THE LAND OF MY MEMORIES: The Life and Work of Philister Baya Lawiri of South Sudan

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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, and a question-and-answer transcript of select interviews during her time at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and 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 question-and-answer transcript if you want to read commentary in the peacemaker's own words. The goal of this format is to reach audiences through multiple channels, providing access to the peacemaker's work, vision, lives and impact in their communities.

ABOUT THE WOMEN PEACEMAKERS PROGRAM

The Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and 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.

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. 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.[1]

BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER — Philister Baya Lawiri

Currently the chairperson of South Sudan's Civil Service Commission, Philister Baya Lawiri was first a war child. At the age of 10, she and her family walked for 35 days through the forests of southern Sudan to what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo to escape the violence of the first civil war in Sudan. She traces her desire to build peace to her years in Uganda as a refugee and then in Sudan's capital, Khartoum, where she was living as an internally displaced person (IDP) when the second civil war broke out in 1983.

In the suburbs of the capital, gross human rights violations were committed by state security personnel against IDP women and children, including physical beatings, harassment, forced labor and imprisonment for breaching Sharia law. Appalled by the situation, Lawiri became a human rights monitor and trained women in the camps how to identify their perpetrators and document the violations so they could file for redress in court.

Lawiri and 10 other IDP women established Southern Women Solidarity for Peace and Development, a network of women's groups established to assist women displaced by war. The group went on to write the book *The Tragedy of Reality: Southern Sudanese Women Appeal for Peace*, which was distributed at the Hague Appeal for Peace Conference in 1999.

Prior to the secession of South Sudan in 2011, Lawiri led the push for a 25 percent quota of women in Sudan's election law, and was then appointed as one of only two women on Sudan's National Electoral Commission, the nine-member national body appointed to oversee the 2010 general elections.

As someone who is well-known for "always believing not only in peace, but also in diversity as a source of power," Lawiri serves has the South Sudan focal point for the bi-national Coalition of Women Leaders, supported by the Institute for Inclusive Security. The group of more than 200 women from Sudan and South Sudan works to advance women's engagement in the peace process.

CONFLICT HISTORY—
Women in South Sudan[2]

"Rights are not given. You have to take them."[3]

Rebecca Nyandeng Garang de Mabior, South Sudanese Presidential Advisor on Human Rights and Gender, and wife of Dr. John Garang, founder of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement

South Sudan, the world's youngest nation, was borne of a struggle lasting more than 50 years. Until earning independence in a national referendum held in 2011, it had been part of the Republic of Sudan, but it is with its northern neighbor that South Sudan's most infamous clashes took place. The nation, when governed as one, endured two civil wars that claimed the lives of over 2 million citizens and displaced twice as many. The figures are even more astounding when contrasted against South Sudan's population today: a modest 8 million.[4]

Within this population, there are a disputed number of ethnic groups and subgroups — between 60[5] and 200[6] — boasting as many languages. Most South Sudanese practice Christianity, differentiating them from the largely Arab and Muslim north. Around 65 percent[7] of southerners are women. The political participation of these women significantly contributed to the realization of the country's independence; for secession to be legitimate, it required the votes of 60 percent of the population. More than half of those who took part in the referendum were female voters.

Despite the prevalence of customs and traditions confining their role to the home, South Sudanese women have been present and active in nearly every dimension of its country's conflict-scarred past and in its long fight for peace. Their contributions — as soldiers, caregivers, breadwinners, activists and leaders — have shaped South Sudan's struggle for autonomy and justice, most notably within the last 30 years.

The First War

Many trace the origins of Sudan's internal strife to the practices of colonial divide-and-rule and the hasty retreat of the British from the continent. For the first half of the 20th century, Britain and Egypt agreed to govern Sudan jointly, although in practice it was ruled as belonging to the British crown. Throughout this colonial period, northern and southern Sudan were governed separately; the north developed closer ties with the Arab world, and southern Sudan did so with East Africa. English became the official language in the south, while Arabic remained widespread in the north. The British developed the governmental capacities and commercial infrastructure of Khartoum, yet the south was left isolated and marginalized economically, geographically, politically and racially. This inequality bred conflict that would remain for generations.

