside the office, Muktar El Mardi and his staff added their congratulations as Zeinab entered. As the accolades died down, Zeinab accompanied Muktar to his desk to get the details of how to proceed. As she sat across from him, Zeinab said, "Thank you so very much for selecting me, Mr. Mardi!"

The short man laughed, his jowls swaying playfully. "Zeinab, I knew you would be an excellent candidate for this scholarship. But we still needed to see how the other applications would compare."

Zeinab looked at him quizzically.

"When we opened the box yesterday morning there was still only one application inside. It seems you were meant to have this scholarship, Zeinab Blandia."



It was June 1984. Zeinab packed her things and boarded a lorry bound for the capital. Her family, colleagues and the women from the social center stood in the exhaust, waving tearful goodbyes as Zeinab drove out of sight.

At Ahfad University, Amna was overjoyed to see Zeinab had been awarded the scholarship. However, coming to university in the shadow of the capital was a new world from the tree-shade and mud-brick schools of the Nuba Mountains. At her father's insistence, Zeinab spent the first year living with her cousins. Amidst the close-packed urban sprawl, their small home was a sanctuary. Inside, traditional Nuba dishes were savored from fingers to mouth. Nuba family and guests stopped by for early morning tea, late afternoon lunch and a talk by candlelight in the evening. And as at home, Zeinab assumed her duty to serve the tea, prepare the lunch and stay to talk late into the evening with her relatives.

It was not until the end of her first year that Zeinab learned she had failed two courses. Without a private place to study away from the warmth and hospitality of her cousin's household, Zeinab realized that to remain in the folds of Nuba culture could cost her the scholarship. Before she left Kadugli, Zeinab had been able to secure a grant for her accommodation and living expenses from the Department of Labor. She needed time and space to concentrate on her studies. So with a heavy heart, Zeinab told her father and cousins that she would be renting a room in a house with other students.

The following year, Zeinab focused on her studies, excelling in all of her courses. Amna and her husband, Gasim Badri, kept a close watch on Zeinab, mentoring her through the transition from the mountains to university in Omdurman. But it was Gasim's father, Yusuf Badri, who had a special fondness for Zeinab. His father, Babiker Badri, had formed the first girls' school in all of Sudan in 1904, with the conviction that women should also be educated. As his school transformed into Ahfad University – Arabic for “for our grandchildren” – Babiker's convictions transferred to his son and grandson. Yusuf reveled in the fact that his father's mission had stretched beyond the capital into the most remote reaches of Sudan. He took Zeinab under his wing like a small child, kissing her cheeks and teasing her like a grandfather, “My little girl from the Nuba Mountains. Look at you now! You will be a big lady someday, my Zeinab!”

As she watched the white fringe of his moustache raise with his smile, Zeinab thought of her own grandmother, “You must be like Pato someday, my little Kosa Maadeh. You must be like Pato.”



A few years after Zeinab graduated, Amna Badri wrote a book to use as a textbook in her classes and when teaching rural women about the qualities of good leadership. The book was inspired by and contained excerpts from an interview with a young woman leader she met in the Nuba Mountains.

### The Post Office

The dappled light set soft geometric shadows playing across Zeinab's ebony skin. She sat under the lush neem tree that patiently occupied the central courtyard of Kadugli's cement-brick post office, listening to the rustling of the green finger-leaves and the morning preoccupations of the offices encircling her small dirt mound. Zeinab was on her semester break from university and her younger sister Hawa had been eager to invite her for breakfast. One of the large wooden doors opened into the courtyard; Hawa looking expectantly for Zeinab at one of the small wooden tables under the tree. Following her, Zeinab noticed the familiar face of Hawa's colleague Zahara, along with a male colleague, coming to join them.

Zeinab stood to greet Hawa and Zahara warmly, while the gentleman waited.

"Zeinab, this is my colleague Ahmad Omar Kuku. Ahmad is from Dara Village, working in Kadugli post office. Ahmad, this is my older sister Zeinab. She is studying in Ahfad University for Women, in Omdurman."

A thick halo of dark hair caught the sunlight above brown eyes, smiling as he greeted her, "aSalaam 'Alaykum."

"Wa-Alaykum aSalaam," Zeinab replied.

The servers brought their breakfasts from a nearby restaurant. They sat together in the soft morning light talking over their plates of thick bread, roasted meat and brown bean sauce. Ahmad explained that he had been working in Khartoum since completing his degree at the post office college. He had recently transferred to Kadugli. Their conversation flowed through Zeinab's studies in Omdurman back to the Nuba Mountains and the common village their grandmothers shared. Eventually, the din of midday hummed outside their shaded sanctuary and Zeinab took her leave.

As Hawa's colleague, there was nothing remarkable about Ahmad making regular visits to the Blandia family home. Food would be shared, easy conversation would flow through the grass-thatched rakuba where guests were welcomed. However, as the evenings would draw to a close, Ahmad would linger near Zeinab, as if there was one more topic he wished to broach. Zeinab sensed these awkward moments and would loudly announce that she must get back to work, making a hasty exit to her room. But one afternoon after tea, Ahmad hesitated as he took his leave. Before Zeinab could make her usual excuse, the words stumbled out, "Zeinab, do you have some time?"

Zeinab tried to deflect the question's obviously personal nature, "Sometimes I have time in the evening or in the office."

Ahmad seized the opening Zeinab did not believe she had offered, "So, can I come to your office?"

"What do you want? Are you coming for official work or what?"

Sheepishly, Ahmad admitted, "No, I am not coming for official work."

“The office is for official work. So, if you aren’t coming for official work, it’s better to make an appointment to meet at home.”

A meeting was set. There was no room for Zeinab to feign other commitments this time. Ahmad returned to her home for the meeting and faced Zeinab with earnest eyes. “Zeinab, I want to be your husband.”

Zeinab studied the man she had known only three months. “Let me think.”

As the hot season cooled, Zeinab continued to consider Ahmad’s proposal. He came to her home and office, reminding her that she had yet to answer his question. Instead, Zeinab invited him to talk. As the rains fell and the grass filled the nooks and crevices of their mountain valley, Zeinab learned about Ahmad. And as the clouds cumulated in afternoon thunderheads and then dispersed into indigo evenings, Ahmad learned about Zeinab.

As the time came for Zeinab to return to university in Khartoum, she had decided that Ahmad was the man she wanted to marry. But many young women gave up their dreams of an education for marriage. Zeinab was determined not to lose her scholarship and her chance for a university degree, so she began the 800 kilometer journey to the capital without giving him an answer.

Undeterred, Ahmad sought out short positions in Khartoum to allow him to see Zeinab. As they continued to meet for long discussions, a deep friendship developed. After two years, Zeinab knew that Ahmad respected her enough to allow her to complete her goal of earning a degree. Finally, she gave her dear friend her answer. “Yes.”

Overjoyed with Zeinab’s acceptance, Ahmad returned to Kadugli to build a house in which to welcome his future bride. He chose a plot of land in the neighboring village of Kulba, where Zeinab had been born and raised.

Zeinab returned from Khartoum in April 1987 with only a month to prepare for her wedding. At the end of May, the appointed familial members agreed on the dowry and the elaborate marriage rituals began. Normally these rituals would be repeated for 14 days, but Zeinab would only be able to maintain the *Arwsa*<sup>15</sup> ritual for half that time; she had to get married and back to university by the end of her break.

The mischievous wind returned, throwing the dry season’s dust on clean clothes as the air hung heavy with impending rain. The seasons were changing. The parched earth waited expectantly for the coming downpour to quench the seeds lying dormant across the valley. Each drop would unleash an eager shoot, transforming the mountain valley from dirt to swaying grasses.

As Zeinab’s family began the preparations for the wedding guests, Zeinab began her *Arwsa* preparations. Women and girls danced outside a private shelter, singing as they prepared food for another day of family negotiations, while a hole was dug inside in the dirt floor. A young friend of the family had been given the title of Zeinab’s *wazira*, or “minister,” a prestigious responsibility for the young girl who would care for all of the *Arwsa*’s needs until her wedding day. She came now to lead Zeinab, ensconced in layers of heavy woolen blankets, to the room. The weight was oppressive;

the heat was already causing Zeinab's pores to sweat, clammy against the scratchy fiber as she seated herself on the low bench beside the pit. She positioned her legs across the small hole filled with the glowing embers of perfumed, sugar-coated wood. She could feel the smoky heat emanating from the mound, against the blankets covering her legs, choking out the cool air her entry had allowed in. The smoky haze filled her lungs, clearing her busy thoughts.

After nearly 20 minutes Zeinab exited the sauna, dripping with perspiration. The wazira had set out cool drinking water and a bowl of cold porridge with sugar for her. She drank and ate to replenish her lost fluids, completing the cycle of cleansing. The wazira joined her again as they began the final element of her skin preparation. Scooping her fingers into a jar of pungent brown paste, she began rubbing Zeinab's body with the mixture of mashed, slow-smoked potatoes and perfume. The exfoliation continued for half an hour and would be repeated twice daily. As June 23 approached, Zeinab's skin shone like polished oak – smooth, soft and saturated with the pungent blend of sweet floral aromas and the earthy odor of smoke.

After weeks of anticipation, Zeinab's wedding day dawned. Early that morning Zeinab was hidden in her brother's house. In a small room the excitement of women's giggles, songs and stories encircled Zeinab as many hands worked to henna her arms and legs, wax her skin and arrange her intricately braided hair, transforming her into Arwsa. Back at her family's compound the preparations for the wedding lunch that afternoon consumed her mother and aunts, while the local imam facilitated small delegations from the bride and groom in negotiation for the union of their families.

At 4 p.m. signatures were laid on the marriage document. A shot rang out, signaling the legal marriage of Ahmad to Zeinab. Zeinab heard the shot from inside the room and was barely able to thank God before her door burst open – in rushed her sisters, followed closely by her mother, uncle, aunts and brothers, hastening to congratulate her. The wazira stood guard, shooing away the curious girls trying to peek in the hut's windows, allowing only Zeinab's closest relatives to see the bride before her husband came for her. The time with her relatives was precious – they had only a few hours to convey their lessons on the life Zeinab was entering. With traditional, nostalgic songs they sang to the bride about her happiness and their sorrow that she was passing from their family to her husband's. Zeinab cried with sadness at leaving her family, and joy as she embraced her future with Ahmad.

Back under the trees between Zeinab's family's compound, Ahmad beamed as his friends and relatives congratulated him. It was a proud day. The Blandia house was overflowing with over 150 guests, toasting the announcement with traditional juice, dates and sweets before being invited to enjoy the late afternoon feast that Zeinab's family had been preparing for days. After eating, Ahmad and the other guests retired to their homes to prepare for the evening's celebration.

As the sun set and the moon rose late that night, Zeinab was finally ready. At 10 p.m. they heard the car approaching. The distance was not far, but ceremony indicated that *Ariz*<sup>16</sup> should transport his Arwsa in style. As it was Ahmad coming to Zeinab's place, in good humor her family made a show of offering him his "worth" before he got out of the car. Taking the handfuls of money he then strode to her door and asked politely if Arwsa was ready. Zeinab stood with bated breath as the door opened and she greeted Ahmad as her husband. Around them the small crowd of family erupted in cheers as youth sang and danced to the traditional beat of the dluwka drum.

The wedding guests had reconvened at the house Ahmad had built for Zeinab. Under a night sky strewn with stars, the crowd of nearly 200 waited anxiously to see how the bride and groom would arrive. Finally, the car approached, parking in the distance. The characteristic thumping of the ceremonial *dluwka* sounded through the night air. Women's voices rose, carrying the whooping and singing of traditional Nuba songs as the parade of singers and youth danced toward the party. In the midst of the twirling, clapping, musical *mélange*, the onlookers saw Ahmad holding Zeinab's hand. Among the din of celebration Arwsa and her Aris took their places at two chairs decorated with fragrant flowers, balloons and palm fronds. Candles were lit and the next genre of music started. The dancing did not stop until 5 a.m., when Ahmad and Zeinab retired to their new home.



Shortly after their wedding, Zeinab and Ahmad returned to Khartoum for Zeinab to enter her final year of studies. It was not long before she learned she was pregnant.

In late April 1989, in the middle of her final exams, Zeinab went into labor. It was on a bright Tuesday morning that their daughter, Eman, entered the world. Forty days later with her baby in her arms, Zeinab graduated with a Bachelor of Family Science degree from Ahfad University. She was the first person in her family to earn a university degree. Her daughter and her degree were the two proudest achievements of her life.

