

Out of Africa: misrepresenting Sudan's 'Lost Boys'

by Brandy Witthoft

The US media has taken an intense interest in the experience of a relatively small group of young males who walked from South Sudan to Ethiopia, spent up to a decade in the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya and were eventually re-settled in the USA in 2001. What is behind the celebrity status – and the cultural misunderstanding – of those dubbed the 'Lost Boys'?

While working for a programme to integrate the 'Lost Boys' in Syracuse, New York state, I became aware that there are significant discrepancies

between typical media narration of their collective experience and the recollections of individuals. Glib articles have focused on aloneness,

resilience and wandering and ignored the key questions such as: how did a large number of male – but hardly any female – adolescents become separated from their families and survive a traumatic experience apparently unaided?

Host-country media constructions of migrants and refugees shape the way they are received. US print media, the Internet and church groups have endlessly retold and reshaped their



Peter Dut, 'Lost Boy', collects supermarket trolleys, Olathe, Kansas

collective narrative. 'Lost Boy' articles are overwhelmingly sympathetic and compassionate but tend towards sensationalist stereotyping. Coverage has pulled heart strings, got 'Lost Boys' on the Oprah Winfrey show and generated an outpouring of donations and assistance. However, it has also dehumanised individual members of the group. Articles gloss over the circumstances in which each of the boys left home but give the impression they were forced to flee when their communities were attacked by forces loyal to the Arab and Muslim government of Sudan.

The media and the Internet are replete with misrepresentations:

"A group of 20,000 young boys formed, wandering the desert seeking safety. They became known as the 'Lost Boys of Sudan.' The boys crossed hundreds of miles of desert. They faced enemy fire, lion attack and hunger. Thousands died along the way. The survivors found safe haven in UN refugee camps in Ethiopia and then Kenya. With peace in the Sudan unforeseeable and without family or opportunity in the camp, the US government decided to bring the 'Lost Boys' to America. In 2001, four thousand of the boys, who are now young men, were given high priority refugee status and began settling all across America—from Houston to Kansas City, San Jose to Little Rock." Publicity for 'Lost Boys' film.¹

"As a boy of seven I ran barefoot and naked into the night and joined up with streams of other boys trying to escape death or slavery ... Bullets replaced

*food, medicine, shelter and my loving parents. I lived on wild vegetables, ate mud from Mother Earth and drank urine from my own body."*²

Stereotypes are reinforced by US aid agencies:

"Named after Peter Pan's cadre of orphans, some 26,000 Sudanese boys were forced by violence from their southern Sudan villages ... thousands died along the way – they drowned, were eaten by wild animals, shot by military forces or overcome by hunger, dehydration or fatigue ... Older boys – some just nine or ten – looked after the youngest ones and small cliques of boys formed their own family groups. Their only relief came when Red Cross helicopters dropped them food or water." American Red Cross³

"No more than six or seven years old, they fled to Ethiopia to escape death or induction into slavery and the northern army. They walked a thousand miles through lion and crocodile country, eating mud to stave off thirst and starvation. Wandering for years, half of them died before reaching the Kenyan refugee camp, Kakuma." International Rescue Committee⁴

Interviews with individual 'Lost Boys' suggest a very different reality. Their accounts confirm long-established anthropological research findings: southern Sudanese boys do not hang around in their villages but may have to roam far in order to find grazing for their families' cattle herds. Male adolescents are traditionally expected to fend for themselves and

to develop strong bonds with their age mates. When their home villages were attacked, many were far away in cattle camps. Unable to return, did they really set off on an epic trek – unprompted and without compasses or geographical knowledge?

Rädda Barnen researchers first cast doubt on the naïve flight narrative in a 1994 report. They suggested that the group was guided to Ethiopian refugee camps by units of the Sudan People's Liberation Army – the main southern Sudanese opposition, now leading the government of South Sudan. My interviews confirmed this is what happened as the 'Lost Boys' roamed hither and thither, uncertain where to go and unaware of the movements of Sudanese government forces. Far from being left to their own devices, they said groups were often accompanied by a few adults and that other adults guided and helped them. One, who was six at the time, describes being carried much of the way by his uncle.

The ex-'Boys' tell a story in which they endure difficulties and overcome trauma thanks to their own efforts and to the support of others. They describe the specific decisions they made to survive and achieve their goals. Articles and films about them ignore their agency and portray them as helpless victims at the mercy of fate until they were 'discovered' by the international community and eventually brought to America.

Life in the USA has been a struggle. Some have now graduated from college but accessing education has not been as easy as many had hoped. Resettlement agencies and church groups offering support concluded that many were too old to complete high school education. Forced into low-paid menial employment many struggle to pay their bills, complete high school and send financial support back to relatives in Sudan or still languishing in Kakuma.

Brandy Witthoft (bwitthof@maxwell.syr.edu) is a PhD student at Syracuse University.

1. www.lostboysfilm.com

2. www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9785295/site/newsweek

3. www.redcross.org/news/in/africa/0108lostboyspage.html

4. www.lostboysofsudan.com