In preparation for independence, Sudan's first parliamentary elections were held in 1953. Women were barred from voting, and southerners were all but excluded due to linguistic differences and the logistics of the future government being headquartered in Khartoum, the northern capital. The south had long lobbied for a system of federalism to be implemented in post-colonial Sudan; northern leaders had agreed to this in principle. But when this promise failed to reach fruition, many

Sudanese in the south saw northern Sudanese domination as a form of oppression replacing British rule — a concept that South Sudanese scholar Francis Deng termed "internal colonialism."[8]

One year before independence was achieved in 1956, mutiny broke among southern Sudanese soldiers stationed in Torit in the state of Eastern Equatoria. The insurgency spread to the cities of Juba and Yei and grew into what became known as the *Anya-nya* guerilla movement. The soldiers lacked sophisticated weapons, but their goal was regional self-determination. It was the start of a civil war that would be fought in a hit-and-run manner — punctuated by a series of occupations and displacement. It was a conflict in which one half million people perished — most of whom were civilians. The war would not cease until 1972, with the signing of the Addis Ababa Agreement. The peace accord stipulated that Sudan would agree to remain as one country, but that the south would experience more local autonomy. It was a fragile peace.

The Second War

Only six years after the signing of accords at Addis Ababa, oil was discovered in southern Sudan through exploration by Chevron, a revelation further fuelling the northern government's desire to maintain control over its now resource-rich area. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, President Gaafar Nimeiry became increasingly authoritarian in his governing policies over Sudan. He was accused of capitalizing on policies of divide-and-rule, in which the south was governed not as one entity, but as three regions carved out of ethnic divisions. Nimeiry's suggestion that smaller groups were being dominated by the prominent Dinka tribe fueled conflict among the south's diverse population. The instability of the situation was further exacerbated by the imposition of Nimeiry's interpretation of Sharia law on the whole of Sudan — a move that was deeply resented and resisted by the largely Christian south.

Suppression again led to war. In 1983, members of the army mutinied once more, this time in Bor, Jonglei State. Dr. John Garang, a lieutenant colonel in Sudan's Armed Forces (who had also fought within the Anya-nya movement), was sent to quiet the 500-soldier insurgency. Instead, he joined the uprising and formed the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M).[9] They began a struggle to achieve Garang's vision of a "New Sudan"[10] — a diverse but harmonious democratic society. His ideas found support in the north as well as the south.

Yet the war that ensued did not end for another 22 years. Between 1.5 and 2 million lives were sacrificed to violence, starvation and disease. The majority of these casualties were suffered in southern Sudan. In the midst of the conflict, Nimeiry was ousted in a military coup, which was later replaced by a coalition government. Lieutenant General Omar al-Bashir took control of Sudan in 1989 after yet another coup. The war intensified, and the 1990s saw numerous aerial bombardments of southern Sudan by government forces — attacks that frequently targeted and displaced civilians. This created a refugee crisis in the neighboring countries of Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia. Tens of thousands of displaced youth became known as "The Lost Boys"[11] and "The Lost Girls"[12] of southern Sudan. They were teenagers and children who had been separated from their families — often during the bombings — escaping on foot to large refugee camps such as Kakuma in northeastern Kenya. Many later resettled to third countries including the United States and Canada, broadening the southern Sudanese diaspora created by civil war.

The SPLA/M had many female members, including both those who acted as soldiers and those who took on more supportive roles. In addition to serving alongside male colleagues, women formed a separate battalion called *Katiba Bernaat*, which carried out one major attack against government forces. Women also worked in intelligence and in delivering information and supplies to the SPLA. In the conflict zone, they frequently adopted roles as caregivers — preparing food for soldiers and their children, caring for the sick and wounded in the communities. This type of alliance also further blurred the distinction between *civilian* and *soldier* for the duration of the war.

John Garang has been described as having generally supported the rights of women. The SPLA's "Constitution" (The Sudan People's Revolutionary Laws) was one of the first of its kind among rebel movements on the African continent to prohibit rape by its soldiers, deeming the act punishable by death. These efforts, however, did not entirely stop sexual violence from occurring during the conflict.