Though they had decided to make a life together in Kadugli, it was taking time for Ahmad to get transferred from Khartoum. As the years had passed, the security situation in the Nuba Mountains continued to deteriorate. In addition to the fighting between the SPLA/M and the government soldiers, villagers were arriving in Kadugli with stories of massacres by the Baggara tribe. Rumors were whispered around Kordofan that the government was supplying the nomadic Arab tribe with guns to kill their Nuba neighbors.

Shortly after Eman's birth, word reached Zeinab that the wife of her elder brother Ibrahim had been killed. Ibrahim had been arrested earlier that year for his political activities and was only one week from release when his wife was stabbed in their home. Zeinab left immediately to be with her grieving family, with Ahmad still in Khartoum.

Separation from her husband wore on Zeinab, but as Eman approached her 4-month birthday, Ahmad was able to get a transfer to Kadugli. Zeinab needed to support her family and was relieved to have Ahmad close.

Twenty months after her daughter's birth, another Tuesday dawned. Since their arrival in Kadugli, the war had intensified. A tenuous security situation was becoming more dangerous by the week. Zeinab and Ahmad's families were both politically active and therefore targeted by the government's increasingly overt violence. Villages throughout the region were being burned to the ground, their inhabitants slaughtered for suspected support of the SPLA/M. In Kadugli, the security forces had taken greater control over the city, harassing Nuba intellectuals and arresting those accused of supporting the army in the south or its local hero, Yousif Kuwa. Fear was becoming endemic; disappearances were commonplace, straining relationships in formerly close-knit Nuba society.

Ahmad and Zeinab had decided the risk had become too much. At night they discussed their plans to return to Khartoum. It would need to happen quickly, without much warning. They already feared the security forces were watching them due to their brothers' support of the SPLA/M. Two weeks. They must leave in no more than two weeks.

It was early December 1990. The rainy season had ended two months earlier; their lush valley was slowly scorching under the penetrating Sudanese sun.



The morning light cast dancing dust beams through the rakuba's grass roof, the noises of birds chirping mingled with the hiss of the charcoal stove on which their milky-sweet tea was brewing. Ahmad was wearing brown polyester pants and a crisp gray shirt; his black shoes shone to spite the dusty earth he would tread to work. Eman had just learned to walk, and Ahmad looked at his daughter. "Eman, bring your Baba some water from the pot," he asked affectionately. Eman toddled to get a cup, then made her way to the water pot, managing to keep a little in the cup on her shaky return to present it proudly to her father. Ahmad took it in a smooth draw before bending to kiss his daughter and bid farewell to Zeinab, "So, I'm going."

It was late afternoon. Zeinab sat beside the smoke of the fire, cooking lunch as she waited for Ahmad to come home. Just beyond the kitchen door, Eman played in the shade of the rakuba as the late afternoon sun dipped toward the horizon. From inside the kitchen Zeinab heard footsteps approaching the gate. Ahmad must be home early! But rather than Ahmad's measured gait, the footfalls came softer and in tandem. Eman squealed as her grandmother and aunt approached, standing shakily to try to go to them. The older woman picked up her excited granddaughter, cradling her face against her cheek. Zeinab greeted her mother and sister warmly, but as they sat on the bed, Hawa's greeting caught in her throat. Instinctively, Zeinab's stomach clenched. Her eyes flew to the women's faces, seeing the tears streaking their cheeks. War's familiar terror flooded through her: the news of her brother's repeated arrests, the pain of learning of her sister-in-law's murder. "What has happened? Who has died?"

Zeinab's mother simply hung her face and cried. Hawa's wet, pained eyes met Zeinab's. Her words came slowly, apologetic, pained. "I'm so sorry, my sister." The room began to spin behind Hawa's face. "Today Ahmad was taken by the security forces." Zeinab felt the air sucked from her lungs. "They asked him to go to the security office." Her muscle fibers slackened, the marrow drained from her bones. She felt her torso sag as the sobs began to wrack her body.

Ahmad.

They had Ahmad.

Where was he at that moment? Had they hurt him?

Was he alive?

Giving voice to the thoughts of the three Blandia women, Hawa whispered, "We don't know what will happen."

Hawa handed Zeinab a white piece of paper she had been carrying. Zeinab fumbled with the letter. It was from Ahmad's boss. Even though Hawa had seen them come and escort her brother-in-law out of the office, it was their boss' duty to let the family know what had happened. He described how the security officers had entered the post office, how they had asked for Ahmad and then asked him to accompany them. There was no refusing their invitation.

As the news spread, family members and neighbors gathered in their compound – a community afflicted by violence, each one with a loved one or neighbor arrested, killed or missing. Their tears flowed with the shared pain – a new injury to an unhealed wound.

As the hours passed the murmurs of Zeinab's family and friends – offering sympathy and prayer, but belying the fear gripping the gathering – became too much. There was still time. The instructions were that she was not allowed to see her husband until the following day. But Zeinab knew that tomorrow could be too late. She left the group of mourners at her home; some tried to persuade her not to go, but she was determined to find out anything she could.

Two of Zeinab's sisters accompanied her, carrying Ahmad's lunch, still warm from the fire. Zeinab picked out a clean change of clothes: smart pants and a clean, pressed shirt. These small tokens of human dignity Zeinab wrapped in a cloth and placed in a bag for her husband.

It did not take them long to reach the military prison. Jostling at its entrance Zeinab saw herself mirrored in a dozen long dresses and brightly covered heads. The crowd stood in agitated vigil awaiting news of their loved ones who had been seized by the government. The sun was hanging low in the sky but their demands continued – "Please, let us see our husbands and sons!"

Zeinab tried to approach the military sentries at the gate to ask if Ahmad was inside. "We don't know anybody called Ahmad here."

"But why can't you check?"

The soldiers were annoyed. The crowd was large and emotional. A soldier began moving toward them, his hand on his AK-47, making the threat clear. "You can't stay here! No answers to your questions! Now, leave this place!"

Zeinab returned home, clinging to the hope that she would see her husband the next day. Her mother and sister stayed with Zeinab that night, sleepless in their shared pain. Even Eman sensed the acute pain surrounding her, her small body crying inconsolably until morning. The next day, weary from sadness and fear, Zeinab went to the other prison in Kadugli, but Ahmad was not there. She returned to the military prison and faced the soldiers again. "We told you, you are not allowed to see him. He is not here."

Zeinab stood defiant. "Then let me see your commander."

"No, you are not allowed."

"Why? I just want to meet with him."



Zeinab continued arguing calmly until the soldiers relented. A soldier dressed in full military attire led Zeinab through the gates into the cement courtyard of the heavily militarized prison, his gun in hand. Inside the whitewashed building, she was led to an office guarded by three armed soldiers and instructed to wait for the commander to allow her to enter.

Sitting behind a large desk, a tall man with significant military rank pinned on his jacket appraised Zeinab as she approached. “aSalaam ‘Alaykum.”

“Wa-Alaykum aSalaam,” she responded and waited for him to begin.

“What are you inquiring about?”

“My husband was arrested yesterday and he is here. Can I see him?”

“No. This is not allowed.” The commander seemed annoyed that he had given his time to repeat what his guards had already told her. He stood up for her to leave, but Zeinab did not move. He looked back to see her, frowning. “I told you no.”

Patiently yet firmly, she pressed on, “Why? If he is here, give me the justification of why I am not allowed to see him. I don’t want to take anything or talk to him. I just want to confirm whether he’s here or not.”

“No. It is against our regulations. You are not allowed to see him.” Zeinab remained in her seat and repeated her question. Despite the danger she was putting herself in, she was not leaving without an answer. Finally, the commander stood, “I will check to see if he is here or not ... if he is alive.” Zeinab watched the commander as he left, every nerve fiber straining to learn what she could about Ahmad’s condition.

He returned after 15 minutes. His tone was firm, “There is no name like this in this prison, I’m sorry.”

Zeinab stared at him with accusing eyes as she left. His lie lay poorly on his features.

Zeinab returned to her home to wait another tearful night for her husband. Time passed slowly, filled with her cries and Eman’s. It seemed like dawn would never come.

It was mid-morning when the boy came, knocking loudly on the gate. Zeinab looked up, her heart in her mouth. “What is it?”

“Ms. Zeinab! A message from your sister! She says they are bringing Mr. Ahmad to the post office today!”

Zeinab was already running into her house, “Eman! Come quickly, we must go!” She changed quickly, grabbed Eman and asked the boy to send the message to Ahmad’s mother, brother and sister.

They rushed to the post office, but when they arrived they learned Ahmad was already inside. Hawa met them, her eyes red. She left quickly to tell her boss that Ahmad's family was waiting outside, hoping to see him. The head of the office would then pass on the message to Ahmad's security guards: his family wants to see him. Zeinab held her breath as they waited for the response. Mercifully, Hawa returned and beckoned them to follow her to Ahmad's office. The room was crowded with Ahmad's colleagues standing in a semi-circle; at the center two armed security men flanked Ahmad. He looked up and saw them. Eman began to cry, reaching for her father. Zeinab held herself, pain and longing threatening to overwhelm her. She greeted him, quietly, fervently; she knew he would not be permitted to respond. His sister and brother were outside straining to see him. When he could, his eyes met Zeinab's, tears sliding down his cheeks. With dull motions he collected everything that had once been his, handing over his responsibilities to his colleagues with somber ceremony.

The security guard asked him if that was everything. His mouth moved around one syllable: "Yes." It was the only word Zeinab heard pass his lips.

"Sign here." A paper was shoved on the desk in front of him. His ties to the post office severed, Ahmad looked at his wife holding his daughter as silent tears wet her cheeks. Eman reached helplessly for Ahmad, crying for her Baba, as the officers led him away.

For three days Ahmad's family waited at Zeinab's home to hear if there was any news about him. But no news came.

No news has come for 19 years.

## Displaced

Zeinab sat propped against the earth bricks of her rakuba, watching the gentle curves of her mountains embrace the eastern edge of the valley. She remembered climbing their rounded peaks as a child, balancing a basket-load of clean laundry on her head. She and her sisters would spread the brightly colored fabric on the boulders and bushes, strung like vivid-hued flags against the deep blue dome of the midday sky. Now these same mountains and forests hid SPLA/M fighters, armed Baggara herdsman and government soldiers. Massacres were being carried out behind their gentle rises.

Zeinab's mind no longer had room for the happy memories of her youth or the war raging around Kulba's valley. She thought only of Ahmad. Unwillingly, she scrutinized the road's horizon, conjuring his familiar silhouette out of the mirage. Her mind teetered precariously; with each blink his form faded or solidified, pitching her toward heartache or madness. But to reign in her hope left a void filled by the nightmare of where he was, what they were doing to him, if they had killed him.

Since the last moments with him at the post office, family and friends had kept a steady vigil, visiting her house to offer condolence and to pray, *Inshallah, he will come*. Zeinab knew many could empathize with her pain. She had sat with them after they had received the news as she had, or simply waited in vain one evening for their loved one to come home.

Zeinab sat in the company of the chirping cicadas watching the sun crimson the valley's horizon. As shadows blanketed her valley, Zeinab noticed a few stragglers scurrying for the shelter of their homes. For two years the kerosene lanterns had lain unused, extinguished by the curfew that came with nightfall. Families hid in their compounds, sheltered by the cover of darkness. If anyone called for you, you did not respond. It was not safe for those who moved after that hour to know you were home.

Zeinab's mother called her to come inside, but heartache numbed her. Sitting under the stars' canopy, Zeinab arranged pebbles in the dirt, counting the disappeared. Sixty-five members of her tribe had vanished into the security forces' prisons, along with hundreds from other tribes.

The following morning Zeinab resolved to seek out the wives and mothers of the disappeared. Knocking on their doors she sought solidarity and dialogue. They began meeting together. As word spread, their group grew from 10 to over 40 women. After days of hearing her own frustration echoed in their voices, Zeinab was no longer satisfied with dialogue. She proposed that they come together to demand information from the authorities on the location of their loved ones. Zeinab knew it was not a simple proposition. They all knew the violent depths to which the government would willingly descend; confronting the provincial governor would likely put their lives in danger. But these women shared her nightmares. As much as she feared Ahmad's fate, the only way she could hope to find peace would be if she knew what that fate was.

Zeinab walked along Kulba's narrow dirt roads to Madina's house, glancing discreetly behind her as the road bent to see if a passerby hesitated or a bicycle changed course. Madina's daughter met her at the gate, leading her to the shady hut in which 20 women had gathered. Steaming cups of sweet milky tea were distributed as the chatter of greetings faded; the women looked expectantly to

Zeinab. Madina put down her cup and addressed Zeinab on behalf of the women gathered. “We have considered your proposal, Zeinab, and decided you are right. We must try to do something.”