On Sudan's southern borders, the war was further complicated by the involvement of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which had operated largely in Uganda as a guerrilla movement fighting against the national army. Allegedly aiding the Government of Sudan, they interrupted supply routes into southern Sudan and terrorized villages in the areas of Central and Western Equatoria in particular. In resistance, youth competent in the traditional skill of archery were trained as community defense forces known as "The Arrow Boys."[13]

Peacemaking

The SPLA and the Sudanese government signed a ceasefire in 2002 in an agreement known as the Machakos Protocol. Its implementation was monitored by the United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS). One year later a new conflict erupted in the western region of Darfur. The violence that occurred there would later be the basis for an indictment by the International Criminal Court for President al-Bashir, who was charged with war crimes and, later, genocide.

In 2005, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed by both Garang of the SPLM and Vice President Ali Osman Taha, representing the Government of Sudan. The agreement required adherence to principles of human rights, such as the freedoms of religion, assembly and expression. It established the Government of Southern Sudan, which would rule the country's 10 southernmost states. It also allowed for power-sharing in the form of a more decentralized government and wealth-sharing in a promise to provide the south with 50 percent of revenue during a six-year transitional period. The establishment of this timeframe was perhaps the most important outcome of the CPA — after six years, it was agreed that a referendum would be held in which the south would have the opportunity to choose between independence or continued unity with the Republic of Sudan. During this interim period, it was considered Sudan's responsibility to make unity attractive to the southern Sudanese and to demonstrate goodwill for a shared future.

It was decided that some territories on the border between the north and south — such as Abyei, South Kordofan and Blue Nile — would be administered jointly. Their status — whether to join the north or the south — would be decided in separate referendums. Yet complicating southern Sudan's new autonomy was the untimely death of its first president, John Garang, in a helicopter crash. He was killed less than one month after the formation of the Government of National Unity,

in which he also held the role of vice president of Sudan, as was stipulated in the CPA. His deputy, Salva Kiir, assumed both of Garang's previous roles.

The CPA has been praised for ending over two decades of war, but it has also faced criticism from advocates of women's rights. There were no female negotiators present during the CPA, and some have connected this absence with the difficulties both countries have experienced in implementing and honoring the promises of the agreement in the years since 2005. Women had long been committed to peacemaking in both northern and southern Sudan, meeting across religious, ethnic and linguistic divides, hosting dialogues, conferences, trainings and lobbying the international community to put pressure on Sudan's government to end the war. A large civil society network of women's organizations had been built in exile and in displacement internally — they demanded inclusivity in shaping the futures of both Sudans. Due to petition from these groups and from female leaders, southern Sudan's interim constitution, also established in 2005, gave some recognition to gender dynamics; it articulated and promised equality between men and women concerning public life, employment and in rights of property ownership and inheritance. It also promised a gender quota: 25 percent of membership in legislative and executive branches of government, as well as in institutions and commissions, would be women. This was done so as to "redress imbalances created by history, customs and traditions."[14]

Independence

On July 9, 2011, southern Sudan held a long-awaited referendum to decide its political destiny. Hundreds of thousands of internally displaced southern Sudanese returned to participate in the historical event. An overwhelming 98 percent[15] of votes were in favor of secession. More than half of those who voted were women, fulfilling the required two-thirds participation for the referendum to be upheld, thereby ensuring the establishment of South Sudan as an independent state.