Zeinab smiled at their collective courage. “Thank you.” She placed a piece of paper on the table. One by one they began writing a list of their loved ones alongside the details of when and where they were taken.

The group elected Zeinab, Awatif and Madina to compile a statement to accompany the list. The women approved the statement and chose a day to present their documents to the provincial governor. As important as the document was getting the governor to read it. Zeinab encouraged the women: “It is easy to ignore one woman or five, but if 50 people are standing waiting for you, wouldn’t you want to see what they want?”



On the streets of Kadugli, women ensconced in the light, flowing fabric of multi-hued tobés greeted each other along the dirt road from the market. Ebony-skinned men in robes of white passed on bicycles while lanky goats and dust-coated dogs sought shelter from the rising sun. Zeinab made her way to the governor’s offices, praying, *Give the women strength to come. And let this man listen to us. Inshallah.* As she entered the wrought iron gates she looked up to see two dozen women assembled inside the gate of the government offices under a leafy mango tree. Soon, the women’s numbers swelled to nearly 50.

The building’s security guards observed the growing number of women suspiciously, finally sending one of the guards to approach them. “What has happened? Why are you gathering here?”

Awatif stepped forward. “We are here to see the governor.”

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No, but would you please tell him there is a group of women to see him, if he can accept to meet with us?”

The guard went inside to pass on their request, returning a few minutes later. “The governor cannot see you until he knows what this meeting is concerning.”

Zeinab smiled, “We are here to deliver a paper. He is the only one who can see what is on that paper. Then he will understand.”

The guard turned, retreating again into the building to deliver the women’s message. When he returned he announced that the governor had agreed to see them. The women let out whoops of joy – the doors had been opened. Alarmed by their enthusiasm, the guard hastened to add that they must wait for 20 minutes until the meeting hall was prepared. Congratulating each other on their first small victory, the women barely heard him.

The women filed into the building, a parade of bright headscarves filling the hallways as they were led into the governor’s formal meeting hall. They fanned into the semi-circle of chairs laid for

them. The vacant table at the front of the room commanded their attention, awed whispers rustling between their bobbing *bijabs*.<sup>17</sup> The governor made them wait another 15 minutes before arriving. Taking the center seat, flanked by his staff and security guards, he welcomed them. “How can I help you? What has brought you here?”

The group had elected five women to speak. Madina began, standing tall and proud as she addressed the table,

Good morning, your Excellency. We have our statement here. But before I give you this statement, I want to explain why we are here. We are the mothers and sisters and wives of men who have been arrested in your province. We don't know where they are. They have not been released to come home. When we go to the prison we are not allowed to see them. All we want to know is if they are alive or where they are. Up to now we don't have any information. But you are the one who is responsible for the security in this state. You know the information. Could you help us just to know if they are alive or not?

The youngest of their spokeswomen rose, her greeting catching in her throat. How tall the governor sat behind his opulent table. She and her husband had only been married one month when he was taken. Her composure faltered, like silk catching on a nail. Her voice shook with months of sleepless nights, the pain of the longing, the fear and the emptiness of her broken heart. Unrehearsed words spilled forth, full of anger and blame; his government had shattered her soul. He must fix it.

The women held the grieving wife and soothed her. Zeinab tried to step over the insults in order to make progress with their demands. She wanted the governor to hear her words as if it was his own mother's pain.

Thank you, Governor, for taking the time to meet with us. We are very pleased that you are willing to hear the purpose of our coming. We believe that the responsibility for security in this province is the shared responsibility of all of its citizens, not only its governor. If there is suspicious activity going on it is in everyone's interest to report that activity to keep our communities and province safe.

Yet imagine how you would feel if you came home tonight to hear a member of your family had been arrested? What if it was your son who had been taken? If I was your mother, can you imagine my pain if your father suddenly disappeared? Wouldn't you try to look everywhere to see if you could find him?

We know death. Any of us could die at any time, from a car accident, disease or a gun shot. We can accept death. If our husbands and sons have been killed, please, just tell us. We understand there is a war and we know that they could be killed as part of that war. We just need to know so we can move on.

The governor was quiet for a moment; but a man could not be in his position if he did not possess an aptitude for ambivalence. His sincerity was smooth, flawless. “Thank you, ladies, for bringing this to my attention. I cannot answer where these men are now of course, but I will ask the military and security forces if they know of their location and have an answer for you within two days. Please leave the names and addresses of your leaders so that we can contact you once we have this information.”

Dutifully, the five spokeswomen for the group wrote their names and addresses on the list beside their husbands and sons. They were in the same cadre now.

While they did not expect the governor to be forthcoming, the women plied their thread of hope back and forth to the governor’s office, seeking the information he had promised. It took a week of daily visits to wear the thread out.

They were not surprised when the harassment began. At their next meeting they shared how they were being stopped in the street for questioning. They soon learned their meetings were being watched. Zeinab returned to work one afternoon to find her papers strewn across her floor. The locks on her desk had been broken.



Zeinab was sitting in her office when the tall man entered. Clad in nondescript pants and shirt, his mundane dress was as good as a uniform for the state security forces. “aSalaam ‘Alaykum, Mrs. Blandia.”

“Wa-Alaykum aSalaam.” Zeinab knew there was no point in asking his name.

“You are wanted to answer questions on some matters of state security. If you could come with me.” It was not a request. It was not even a question.

Carefully, Zeinab packed her belongings and locked her desk. Her hand shook slightly as she turned the key. The security officer led her out of the building into the glare of the midday sun. Along the way furtive eyes caught the familiar parade. With a subtle bow of their heads they muttered a silent prayer for her, like they had so many others.

From the main road their path turned abruptly toward Kadugli’s main hospital. Shaded by the dappled canopy of a neem tree, Zeinab saw her brother’s in-laws waiting near the entrance. The previous evening Zeinab’s neighbor had come to let her know that Ibrahim’s sister-in-law, Miriam, had been taken for questioning early that morning. A few hours later they admitted her to the hospital.

They entered one of the far, single-story buildings. Their shoes echoed along cement corridors where the sick lay prostrate on old gurneys. The smell of illness stuck to everything. Past the patient wards he directed her into an office. Inside, two men sat waiting for her. Even the hospital had been commandeered by the security forces.

They motioned for her to take the lone seat on the far side of a small wooden table. Then the questions began:

*What is your name?* You know my name; you came for me asking for me by name. *Give us your name!* Zeinab Mohamed Blandia. *Age.* Twenty-eight years. *Tribe.* Kadugli tribe. *Education.* Ahfad University in Omdurman. *Occupation.* Coordinator of Rural Development Projects at the Extension Department of the Ministry of Agriculture and Manager of the Kulba Social Development Centre. *Members of your family ...*

She was there for her family. Her brother, the politician, old friend and supporter of Yousif Kuwa. Her brother-in-law, the clandestine recruiter of Nuba fighters for the SPLA/M. And her husband. Ahmad.

*Are you married? Yes. Where is your husband?*

She felt the rage rise in her throat, pushing her mouth open to scream at them that *they* should tell *her* where her husband was! She kept her mouth shut, clenching her eyes closed to hold back the tears. They went back to her brother.

*Where is your brother? Are you doing the same things as your brother?*

Zeinab stared at them in silence.

*If you don't want to answer these questions, you will see what we will do to you.* I don't have any answers for you. You know where my brother is. You know what he is doing. I don't know what my brother is doing. He is a grown man. I have my private house and he has his private house. We have private lives. I don't know what he's doing or where he is.

They knew both. They had him in their prison.

Their questions sought to entrap her. Zeinab refused to answer them. Her silence infuriated her questioners. They threatened her until she gave them something. They held her for two-and-a-half hours. When they finally released her, she walked out into the afternoon sun, looking up at the sky, breathing into the air, "Alhamdulillah."

She longed to escape the hospital, but she turned instead toward the majestic neem trees shading the hospital entrance. Miriam's sisters still stood under the tree's canopy. Zeinab approached, greeting them as family. They shared what they could in the hushed, truncated language of war. Miriam had been taken from her office early the previous morning, likely to the same room where Zeinab had been questioned that day. After hours of questioning she had quarreled with her interrogators. They had beaten her first with sticks, then on the ground, kicking her against the cement floor on which she tried to shield herself. They admitted her to the hospital unconscious. She was no use to them then.

"May I see her?"

Zeinab entered the long cement building housing the female patients. She stopped to talk to the nurse at the small table at the entrance, then made her way along the crowded rows of beds toward a woman curled up on her side by the far window. “Miriam?” The woman turned her swollen face toward Zeinab, the security forces’ zealous work written across her broken body.



Ancient mahogany trees lined the road from Kadugli to Kulba, extending their branches in a leafy awning under which Zeinab’s feet carried her home. Her mind was once again consumed by the nightmares. As she pushed open her gate, Eman let out a squeal of delight, bringing Zeinab back to the present. She scooped her daughter into her arms and held her tightly. She had made it home.

The night was long and cold; nightmares of Miriam’s cries mingled with phantom footfalls outside Zeinab’s window.

Bleary-eyed, Zeinab left late to tread the familiar path to work the next morning. Approaching her office, she noticed the elderly cleaning lady slouched on a wicker stool in front of her door. “aSalaam ‘Alaykum, Fatma.”

Fatma’s faded olive tobe turned to reveal her wrinkled brow etched deeper with worry. “Wa-Alaykum aSalaam. Madame Zeinab, the security man returned this morning. He asked for you but I told him you were not yet here.” Her milky eyes closed under the burden of the news. “He wanted me to tell you to return to the room in the hospital at 11.”



Zeinab’s steps echoed along the cement corridor of the hospital wing. The rooms seemed emptier than they had yesterday.

As she approached the office she saw the interrogator from the previous day waiting for her outside. He shifted his stance. He must be a sentry, sent to confirm her arrival. Her head dipped as she approached. It was not a greeting, merely an acknowledgement: *Yes, I am here.*

Inside the room two new men sat waiting for her. Zeinab stood just inside the doorway. The men sat in juxtaposition, one short and round, one tall and thin. They rose slowly to greet her. “aSalaam ‘Alaykum. You were here yesterday for questioning, yes?”

Zeinab nodded.

“We have some additional questions for you. Please sit down.”

Zeinab assumed her position on the far side of the table.

*Name?* You know my name. *Name!* Zeinab Mohamed Blandia. *Age?* I answered these questions yesterday! Why are you repeating them? *Answer the question!* Twenty-eight. *Tribe.* Kadugli tribe. *Education.* Ahfad University in Omdurman. *Occupation ...*



Frustration emboldened her, “I don’t want to repeat myself. If this is all you are going to ask me, I don’t have anything new to say. You already have these answers in your book. It’s there, just look inside!”

The man rose from his desk shouting, “As you are being asked these questions, you must answer!” He grabbed the long thick stick leaning against the table, striking it against the floor. Zeinab covered her face, terrified of the blow that might follow. Fortunately, he sat down. It was her warning.

The questions continued, repeated and rephrased, over and over. Zeinab grew exhausted as they tried to elicit further information on her family. Her silence earned their fury – their voices enraged, they raised the stick above her again. She thought of Miriam, cowering on the floor, her own heart clenching in her chest. Zeinab hastened to calm them, offering them just enough information to spare her.

The light beams slanted low on the yellowing office walls when the higher-ranked officer leaned back in his chair. “OK, you may go. But this is not the end.”

As they escorted her out of the building, Zeinab looked at her watch. The interrogation had lasted five hours.

The low red sun cast long shadows across her path as Zeinab began the last rise toward her home. The large neem trees and grass fence bordering her property loomed into view; two agitated sentinels waited behind the gate. Hawa and her mother recognized Zeinab and rushed to the gate to meet her, anxiety visible on their faces. Trailing in their path, Eman toddled, crying hungrily for her mother. The gate opened and Zeinab wordlessly embraced her family; sobs shook their shoulders. The time had come. She must leave.

Her mother urged her to run that night but Zeinab needed time to get her affairs in order. She would be abandoning her responsibilities as head of the Social Development Center, the social secretary for the women’s union and her job at the Ministry of Agriculture. Just as she had as a child, she must leave coins to help them through the black days to come.

At the Ministry of Agriculture, she tallied her remaining vacation days and applied for the maximum available leave – 25 days. At the women’s union she rushed to finish a proposal to fund the creation of women’s groups across the province. A few days later, she met with the governor and presented the union’s proposal, determined to get it funded. He recognized Zeinab, but as a union representative she was aligned with a proposal that had the potential to boost his political image. There was no mention of her subversive demands to locate the disappeared.

Zeinab lobbied vehemently, securing the financial support for the union to proceed with one of their most ambitious programs to date. At their subsequent meeting she announced the proposal had been successful. The women let out cries of celebration, congratulating Zeinab on a momentous achievement. As the cheers and accolades died down, Zeinab laid out what would be needed for the proposal to move forward. She paused, then stated that unfortunately, she would be traveling to Khartoum to attend to a medical condition that had befallen her daughter, but she would return

from her leave the following month. Only Zeinab's closest friends would have noticed the way her eyes shifted at the lie.

The following day Zeinab met with the two women the union had assigned to continue meeting with the governor to see the proposal implemented. Outside the union office children rolled bicycle tires through the dry season's sand-laden streets. Zeinab drew her eyes away from the familiar scene, renouncing the nostalgia of the home she must abandon. She handed over the proposal documents and signed a document confirming the exchange. "Tomorrow I will not be in the office. This is now your responsibility."



That night Zeinab saw Koshe waiting at her gate. Against the twilight setting over the valley, the woman's singed head stood silhouetted, bearing stark witness to the bombing of her village. Koshe, her sister-in-law and her three small children were among the few survivors. Walking during the cover of night to Kadugli, they had taken shelter in the dark caves above Zeinab's home.

After dinner each night, Zeinab had shared her food with the poor family waiting at her gate. After a week, she accepted Koshe's offers to clean the compound and help care for Eman, and their friendship had grown. Now she was one of the few people Zeinab trusted with the news of her imminent decision to flee her home.

On the eve of Zeinab's departure, Koshe had come with a proposal of her own. Zeinab's mother would be returning to her home with Hawa, and Zeinab's home would be left vacant. Could Koshe be allowed to stay in her home, to care for the buildings and have shelter for her family until Zeinab's return? Readily, Zeinab agreed. She helped her mother move some of her furniture to her parent's house, locked her room with her remaining belongings and gave Koshe the key to check for termites every season. She did not know how many seasons she would be gone.



On Dec. 25, 1990, the dawn hung cold in the valley as Zeinab walked the familiar roads to Kadugli's bus park.

Mahogany trees hemmed the edges and spotted the middle of the jumbled bus park. White-robed men on bicycles weaved between idling transport trucks, their squat cages stacked high with squawking chickens. Rainbow fabrics of women's covered heads bobbed as they crossed the dirt lot to the adjoining market. Zeinab shielded her face from the clouds of dust and exhaust spewed from shifting vehicles as she waited to board the tall faded-red bus to the capital. Two colleagues had come to see her off with wishes for her safe journey and Eman's speedy recovery. They remained naïve to the sadness in Hawa and her mother's eyes as Zeinab boarded the bus with Eman in her arms.

The bus idled loudly while Zeinab looked for her seat in the packed mass of bodies. Her eyes reexamined her ticket and the occupied row where she and Eman should be sitting. "Excuse me, sir, but I reserved this seat."

The man shrugged and showed his own ticket with Zeinab's assigned seat clearly marked. "I was told to take this seat."

Frustration and fear competed for Zeinab's thoughts as the bus driver directed her to take her complaint to the ticket office. She dismounted the steep grooved stairs, as the only bus of the day prepared to depart. Her mother and sister hurried to Zeinab's side ahead of her surprised colleagues, asking in hushed voices what had happened. Zeinab approached the ticket desk, presenting her ticket angrily to the attendant. "I am to go to Khartoum this morning and now there is no room for me. I reserved this seat two days ago! What happened? Why did you reassign my seat?"

As the ticket attendant floundered for a response she heard someone enter the small office behind them. "Ms. Blandia?" Instinctively, her shoulders stiffened. Zeinab turned, but she knew who she was facing. The security officer motioned out the door. "Please come with me."

In a small dark room in an alley off the bus park, Zeinab faced her interrogators again. Eyes narrowed, the officer almost spat the words, "Where are you going?" But in his accusation he was already smug. She was caught. *Where did you think you were going?*

"Khartoum."

She was not surprised they had found out. Or that they had been watching. But she was ready. She presented her carefully crafted, documented and corroborated lie: I am going for leave for 25 days to take my daughter for a medical condition in Khartoum. Here are the documents.

Despite their lack of evidence to hold her, the men continued to question her until an hour after the bus had departed to Khartoum – just to be sure. They eventually released her, but Zeinab was sure they would not allow her to leave Kadugli regardless of when she booked her next ticket. She re-joined the bustling crowds of the bus station where Hawa and her mother had been waiting with Eman; her brother Adam had joined them to watch for Zeinab's release. In whispered voices her family strategized her escape. The war surrounded Kadugli like a noose. Each morning a military convoy escorted a parade of swaying, overloaded produce trucks and the large red passenger bus north to Kosti in order to make it out of the war zone by nightfall. It was the only safe way to embark on the 800 kilometer journey to Khartoum. But Zeinab's safety was already in jeopardy. She knew she must leave immediately, that day.

Frantically, Zeinab's siblings searched the bus park for other vehicles going north. Every passenger vehicle to the surrounding towns of Dilling, El Obeid or Kosti had already departed with the convoy. Finally, Adam was directed to what the truck drivers insisted would be the only other vehicle traveling out of Kadugli that day. At the far end of the park, a large overland lorry towered above the buses and trucks in the station, its rear-end rising out of a toxic cloud of blue exhaust, its canvas-covered load bending the branches of the surrounding mahogany trees. Zeinab's mother gasped. "My daughter, you cannot travel aboard this lorry!"

Zeinab hesitated. More dangerous than her precarious position atop the lorry's mountain of goods was that the journey would be overnight and not in convoy. The chances of them being

attacked – and maimed, raped or killed – along the Kadugli-Kosti road were perilously high. But in Kadugli, Zeinab was a sitting duck. “Mother, I must travel tonight.”

Zeinab said a hushed tearful goodbye to her family before being hoisted up onto the piled sacks with the few other courageous and desperate travelers. She waved at her family through the cloud of dust and smoke as the lorry lurched out of the bus park. She pulled her tobe around her face and gripped Eman close as the truck groaned and swayed out of her hometown.



As the sun set and the inky night sky descended over the Nuba Mountains, Zeinab wrapped her sleeping daughter against the cool night air. The night’s starry cover had often been a bright and friendly companion to Zeinab. Ascending her mountains she had felt welcome in their bright celestial gathering. But now the night was a cold and distant mistress. In her folds lay armed gunmen who would not hesitate to murder her or the sleeping baby in her arms. Zeinab did not dare to close her eyes that night. When the vehicle slowed, she prayed, her eyes squinting into the darkness, scrutinizing the black shapes of rocks and bushes for prowling figures.

In the wee hours of the morning the lorry trundled into the bus park in Kosti. They had made it a mere third of their journey, but the symbolic arrival at the edge of the war zone was celebrated – Alhamdulillah. As the other travelers dismounted the lorry’s mountain to find their way onward to their destinations, Zeinab called down to the driver to ask whether she and Eman could remain hidden in its mounds until morning. Though the gunmen would not be soldiers, midnight bus parks were known for their crime. Mercifully, the driver agreed; he would not be traveling further that night.

It took two days for Zeinab and Eman to make their way to the sprawling beige and white block-buildings that fringed the desert metropolis. It had been over a year since Zeinab had lived in the capital. She stepped off the bus into the chaos of Khartoum’s main bus park, gripping Eman and her one small suitcase with all the belongings she had. She found a taxi and directed the driver to the squatter settlement on the outskirts of nearby Omdurman.

The taxi swerved through the frenzied traffic of the capital, making its way west over the great river Nile. The driver weaved and lurched, plying the stop-go streets until they reached the ramshackle periphery of Omdurman.

Crowding around the shimmering prosperity of the capital, Khartoum’s rural cousins – displaced from drought, famine and war – sought shelter in the basked glow of the city, realizing too late that its light only cast a darker shadow for them.

Turning off the main roads into the vast squalor of unplanned huts built wherever there was room, the taxi came to Abuzeid displaced camp. The city emanated exhaust and sewage; tattered plastic bags and garbage littered the dirt walkways that snaked between the close-packed, soil-brick huts. Zeinab was familiar with the squatter settlement that Ahmad’s family had lived in since 1981, but with the last visions of Kordofan’s lush hills vibrant in her mind, the displaced camp looked stark and hostile. She was no longer a visitor; now she was one of the displaced.

## Zeinab's Vision

### ***Women's Solidarity Fund Groups***

Afternoon sunlight flashed off the small, hand-held mirror hung on the thatch wall of the rakuba. Its shiny surface reflected a room full of women lost in animated discussion. Occasionally, a draped face was distracted by the mirror's glint, suddenly drawn to the reflection of the furrowed brow over her deep-set almond eyes. Noticing the troubled expression in the mirror, her brows lifted in surprise. *Do I always look so anxious?* Her shoulders relaxed as she inhaled, calm spreading over her features. A woman shrouded in a patterned emerald headscarf noticed the host's children, darting in and out of the meeting, politely taking tea cups and offering dried fruit to their guests. *Her children are so happy and well behaved! I will have to ask her what skills she taught them before I am called to host. My children would run everywhere!* Another woman smiled approvingly at the clean and well-presented dress of the women around her. *Look at us, everyone is looking so smart!* Silently, the mirror reflected both what was there and what each of them hoped to see.

That is why there was always a mirror. Whether a gilded pane stretching from floor to ceiling or a plastic compact hanging on a string, each member was to mount a mirror in her home. In its gaze the woman could reflect on herself every day. Then, when it was her turn to host the meeting, the mirror provided a way for the group to see themselves and their members – were they proud of each other? Did they take care of themselves? How did they want to be seen by others? There was pride cast in its gentle light.

The mirror was but one piece of Zeinab's meticulously theorized and constructed puzzle. After years of forming and leading women's groups, Zeinab joined other displaced Nuba university students in the capital to form their own organization. It was a group unlike any of which she had been part, formed by Nuba intellectuals from the ground up. Zeinab proposed they call their organization *Ryya*. "Vision."

Zeinab's vision was to empower the Nuba people. To empower women. And to empower Sudan. Under the dim light of her kerosene lamp, she began researching authorities on women's economic and social empowerment. Zeinab applied the teachings of visionaries such as Muhammad Yunus to her first-hand experience of how groups best succeed in Nuba culture. Melding the academic with the practical, Zeinab developed a theoretical framework to guide the formation of what she intended to be the most successful women's groups in Sudan. She named them Women's Solidarity Fund Groups (WSFG). Over the course of a decade, Zeinab watched her dream grow from a handful of women meeting in the transience of a displaced camp outside Khartoum to a network of 150 groups spread across the hills and valleys of the Nuba Mountains.

Critical to her vision was that, like tomatoes on a vine, with proper support the women would grow and ripen in the direction they chose. A robust framework held, not constrained, the most productive vines. And the healthiest vines produced the heaviest, most succulent fruit. Each group started from the same seed. Zeinab and her colleagues at Ryya first identified influential women in a community. They trained the women as WSFG leaders, teaching them the principles of the framework so they could form their own groups:

- Each group must have between 30 and 45 members. No more, no less.

- There were nine prescribed monthly themes. The group could choose the order in which to address each issue.
- The members of each group must sign a contract committing themselves to the group's guidelines for at least nine months.
- Their weekly meetings were always hosted in one of the member's homes, each meeting ending with a draw to pick the next week's host. Members agreed to bring a weekly contribution, such as a bar of soap, 250 Sudanese dinars or half a pound of sugar. Five percent of the weekly total was carefully set aside for the group's savings; the rest was given to the host.
- The group elected and then trained the positions of secretary and treasurer.
- All members were bound to the principles of democracy, transparency, accountability and participation.

The framework was universal – the same principles and guidelines applied equally to all of Ruya's Women's Solidarity Fund Groups.

Zeinab soon saw successes so significant and profound that she believed WSFGs could flourish throughout Sudan. In a country where men and women often followed socially prescribed roles, the groups allowed self-determination, fostered self-education and empowered women to forge their own paths to meet their needs.

As Zeinab wound through Nuba's dusty mountain passes and moist swaths of valleys to expand WSFG's vast network of women, she encountered stories that pushed her on.

### *It Takes All the Drops to Make the River Flow*

There was once a time when the capital of South Kordofan state had a problem of water. One by one the hand-pumps in Kadugli were breaking. Rambunctious children climbed on dilapidated machinery, women jerked stubborn handles, old bolts rusted closed until the water dried to a trickle and the old machines groaned their last parched breath.

As their pumps broke, the neighborhoods swarmed to the next closest pump. Lines of weary mothers, grimy children and agitated laborers grew like tangled string from the last remaining wells. Long, dusty waits under a scorching sun frayed tempers, knotting the lines in confrontation. In desperation, women began seeking more and more distant water sources to meet their daily needs. Before long, the sleepy road from the provincial capital to the neighboring village of Kulba had become a morning thoroughfare. A steady stream of flowing tobes and children's small feet plied the dusty road under the arc of the mango trees' canopy. Loaded with jerrycans and clay pots, each was eager to return to town before the rising sun crested the mountain's shield and caught them with their heavy burden.

Soles weary from the daily trek to the village, the members of Kadugli's Women's Solidarity Fund Group huffed their frustration that women from the *town* were traveling to the *village* to fetch water! Was Kadugli not the provincial capital of South Kordofan? And what was the government doing about its crumbling infrastructure? Nothing!

Word travelled to Zeinab that the WSFG group from east Kadugli was complaining about this issue of water: *What can we do, Zeinab?* Zeinab considered their problem, reviving the bitter-sweet memory of the first time she mobilized the women of Kadugli to demand government action – to find Ahmad. But this solution should come from the women. They needed to find their own way. Visiting the group at their next meeting, Zeinab told the story of her group approaching the governor during the height of the conflict. She insisted that they must find their own way, but that the women of Kadugli had every right to demand access to water.

With Zeinab's encouragement, the women met together to consider their objectives, strengths and the approach they felt would be the most effective. They nominated the women who knew how to read and write, who together wrote their complaint to the government. Then some of the group suggested nominating five women to approach the governor. A small voice piped up, "What about Zeinab's experience?" *Mmm*, the women murmured. The women of the disappeared had been seen because they had been many. They should all go!

The group called Zeinab to their next meeting to let her know their plan. "We are going, all 35 of us!"

"Thirty-five is a big number! That is great," Zeinab responded. "But what about the other Women's Solidarity Fund Groups? Do they not also face this issue?"

"Why of course ..." Why stop at 35?

The group's leader made her way to the other groups in town, sure that they were equally frustrated by the search for water. Each of the six groups in Kadugli offered to send 10 members. Marching together, the 95 women arrived in a fluid rainbow of fabric, many carrying the empty clay pots and lemon-colored jerrycans their demands sought to fill. Together they amassed in front of the government buildings, mirroring the group in which Zeinab had stood over a decade earlier. Stating their demands, the women were received by the governor. Hearing their complaints of the abysmal state of the town's water pumps, the governor picked up the phone. Within five minutes the deputy head of the Department of Rural Water Resources was standing in his office. The demand was simple: Go with these women and inspect the state of these hand-pumps. In one day, the deputy was to report on the status of the problem and how he would fix it.

Bustling around like a team of prospectors searching for gold, the deputy barked orders at his engineer, surveyors and staff as they systematically confirmed what the women had told them. Eight pumps were broken. By the end of the day they knew which could be repaired and which could not. By the end of the week they had sourced three new water points to be drilled. By the end of the fortnight the five salvageable pumps had been repaired. By the end of the month the flow of dusty water jugs along the Kadugli-Kulba road had ceased. Wet, slippery children played in puddles at the pumps as the women celebrated their success. Like a spilled drop soaking into the earth, their individual voices would have been lost. But together they ran like a stream, molding the land.

### *The Greedy Husband*

Another lesson came from the village of Keiga. In the Women's Solidarity Fund Group there were two women married to the same man. When the chance came for the first wife to host the meeting, she and her co-wife readied their home for the exuberant crowd of women. After much preparation and hard work, the meeting's success was evident in the compliments from their guests and the weekly contributions of soap and sugar piled high in the center of their tucul.

As the meeting drew to a close, the secretary reached into the brightly patterned cloth bag, blindly choosing the next week's host. Laughter erupted into the evening air as the name of the host's co-wife was read. The group members congratulated them as the co-wives rejoiced.

At the following meeting the women returned, carrying that week's contribution of an ounce of sugar and 100 dinar. Jokes about their return to the same spot as last week colored the meeting as the co-wives grinned, discreetly eyeing the 95 percent of the group's contribution they would be keeping.

When their husband returned that evening from the sun-baked fields, his wives ran to meet him. "Look what our sisters have brought us!" Their husband's jaw gaped as he stared at the matching pyramids of sugar and soap, surrounded by a glinting moat of coins. Appraising their lucrative haul, suddenly he announced that they were to leave. As the sun peaked over the mountains the next morning, he took his wives and children and relocated his family to their fields. There, they lived in the small hut they used when harvesting their crops. Hidden away in the valley the family celebrated their Shangri-La in an effusive lather of soap bubbles, clean clothes, long showers, sugary tea and coffee.

Back in Keiga, the WSFG waited for the women's return. Their absence at the next meeting was noted, and the following meeting as well. Perhaps one of them had fallen sick? But if she was sick, the women must be informed; they would be eager to pay her a visit and see if there was any way they could help. Yet, as the weeks turned to months, the women's spots remained empty, their voices absent and their weekly contributions to the host and communal pot unpaid.

"What can we do about these women?" the members asked. They had heard a rumor that the women's husband had taken his wives to their garden, but their plot was not far. The women could still come to the meetings. In search of an explanation, the group elected two women to pay the wives a visit.

The group's scouts found the well-washed, clean-dressed wives tilling the sun-baked earth. As their sisters from the WSFG approached, the women tried to mask their startled expressions, fumbling with excuses for their lengthy absence. "Sisters! Please excuse us! We have been very busy in our garden. Our husband has refused to allow us to come to the meetings."

Their visitors nodded with skeptically raised eyebrows. "And what about the things that you took that are not yours?" Sheepish expressions passed between the wives.

"The provisions were not all for you, only a portion. The rest must be returned at the meetings," they reminded them. "You are now 20 weeks overdue in your contributions. Either you



come to the meeting and pay back what you owe or you come to explain the reason for your delay. You have two weeks.” Leaving them with this olive branch, the women returned to Keiga.

When their husband returned the women reported the visit, feeling guilty for the strain their actions had caused. But their husband gave a confident huff. “No one leaves here until our planting is done.”

“But can we at least send the remaining sugar and soap to the group?” his second wife asked.

“No.” He had no intention of repaying the women’s goods.

As the heat grew, ready to break with the coming rains, the WSFG sent a second delegation to the women’s fields. Two more weeks had passed with no sign of the wives. Again, the women were told of the man’s refusal to allow his wives to attend or repay the goods. So this time they extended the invitation to him. “Please, ask your husband to come to our meeting next week so that we can discuss this issue.”

But the man did not deign to attend the meeting or send his wives to explain. Exasperated, the group considered their options. They decided it was time to enlist the authority of the tribal chief. The women sent a delegation to the chief, and under the shade of his arborous court they explained the actions of the man and his two wives. The chief called the man from his fields. His age-etched brow furrowed deeply, “What say you to these allegations?” The man heard the tone of condemnation and realized any efforts to escape justice would be wasted. He apologized with a hung head and promised to repay the women within the fortnight.

*Stubbornness must run in the valley’s stream*, the women muttered as another month passed without sign of their debtor. A second trip to the chief and a second summons to the man provided them with a guarantee of the exact date their resources would be repaid. They were no longer surprised when the day passed without his arrival.

Marching together to his home, the women demanded to know his intentions. Was he going to pay them back or not? Their partnership had been with his wives; they were the ones who had signed the contract and agreed on the rules to join the group. This man was a stranger to them and void of any commitment to benefit the women. They walked through the golden fields away from his farm that evening, the new date he had given them sounding as hollow as the wind through the grasses.

They waited out of courtesy for another two weeks to pass before approaching the village’s traditional court. The head of the court sat patiently while the women listed the long history of their attempts to have their goods returned. Then he summoned the husband. “You know these women are serious. It has been nearly seven months; they are not going to forget this claim. I suggest that you return to them and solve this problem, because if they come back to me, I will make a ruling that will not be good for you. So, when will you pay them back?” Again, the man gave a date. Again, he ignored his promise.

The women of the WSFG considered their next action. They could return to the traditional court or to the tribal chief. But they had a better idea; they were tired of asking other people to solve their problem.

As the morning sun rose above the tamarind canopy, five women seated themselves firmly upon the worn boards of a donkey cart, giggling and laughing as they arranged their skirts so they wouldn't lose anyone on the first bump. The donkey's master stood beside the beast's head until the women were seated. When the women gave the word, his switch gave a *thwack* against the smooth tan rump, lurching the dozy animal into motion. They were off! Over the winding dirt roads into the valley the women chatted and strategized the execution of their plan.

As the sun arced upwards toward its midday roost, the man's huts loomed into view, his children playing outside. As the cart approached, the wives came out to greet them like old friends. But the women stood aloof; it was clear they had not come for a social visit. The wives glanced nervously at one another before the first wife invited them to sit under the shade of their mango tree.

The eldest woman of the group sat in the middle, ruffling her skirts around her ample rear like a mother hen settling herself into the earth. "So, what is the problem? We have been waiting for you to return what you owe. Your husband promises to bring the things and bring the things, yet he never comes. You were part of our group, our sisters. Please explain what has happened."

The wives shifted as if their seats had found hot coals rather than cool earth on which to rest. "You see, our husband refused to allow us to come ..." the first wife's voice trailed off pleadingly.

"So what is he thinking? Is keeping the things his idea? Does he think our group has no purpose? That women meet for nothing? What does he say?"

The second wife fumbled with an answer that wound around the truth. The first wife tried to offer a logical response and maintain her dignity, but like opposing magnets they refused to go together.

After a brief continuation of questions and the wives' untruthful answers, the gray-haired mother hen rose from her roost, signaling to the other women that the conversation was over. "We understand if you do not want to tell us the truth. After these many months, we have made our decision."

In a line the women departed the shade of the tree and entered the thatched huts, the wives hurrying after them in disbelief. A minute later they returned, carrying the family's mattresses past the jaw-gaping women and their wide-eyed children to the donkey cart. Piling them in a layer of cushion over the cart's flatbed, two of the women climbed on. The other two walked beside the cart as it began the uphill climb back to Keiga. They would take turns reclining on their ransom as they made their way home.

As the afternoon heat radiated from the earth, the man returned home. He had been productive at the market, selling nearly all of their freshly harvested produce. He was so buoyed by

the coins jingling in his pocket that he failed to notice his wives' nervous agitation. They plied him with compliments and cool water as they offered him a comfortable stool set under their mango's broad shade.

Sitting down, he broke their steady stream of distraction. "Why haven't you put the bed outside? I am tired and want to take my afternoon rest!" The wives looked anxiously at one another. "What is wrong? Where is my bed?" he demanded. The women avoided his eyes, neither one wanting to be the bearer of the news. Watching the tension grow between his parents, the man's son piped up, "*Bapi*, there were some women who came here and they took all the beds."

"What? Is what you are saying true?" the man's voice rose.

"Yes, Baba," the son announced eagerly.

"Where did those women come from?"

"From that village, Keiga," the son announced, proud he possessed such valuable information.

Turning his seething gaze on his wives, the man demanded their confirmation. They nodded solemnly.

"Why? Why did those women come and take our beds? Who gave them the right to take these beds?"

He was working himself up to a royal indignation. His first wife tried reason. "They came here so many times. We have gone back and forth with them trying to discuss this issue, but you did not respond. So we couldn't prevent them here."

"Why not? You were two women here, you could have stopped them!"

"No, we could not." His wife's tone conveyed that their reservations had been ethical, not physical.

Their support of the women did nothing to soothe their husband's injured pride. After taking a short rest, he marched angrily toward Keiga, stick in hand.

Approaching the Social Development Center, the man brought his stick against the door in three firm raps. A hush fell inside the meeting. The women had been waiting for their visitor. The group's stout leader walked to the door to meet the irate figure pacing outside. "Welcome!" She smiled as she went outside to greet him.

"Zahara!" he huffed. "You are the woman who wants to play with men? Who gave you the right to go and take our property?"

The rest of the group was filing out of the building quickly, standing behind their leader. Zahara waited patiently, listening to the man rant. Finally, he concluded, “I want my beds back now!”

“No.” Zahara spoke calmly but firmly. “We can give you your beds, but not until you repay our things.”

Seeing the man’s rage focused on their leader, the women quickly defended her. “We are the ones who made that decision, not Zahara! How dare you talk to her that way! We are the ones, all 33 of us! If you want to talk, you can talk to *all* of us!”

The man paled slightly in front of the group. Yelling his indignation, he turned on his heel, marching off to find the tribal chief. He needed the support of a man against these crazy women. Approaching the chief, the man launched into the story of this group of disrespectful women – women who did not know their place. “They want to play with us. Now they seem to think they can make decisions over us!”

Seething, the man paced the floor until finally the chief spoke. “You remember I called you here one day? Do you remember I talked to you about this case? I gave you recommendations then and you refused to follow them. Then, the case went to the traditional court. Again, you were given a chance to make this right. Again, you willfully ignored that opportunity. So, there is nothing we can do for you now. This is your problem. You must go solve it with these women. I will have nothing to do with you.” With that, the man was dismissed from the chief’s presence.

In a plume of kicked-up dust, he stomped back to the women’s group. Their meeting was nearing its conclusion.

“You women!” he growled to no one in particular.

Zahara could guess the chief had not given him what he wanted or he would be righteous rather than angry. She coaxed him now, “Sir, it is better just to give us back our things quietly. We have no use for your beds. However, if you do not return our things now the next course of action you will dislike much more than this. We have made our decision, now what is yours?”

The man paced. He was no longer able to save face and the time had come for him to capitulate. He did so excruciatingly. “How much?” he barked.

Zahara went inside with the group’s secretary and treasurer to account for the wives’ debt. How many bars of soap did they owe after their months of absence? How many ounces of sugar? How many dinars? They checked and re-checked the amount before coming back outside. They told the man the amount; he could pay in sugar or soap or with the full monetary value. He checked their math and reluctantly agreed. Counting out a pile of wrinkled notes and seven dull coins, the man finally settled his debt.

“Thank you,” Zahara said with the smile of a businesswoman. “Your beds are in the storehouse.”

Zahara gestured to the building, where she noticed some women had generously brought out the man's mattresses and leaned them against the wall.

"Right," the man began matter-of-factly. "Now, which of you can help return these mattresses to my house?"

"Oh, no," Zahara smiled. "We are much too busy! Our meeting is finished and we are going home to our families now." With that she turned on her heel, picturing the jaw that had fallen open behind her.

### *Across the Divide*

Zeinab watched with hope as nine days into 2005, the heavily lauded Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed between the Sudanese government and the SPLA/M. Finally, a lasting respite from the violence that had wracked her weary mountains seemed to have dawned. Cautiously, the taut postures of a people at war began to relax, slightly.

Their vision, however, took longer to adjust. Years of hardened judgments veiled their perspective on their neighbors, the other clans – the deeply etched frontlines as visible as scars across the mountains. Their eyes still scanned for the gun, missing any warmth in a stranger's smile.

Women's Solidarity Fund Groups had sprouted throughout the mountains of Zeinab's conflict-fractured state. Watching the women banding together around her, Zeinab began to dream of these women crossing the divisions between SPLA/M and government-controlled areas to know one another. Each village had suffered. Each community had been torn by the political power brokers. Each family had been afflicted by the pain of two decades of conflict. There could not be lasting peace if they ignored the ache of these old wounds. What would it take for her people to heal?

Speaking with the board members of Ruya, Zeinab began to brainstorm a meeting of groups from across the conflict's divide. Zeinab wanted them not only to meet one another, but also to see where each was from. Dusty Nuba footprints had traversed these mountains for centuries, but with the outbreak of war, villagers had hidden in their homes. For many, the valleys below their mountains had loomed like chasms; for two decades these women had remained marooned on their scraggy hilltops.



The February heat radiated up from the earth and down from the sky as 10 women assembled in the mottled shade of the haraz tree. Zeinab bustled out of the Kulba Social Development Center, carrying her papers and a small suitcase over her shoulder. Glancing at the distances the women had created between the groups from each village, she said a silent prayer, "Inshallah, this trip will bridge these sad divides."

The villages for the pilot exchange trip had been chosen carefully. Leaders from the WSFG of Keiga and Kulba would meet in Kulba before traveling south to Abu Hashim. There, they would

be hosted for a day and a half with the WSFG of Abu Hashim before picking up its leaders and returning to Kulba. The sequence would be repeated in Kulba, then Keiga. Finally, they would all return to Kadugli for a two-day workshop to evaluate the exchange.

The Land Cruiser was her first unifier. “Come on, let us go. We have three hours to drive to reach Abu Hashim,” Zeinab announced encouragingly. The women rose from their shady perches to approach the vehicle. Some moved eagerly to the front of the crowd, opting to stake their claim on the best seats, while others held back hoping to sit closer to the doors. The Land Cruiser accepted the squished bodies and luggage easily, holding double the official capacity given to other countries where cars were as numerous as people. As the women’s bodies nestled close to their neighbors, halting, shallow conversations began.

The worn dirt tracks narrowed as the Land Cruiser wound through the mountains to the south. Their final turn was made slowly; the 4x4’s wheels crunched the dry grass, straddling the footpath that led them to the village. The community of Abu Hashim had experienced multiple displacements during the course of the war. Even now, Zeinab was surprised to find the villagers had recently begun relocating from a temporary camp at the foot of the mountain to their original homes at the top.

The villagers heard the foreign rumble of a combustion engine approaching and poked their heads out of their thatched huts with wary curiosity. The WSFG assembled, its members standing in nervous agitation to welcome their guests. Everything was prepared. Water had been collected over the past two days, ready for bathing, drinking and making tea and coffee. The spicy aroma of dinner for all the members and their guests wafted from the pots simmering on charcoal stoves. Beds had been prepared in the chief’s compound, furnished with pillows and bed sheets brought from the women’s homes.

As the vehicle came to a stop and the women disembarked, the leaders of Abu Hashim’s WSFG came forward to greet them. Zeinab went ahead to make the introductions and was immediately enveloped by the leaders’ arms. “Sister Zeinab! Welcome! It has been a long time! How are you? How is home?” The greetings continued from Zeinab to the other leaders, then to the women gathered. Finally, the women were led to the tribal chief’s home. The hosting had begun.

Over the fragrant dishes prepared by the women of Abu Hashim, the group and their guests began to relax. As their mouths savored the culinary traditions of this remote village, their tongues began to share the stories of their regions. The visitors learned the history of multiple displacements the women of Abu Hashim had suffered. They shared the bitter memory of their village being destroyed by government attacks on SPLA/M rebels and how in the smoke-choked debris they had fled, running north as far as Gadarif State. Day and night their feet plodded on, farther and farther away from home; far enough to escape the fighting. The women across from them winced at the familiar stories of how, while they felt forced to flee, their children chose to stay, joining the SPLA/M. Meanwhile, their neighbors’ children joined the government’s fighters. Villages of families and friends had been transformed into enemies. When the government seized their village, pressuring them to return, they were directed to live beyond its parameters. Making a camp to “protect” them in the valley, the government soldiers surrounded the crowded huts, while the villagers looked longingly at their destroyed homes on the mountainside. It had taken seven long years for the cease-fire and peace agreement to allow them to move 200 meters up their hillside.

As the meal drew to an end, some of the women from Abu Hashim were huddled in a private conversation. Then one of them spoke up. “Zeinab, some of us have decided our sisters from Keiga and Kulba cannot sleep at the sheik’s compound when we have our homes here for them. We would like to host them tonight.”

The leaders from Keiga and Kulba looked to Zeinab while the women from Abu Hashim were already jostling to the sides of their guests. One had her hand on a woman from Kulba. Another grabbed the shoulder of a woman from Keiga, “Please, come with me!” Jovially, two women came to grab Zeinab. Laughing, Zeinab surrendered, “We are in the hands of the women of Abu Hashim! We are their guests and how they host us is up to them!”

Throughout the night, discussions continued under the thatched roofs of Abu Hashim’s *tuculs*. As the morning sun crested the mountain’s undulous horizon, the women gathered for breakfast. Zeinab listened to the animated chatter revealing the new friendships bonding them.

After breakfast, the visitors were led to the old school grounds. Amidst the rubble of the bombed buildings, basic *rakubas* had been assembled. Outside, children took lessons under the shade of the neem trees, waiting for the day when a new school would be constructed. As the women entered the largest *rakuba*, they were greeted by a gathering of villagers in addition to the women in the WSFG. The whole village wanted to know the issues these women would be discussing.

The meeting was one of the most crucial parts of Zeinab’s plan. Together they listened to the host group share their experiences of the conflict. When it was time for the guests to respond, the community was able to learn how similar the experiences of other villages had been throughout the region; how the violence had affected villages they had only heard of with painful similarity; how the lines between SPLA/M-controlled areas and government areas were blurred, dividing Nuba communities on both sides in the same way Abu Hashim had been divided. Feelings of animosity and apprehension faded as the villagers heard their own words elicited from the mouths of strangers.

The meeting ran through the allotted time, into the late afternoon without anyone glancing at a clock. The lunch was long ready when the songs and dances of welcome finally concluded and the visitors were fed like family.

Finally, Zeinab reminded the women that they still had a long journey ahead of them that day. When the leaders from Abu Hashim returned from fetching their bags, they brought with them a parade of well-wishers. The entire community radiated pride that they had a delegation traveling to Kadugli. For the people of Abu Hashim, the capital of the province was held in the same reverence as Khartoum.

Sardined into the Land Cruiser with their luggage roped to the roof, the women bumped along the road to Kadugli with their new passengers. As they approached Kulba in the setting dusk, the Social Development Center came into view, lit like a lantern. Outside, three dozen women swayed in the rising moonlight, singing songs of welcome into the night.

The women disembarked the vehicle into a crowd of whooping cheers and celebration. The strangers were greeted and the leaders from Kulba were welcomed home. Then they were hustled into the building to drop their things. The main hall had been transformed into a makeshift dormitory, beds lining the walls in a rainbow of hues. “Pick the one you like!” the Kulba leaders offered.

As soon as they left their bags on their chosen bed, the women were invited next door for dinner. Gasps escaped the guests’ lips at the sight of walls draped in streamers and a television broadcasting a local news station in the corner. Tables arrayed with steaming dishes filled the hall. It seemed the women of Kulba were determined to impress their new friends from Abu Hashim and Keiga with the sparkle of the provincial capital. The hosts beamed as their visitors acclaimed the lavish welcome.

The newcomers passed along the table of platters, their appetites whetting with each new offering, in particular an especially fragrant dish of marinated steaks. As they sampled the tender food, they enquired, “What meat is this you have cooked for us?” Their hosts laughed, “It is not meat! That is our local specialty, marinated eggplant!”

After the guests, satiated, pushed away from the table, they were offered showers and then the pungent pastes and local perfumes used to adorn Kulba brides before marriage. Like schoolgirls, the women from Kulba, Abu Hashim and Keiga sat together, giggling, adorning one another’s skin with the perfume of *dilka*, *humra* and *karkar*. Zeinab returned to the dormitory before heading home, thinking she would say a final goodnight to her guests. Instead, she found the room full, clusters of women sitting together on beds, sharing their stories with laughter and pain. “Go home, it is late! We have our big meeting in the morning!” Zeinab chided. But her conviction was hollow, her heart swelling to see her highest hopes being realized before her eyes.

And so the meetings continued. The next morning the WSFGs from Kulba gathered under the umbrella shade of a mango’s broad branches. Half the village came, along with a broadcasting team from the state media that Zeinab had invited. The media were so enthralled with this self-organized meeting of women from both sides of the conflict that they asked to accompany the team on to Keiga.

The group in Keiga again strove to impress their visitors, good-heartedly trying to out-do the displays of hospitality that had come before. In all the villages, the presence of Zeinab’s mirror was felt.

Everywhere the discussion was the same, and everywhere it was different. In each village the women told of challenges they were facing. Issues that were felt in one community echoed through the mountains into the mouths of women from the other side of the conflict. Perceptions of how their enemy had fared during the violence crumbled like stale bread. Everyone had suffered. Everyone had made difficult choices. It was the nature of that suffering which was often unique. With each story, the women’s friendship grew.

After Keiga, the dozen leaders traveled with Zeinab in a cramped, melodic, jovial journey back to Kadugli. There, they held a two-day follow-up workshop to evaluate the inaugural exchange visit. The feedback was resoundingly positive. The women had watched their own transformation



from the cold apprehension with which they approached each other in Abu Hashim, to the sisterly affection that had developed over their four-day journey. The ladies from Abu Hashim commented eagerly that they had passed to Kadugli often, but they never lingered long there, knowing no one. Now they had friends. On their next journey to the capital, they would try to spend an extra day or two to stay with their sisters in Kulba. The women from Kulba chimed in that they had heard of places like Keiga and Abu Hashim, but they had known nothing of the place or their people until this visit.

Together, the leaders discussed how to organize women around the issues they heard during the exchange. They were convinced that the CPA was the political actor's commitment to peace, but that it was their responsibility to create the trust that would foment real peace in their communities. They planned for ongoing communication, programs and exchanges between the three villages. They would go back to their groups and discuss the issues and see how their groups could support the women from their sister groups.

The most fervent recommendation of the groups, however, was that an annual exchange visit must continue. Throughout the year, Zeinab worked to garner support for the exchange, pushing the sites she wished to visit farther beyond the cease-fire lines.



As the Nuba heat rose to 100 degrees the following February, Zeinab found herself scurrying around the Kulba Social Development Center, grabbing the last of her documents before jumping in the front seat of her already-running Land Cruiser. Under the haraz's rustling branches, 32 women chatted excitedly, eager to embark on a two-week journey to the villages of Dilling, Lagawa, Kowda and Kadugli.

The following year it was 60 women. The Land Cruiser was upgraded to two mini-buses; the following year to three. The trip expanded to 18 villages. The buses lumbered under tightly strapped luggage and bleating goats roped to the roof, as the swaying caravan snaked through the desolate miles between human habitations – the sound of raucous song trailing out their windows.

## **A CONVERSATION WITH ZEINAB MOHAMED BLANDIA**

*The following is an edited transcript of an interview conducted by Jennifer Freeman during a public event on Oct. 22, 2009, in the Peace & Justice Theatre of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice (IPJ). The transcript includes questions from the audience.*

**Q: When did you first realize you were going to be a leader in your community?**

A: I was born in the Nuba Mountains in central Sudan. My grandmother usually called me *Kosa Maadeb*. In the Nuba culture, Kosa is the third-born. *Maadeb* means “great woman.” She sometimes prepared food and called me to eat with her, or she would bring the food to me. And she would tell me the story of the great woman who ruled the Kadugli tribe. She is called Pato.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, my mom also cared for me a lot. She taught me and my sister that you have to save the coin of a white day for the black day, and she meant money or anything that you can preserve for the difficult day. I took this seriously and put it to use in my life. I practice it in my home. When my family had more stock at home – like sugar, soap or flour – I would take some of this stock and hide it. So when they didn’t have food, I went to my secret store and brought food from that store so they will be surprised: “From where did you get this food? Did you ask your neighbor?” I said, “No, I get it from our home.” So my mom wanted to know where I have hidden this food, and she admired my idea. She said to my father, “You see? Zeinab has a good idea. I think this girl will have a bright future, so encourage her.”

My mother encouraged me in education, so I finished my secondary school and I passed the examination and was supposed to join the university, but unfortunately I didn’t join because my father prevented me from going. According to tradition, a girl cannot go away from the family and travel far from the village to get an education. I was really upset about that prevention.

But I still worked with my colleagues in the village. We organized one day a month that we called cleaning day. We went around the homes and we cleaned the water pots, we cleaned all of the surrounding area. So I took the lead to make sure our village was clean. And when something happened in the village, my colleagues would call me, “Zeinab, come and lead this. Zeinab, come and take that.” They expected me to take that lead, and my mom and my grandmother did too. They really gave me that sense that you have to do something and you will be a leader in the future. So I kept that in my mind. How can I be leader? Can I be a leader like my grandmother? Like Pato? So that was my dream – to be a leader.

**Q: Can you tell us about your Bridging Women exchange program?**

A: After two years of forming the Women’s Solidarity Fund Groups we had more leaders.<sup>19</sup> The leaders were taking the role of changing the community. So we initiated another idea: How can we bring these leaders from different places to discuss the issues? We have some groups in Lagawa and Dilling and Kadugli and Rashad.

**Q: Those groups are in the areas that were the most conflict-affected, that had the most government or SPLA/M soldiers around them.**

A: There is a group in the SPLA/M area where there is total mistrust between those from the SPLA/M and those in the government side. Total mistrust. Our objective was to build that trust between women, to bring women from the SPLA/M side to meet with women from the government side, and then they could go along together to challenge the situation. Regardless of whether they are from the government or the SPLA/M, we have to think as women. We are the ones facing the problems. So I brought the idea of building a bridge so women from SPLA/M can cross and come to the women from the government side and vice versa.

We succeeded to do that and we now have an annual exchange visit where this group of leaders comes together for two weeks, moving from village to village talking to the community about the situation. We have women who are taking the lead to build peace and trust, who are saying, “Can you join us? We are the one who are suffering. All the communities are suffering.” So over the course of two weeks they go to see what the other groups are doing; are they effective in their meetings or is there some obstacles facing them? After this exchange visit they come for a four-day workshop to evaluate what they did and to make a strategic plan for the next year. So many people are interested in this program. Even the men are interested in joining the Bridging Women program and conducting exchange visits.

There is one funny story. In Lagawa women were using the mountain as a protective area. When we went there, the women were surprised and didn’t believe there were people who lived in the area of the plains, without mountains. And those from the area of the plains, when they saw the big mountains they were surprised and didn’t believe there were people who lived on the top of the mountain! So, you see how they exchange their knowledge. Since they are in one region they don’t know the diversity of climate or of views – so it is one way to learn, to discover, to participate, to mobilize others to learn from one another. So the women go and discover that other women are doing a very good job. In their farms, they use the resources that are available. So when they all came for the evaluation, some of them decided to build a social center like those did in Kulba. Some of them said they wanted to make use of hand-pumps for water to grow vegetables, because they saw it in the other village and it was their need too. It was an exchange of knowledge and learning. So we succeeded in bridging women from the SPLA/M and the government side.

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*“Since they are in one region they don’t know the diversity of climate or of views – so it is one way to learn, to discover, to participate, to mobilize others to learn from one another.”*

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**Q: You were displaced for a number of years. What is the societal change that comes from so much displacement in a country? In traditional villages it might have been difficult for women to take leadership roles, but when they moved to Khartoum or to displacement camps and families were separated, did it offer more opportunity for women to take a leadership position?**

A: Yes. Women entered the displaced camps and had to learn how to cope with this situation of the cities and shanty areas – and it was really a new situation for them. But when they were presented with challenges and then found an initiative or an idea for them to change their situation, they responded positively to take that lead. And when there was any training or meeting, they would come and were keen to have that opportunity to be a leader in tackling some issue, whether within their tribe or within their area where they were living. Because it was a displaced area – it is not my village and it is not your village, it was a place that accommodated all of us – we have to respect each other and live in peace. And we carried that peace through the women leaders to the community.

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*“Because it was a displaced area – it is not my village and it is not your village, it was a place that accommodated all of us – we have to respect each other and live in peace. And we carried that peace through the women leaders to the community.”*

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**Q: Can you tell us about the solar engineering project you will be going back to?**

A: We sent four women from the Nuba Mountains to India and they studied solar engineering for six months. Now they are back from India and they start to identify the needs in the community. When they electrify their villages they will have more time and opportunity to do many things because it is light. This was a way to coordinate the work of women internationally.

**Q: While the war in the south ended officially in 2005 with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), in the past few months it has been reported that there have been more people killed in tribal clashes in southern Sudan than in Darfur. As part of the peace agreement, the first elections in two decades are planned to be held in 2010. Recently up to 20 political parties threatened to boycott the elections due to the controversy over the national census. What are your fears and hopes for sustainable peace in Sudan?**

A: You know, the tribal conflict in Sudan was there before the signing of the agreement, and after the signing of the agreement the tribal conflict is still there. Tribal conflict often happens between the nomads and the farmers over resources. The nomads need their animals to graze, and the farmers are cultivating their lands. This is the nature of the conflict between the tribes. But in this kind of conflict, usually the community has its indigenous way to solve the problem. When the problem happens, they go and see the adversaries and discuss the issue. Then they come with an agreement and sign that agreement to live peacefully.

But during this war in Sudan many things changed because the government militarized the community leaders. In the past, the community leaders would play the role of negotiating the needs of the nomads and the farmers. For a long time they were living in peace. But then there was interference with the government supporting one group against another group. The government was mainly supporting the Baggara to kill the Nuba, and they empower the Baggara more than the Nuba.

Now there is this peace agreement that has been signed, this big document of peace – 250 pages. Yet most of the community is illiterate. They don't know what the document means to them. Yes, they are happy for the signing of the agreement. But how do we implement what is written in these documents? This is one of the challenges.

The other challenge is that now the government is happy that there is no more war against it, but it is again intervening to support some tribes against other tribes. The conflict between tribes has become worse because there are some that have received more power to use against the other. And this is affecting the life of many people. We are neighbors and we are in conflict; that means this area will not accommodate all of us. Everyone wants to run from there because of insecurity. People are running from their area because of this conflict and they become displaced again. This is another displacement, after the war. It is the responsibility of the tribal chiefs to solve that problem, but unfortunately, they have been militarized; they have been supported by the government to do another job. And this is one of our fears, that the tribal conflicts will become big. This will be another war, which is very bad for a community that already has the experience of war.

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*“...the government ...is again intervening to support some tribes against other tribes. The conflict between tribes has become worse because there are some that have received more power to use against the other.”*

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The election is coming even though it is not stable in Sudan. There is still the part of Sudan, Darfur, with many challenges also, and these tribal conflicts are going on. So the election is coming and they are expecting violence because a lot of people did not participate in the census. How will the election take place? We are expecting election violence.

But from our side, as women, still we are doing our best. Our plan is since we saw the success of women doing their work, we want to mobilize more women, to train more women, to have more leaders to stand up and say, “No, we don't want war. We want peace.” And they have to take that lead. It was the men who failed to fulfill that need of peace. Now women are the ones who will take the lead. We need to build the capacity of women to take that initiative of taking the message of the peace and trust-building to work with others, not only in the region but outside our region, broader, so as to make sure we are taking care of the peace.

**Q: What are you taking back with you as you leave San Diego?**

A: I have been here for one month and two weeks, and two weeks remain. There are many ideas that I am taking from here, and there are many women waiting for me. One idea is that when I go home I have to work not only with women, but also with different community groups. For instance, students – we didn't consider students, but they are the empowered people.

And the elders. That is the best thing I learned from here. This is a lesson: Here, those who are the elders still have their role to play in the community. And this is one of the experiences, that when we

went to different groups we found many ladies who are retired from their jobs, but they don't keep themselves at home and say, "Now we are old and we have to stay at home." Still they are doing their job. Our elders, when they reach 65 or more than 70, they stay at home and they depend on their children. But you see they still have energy, so how do we mobilize them so they can help themselves and the community to benefit from their knowledge – because they have great knowledge, accumulated knowledge. How can we make use of that knowledge?

**Q: What do you need most to help with your work? How can we in San Diego help with your work?**

A: Thank you very much for that question. Really, I appreciate coming here for two months to share my story, and now people start to understand what I am saying and the difficulties that women are facing. To reply to your question, I think we need networking. We already have that networking at the grassroots level, but still we need networking beyond our community. If there is not any networking, there is no connection. And we have to advocate. We need more help in advocacy at the grassroots level, the regional level and the global level. So, this is one.

The other is that women don't have the opportunity to have economic improvement. If we want women to participate fully in changing the situation, they have to be economically empowered because to involve them economically they will have many opportunities to do something visible. Right now, they are still looking how to feed their children, how to work. Many don't have the opportunity to have jobs because some of them are illiterate – so education is one of the more important factors for the empowerment of women. Education and economic empowerment will go together to build the capacity of women.

So this is what we need, and we really want to thank women in San Diego a lot because since we are here they have really given us consideration. They meet with us, they talk with us, they take us to different places. And we now have good relations with the women here. We need this friendship to reflect on our work, on our effort, so as to make sure we have a connection with women in San Diego.

**Q: As you may know there are approximately 40,000 Sudanese in San Diego County. My question has to do with you and the community and those of us who work with the Sudanese. How can we learn from them and network? How can we continue to keep in touch with you so there is an exchange of ideas and support?**

A: Thank you very much for your question, because this has been one of my worries since the start. The Sudanese women are displaced in many countries – in the United States, some of them are in the United Kingdom, some in Holland, some of them in African countries. There are so many Sudanese in different countries. But for those who are here in San Diego, this is our opportunity to visit them, to talk to them, to think together, what can we do? I had a meeting a few days ago with refugee women who are in San Diego and it was really productive. The outcome of the meeting was for us to start to have a connection between women in the diaspora and women in Sudan. There is opportunity for you here in the United States; there is opportunity because the people are ready to give their hands. So make use of that opportunity. I expect the Sudanese women who were in that meeting will keep working on that issue to make sure we work together for women here and their mothers and sisters in Sudan. Thank you.

**BEST PRACTICES IN GRASSROOTS PEACEBUILDING**

<b>STRATEGY</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION OF IMPLEMENTATION</b>	<b>EXAMPLE</b>
<b>Integrating theoretical frameworks in grassroots peacebuilding</b>	Before applying a theoretical framework to a community intervention, check the theories and match them with the indigenous knowledge that exists. Develop or choose an approach that is relevant to the local culture. Use the local culture as a resource to build the program.	Zeinab spent 20 years studying community, rural and economic development theories. She integrated these theories with the existing situation in her community, then developed an approach that would benefit both the women and the community's development.
<b>Selection of community entry points</b>	In each village, talk to women of various age groups in a general meeting. Elect women with leadership characteristics, such as those who are well-educated and outspoken on issues affecting the community. Work with them as an entry point to the community.	Zeinab spent one year meeting informally with women of different ages to identify the key entry points to a community.
<b>Community Intervention Approach</b>	Community interventions should address: 1) cultural diversity; 2) main community challenges; 3) personal and group emotional development (solidarity and cooperation); 4) economic empowerment of the community; 5) women's economic empowerment and participation; and 6) personal and group development – i.e., trust and peacebuilding, trauma healing and reconciliation are strong foundations for bridging a sustainable peace and security.	
<b>Organizing Women</b>	Organize women in groups in residential areas and villages and identify leaders for each group. Conduct focus group discussions with women leaders to identify community challenges, challenges for women and the needs of the community. Train them and work with them as change agents in their communities and region.	Women's Solidarity Fund Groups. Each group has a leader, secretary and treasurer elected by the group of 30 to 45 women.

STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION OF IMPLEMENTATION	EXAMPLE
<b>Women’s Solidarity Fund Groups</b>	Each group consists of between 30 and 45 women. Each group has a facilitator, chief, secretary, treasurer and solidarity fund secretary to manage the group meetings and resources, train members of the group and facilitate dialogue with other fund groups around common issues.	Each group meets once a week to discuss locally relevant issues. Over a period of nine months, groups cover nine set topics in the order they choose. Each member makes a weekly contribution of a certain resource (e.g., money, soap or sugar) that the group has agreed upon. A draw is held to select the next host of the weekly meeting. Meetings are held in the group members’ houses; hosts are able to keep 95 percent of the weekly contribution. The remaining 5 percent is put aside for group savings.
<b>“Tray of Peace”:</b> Communal meals hosted by one group as an avenue to learn about various cultures.	The group organizes monthly social events where food is prepared and served by one tribe on the “Tray of Peace.” Dishes are served to children, men and women from different tribes, in a public place. The food is used as a talking point to discuss cross-cultural understanding. The following month it is another tribe’s turn to host.	In Umbda, in the west of what is now Southern Kordofan state, the program was implemented with IDPs, including war-affected tribes and those displaced by famine.
<b>Trust-building Committees</b> to resolve local conflicts	Create small groups of three women and two men. These committees can be used to resolve conflicts within solidarity fund groups, at the village level or in nearby communities.	In Miri village, the trust-building committee was involved in solving disputes between neighbors.



STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION OF IMPLEMENTATION	EXAMPLE
<p><b>Bridging Women</b> from different communities through exchange visits</p>	<p>Involve women from different communities in exchange visits to other villages throughout the region. These exchanges create a space for women from across conflict lines to meet, think, see the areas from which the other women come, discover, interact with the communities, dialogue, decide, contribute and shape their future in the post-conflict context.</p>	<p>In 2005, 12 women participated in the first exchange visit between eight groups in three villages around Kadugli (Abu Hashim, Keiga and Kulba). Annual exchanges were held and expanded in 2006 and 2007.</p>

**FURTHER READING –**  
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**BIOGRAPHY OF A PEACE WRITER –  
JENNIFER FREEMAN**

Jennifer Freeman has a B.A. in Political Science, German and European Studies from the University of Victoria in Canada and an M.A. in Peace and Conflict Studies from the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland, where she studied on a Rotary International Ambassadorial Scholarship. Freeman has worked with various nongovernmental organizations in Ghana, the United Kingdom, Canada and in Ugandan refugee settlements on issues of women’s rights and peacebuilding through sexual and gender-based violence prevention and response, supporting women with HIV/AIDS and conducting psychosocial programs for war-affected youth. For her master’s thesis, Freeman conducted research in Kyaka II refugee settlement in Uganda on gendered security, for which she interviewed Congolese, Rwandan and Burundian refugees on their perspectives of human and traditional security threats in their countries of origin and since arriving in the “safety” of asylum. Freeman was a 2008 peace writer and wrote the story “Healing the Wounds of War: The Peacebuilding Work of Sylvie Maunga Mbanga of the Democratic Republic of the Congo” (available at [www.sandiego.edu/peacestudies/documents/ipj/Sylvie-Maunga-Mbanga-DRC2.pdf](http://www.sandiego.edu/peacestudies/documents/ipj/Sylvie-Maunga-Mbanga-DRC2.pdf)). She was also the event coordinator for the 2009 Women PeaceMakers arts festival, “Bearing Exquisite Witness.”



Photo credit: Patricia Rogers



## **JOAN B. KROC INSTITUTE FOR PEACE & JUSTICE**

The mission of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice (IPJ) is to foster peace, cultivate justice and create a safer world. Through education, research and peacemaking activities, the IPJ offers programs that advance scholarship and practice in conflict resolution and human rights. The institute, a unit of the University of San Diego's Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies, draws on Catholic social teaching that sees peace as inseparable from justice and acts to prevent and resolve conflicts that threaten local, national and international peace.

The IPJ was established in 2000 through a generous gift from the late Joan B. Kroc to the University of San Diego to create an institute for the study and practice of peace and justice. Programming began in early 2001 and the building was dedicated in December 2001 with a conference, "Peacemaking with Justice: Policy for the 21st Century."

The institute strives, in Joan B. Kroc's words, to not only talk about peace, but also make peace. In its peacebuilding initiatives, the IPJ works with local partners to help strengthen their efforts to consolidate peace with justice in the communities in which they live. In Nepal, for example, for nearly a decade the IPJ has been working with Nepali groups to support inclusiveness and dialogue in the transition from armed conflict and monarchy to peace and multiparty democracy. In its West African Human Rights Training Initiative, the institute partners with local human rights groups to strengthen their ability to pressure government for reform and accountability.

In addition to the Women PeaceMakers Program, the institute has several ongoing programs. The Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series is a forum for high-level national and international leaders and policymakers to share their knowledge and perspective on issues related to peace and justice.

WorldLink, a year-round educational program for middle school and high school students from San Diego and Baja California, connects youth to global affairs.

Community outreach includes speakers, films, art and opportunities for discussion between community members, academics and practitioners on issues of peace and social justice, as well as dialogue with national and international leaders in government, nongovernmental organizations and the military.

In addition to the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice, the Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies includes the Trans-Border Institute, which promotes border-related scholarship and an active role for the university in the cross-border community, and a master's program in Peace and Justice Studies to train future leaders in the field.

## **UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO**

Chartered in 1949, the University of San Diego (USD) is a Roman Catholic institution of higher learning located on 180 acres overlooking San Diego's Mission Bay. The University of San Diego is committed to promoting academic excellence, expanding liberal and professional knowledge, creating a diverse community and preparing leaders dedicated to ethical and compassionate service.

The university is steadfast in its dedication to the examination of the Catholic tradition as the basis of a continuing search for meaning in contemporary life. Global peace and development and the application of ethics and values are examined through campus centers and institutes such as the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice, the Values Institute, the Trans-Border Institute, the Center for Public Interest Law, the Institute for Law and Philosophy and the International Center for Character Education. Furthermore, through special campus events such as the Social Issues Conference, the James Bond Stockdale Leadership and Ethics Symposium and the Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series, we invite the community to join us in further exploration of these values.

The USD campus, considered one of the most architecturally unique in the nation, is known as Alcalá Park. Like the city of San Diego, the campus takes its name from San Diego de Alcalá, a Franciscan brother who served as the infirmarian at Alcalá de Henares, a monastery near Madrid, Spain. The Spanish Renaissance architecture that characterizes the five-century-old University of Alcalá serves as the inspiration for the buildings on the USD campus. The architecture was intended by the founders, Bishop Charles Francis Buddy and Mother Rosalie Hill, to enhance the search for truth through beauty and harmony. Recent additions, such as the state-of-the-art Donald P. Shiley Center for Science and Technology and the new School of Leadership and Education Sciences building carry on that tradition.

A member of the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa, USD is ranked among the nation's top 100 universities. The university offers its 7,500 undergraduate, graduate and law students rigorous academic programs in more than 60 fields of study through six academic divisions, including the College of Arts and Sciences and the schools of Business Administration, Leadership and Education Sciences, Law, and Nursing and Health Science. The Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies opened in Fall 2007.

**LIST OF ACRONYMS**

<b>CPA</b>	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
<b>GOS</b>	Government of Sudan
<b>ICC</b>	International Criminal Court
<b>IDP</b>	Internally Displaced People
<b>IPJ</b>	Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice
<b>NIF</b>	National Islamic Front
<b>PNC</b>	Popular National Congress
<b>SPLA/M</b>	Sudan People’s Liberation Army/Movement
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNAMID</b>	United Nations/African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur
<b>UNMIS</b>	United Nations Mission in Sudan
<b>US</b>	United States
<b>USD</b>	University of San Diego
<b>WSFG</b>	Women’s Solidarity Fund Groups

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this paragraph first appeared in the article “‘Women Cannot Cry Anymore’: Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict,” by Emiko Noma in *Critical Half*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007). Copyright 2007 Women for Women International.

<sup>2</sup> Muhammad Ahmed Al Mahdi was a Sudanese religious leader who proclaimed himself the Mahdi, or prophesized redeemer of Islam. He led united Arab tribes, including the Fur and Baggara, to overthrow the Egyptian and British occupying forces in 1881 and to establish an Islamic state. His army succeeded but he was killed. The British eventually defeated his army in the 1898 Battle of Omdurman.

<sup>3</sup> One example of local conflict resolution employed between the Nuba and Baggara was the “lending” of a Nuba youth to a nomadic family. The youth would work as a cattle hand for a set period of time, after which he would return to his family and the Baggara tribe would pay the family in cattle for their son’s service.

<sup>4</sup> The Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) later formed a political wing, the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM). It is referred to jointly as the SPLA/M.

<sup>5</sup> While there were strong religious tones to the North-South civil war, in the Nuba Mountains killing was targeted against the Nuba population as a whole, irrespective of religion.

<sup>6</sup> *Tucul* is a round mud hut with a dome-shaped thatched roof.

<sup>7</sup> *Khalwa*, Arabic for “solitude,” refers to the religious preschool attended by Muslim Nuba youth.

<sup>8</sup> *Rakuba* is a thatched enclosed veranda common on the stand-alone rooms of Nuba compounds.

<sup>9</sup> *Haraẓ* is the Arabic name for a tropical tree found in the Nuba Mountain region of Sudan. The tree is characterized by a massive trunk, similar in girth to the baobab. The tree has small leaves which drop in the rainy season. During the summer months the tree is leafy, and in the winter dry season its bark secretes water to nourish it.

<sup>10</sup> “Stone Soup” is a children’s fable that tells of a stranger to a village who promises to make a delicious soup for the inhabitants with nothing but a stone. The villagers make fun of him, but are soon tricked into offering a little of their own vegetables and meat to improve the soup. The resulting soup is a delicious dish, shared by everyone – all from a stone.

<sup>11</sup> *Tobe* is the local word to refer to the headscarf worn by Sudanese Muslim women.

<sup>12</sup> *Kisra* is a traditional Nuba dish of steamed sorghum.

<sup>13</sup> *Alhamdulillah* is an Arabic saying meaning “Praise be to God,” or in more casual usage, “Thank God!”

<sup>14</sup> *Inshallah* is an Arabic saying meaning “God willing.”

<sup>15</sup> *Armsa* is the Nuba term for bride.

<sup>16</sup> *Aris* is the Nuba term for husband.

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<sup>17</sup> *Hijab* is an Arabic word to refer to a headscarf worn in respect of an interpretation of the Quran. The majority of the population in Kadugli is Muslim. Many Muslim women in Sudan choose to wear a hijab or tobe in the form of fabric draped over their hair. In the Nuba Mountains, as in certain other regions in Sudan, traditional African headscarves (tied around the hair with a knot on the side or top of the head) are also worn by women of all faiths.

<sup>18</sup> The story of Pato is told in detail in the first narrative section “Coins for Black Days.”

<sup>19</sup> The formation of the Women’s Solidarity Fund Groups and the subsequent Bridging Women exchange program is explained in detail in the narrative section “Zeinab’s Vision.”