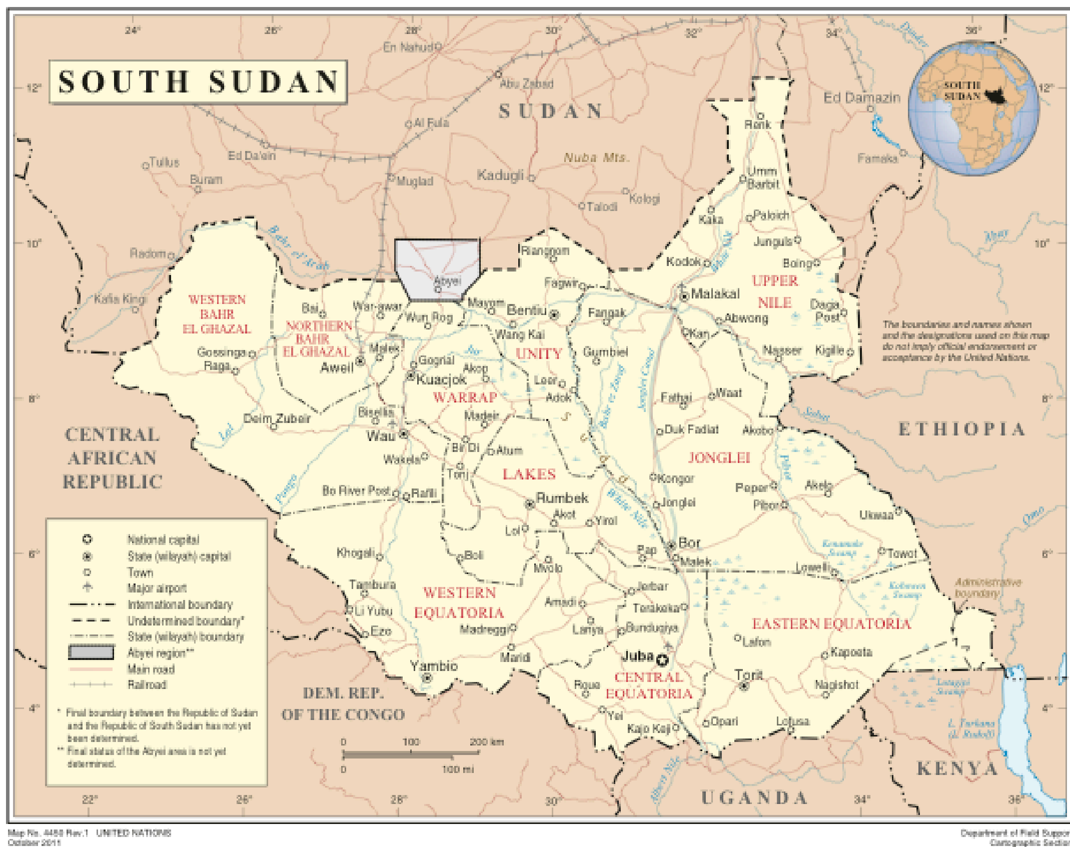
Current Successes and Challenges

The entrenchment of women's rights in the South Sudan Constitution has been considered one of the victories of the nation-building process thus far. The 25 percent quota regarding the participation of women in the political sphere has been met in some areas of government, such as the legislature, but unfulfilled in others, such as the governorate and state ministries. High voter turnout among women in both the Sudan-Southern Sudan elections of 2010 (over 50 percent[16]) — the first in which women were not restricted — and in South Sudan's independence referendum (52 percent[17]) are promising achievements. Yet greater participation of women in political leadership has been challenged by the country's high levels of poverty and low levels of literacy, which disproportionately affect the country's female population; it is estimated that only 16 percent[18] of women in South Sudan can read and write.

Geography and natural resources also remain contested issues, as border disputes continue and the north-south diplomatic relationship continues to be wrought with tension. The south now has 75 percent of the oil[19] in all of the Sudan. This promises an opportunity for high national revenue for the new nation, yet the refinery with which to process the crude oil remains in Sudan. A permanent agreement satisfying both states regarding oil transit fees has yet to materialize.

The resolution of post-referendum issues now looms as a threat to peace between the north and South. Although they were excluded from the original negotiations, women are actively demanding a stronger voice and greater role in this implementation process so that their vision of a sustainable peace for Sudan and South Sudan can be realized in the years to come.

MAP — South Sudan



INTEGRATED TIMELINE

Political Developments in Sudan and South Sudan and *Personal History of Philister Baya Lawiri*

1899 Sudan enters a period of Anglo-Egyptian condominium rule.

1954 ***June – Philister is born in a local hospital in Lui, Western Equatoria, in southern Sudan. She is the seventh child in the family.***

1955 Sudan's first civil war begins, led by the *Anya-nya* guerrilla movement.

1956 Sudan gains its independence from Britain on January 1, with Ismail al-Azhari as the country's first prime minister.

1958 Sudan experiences its first military coup, in which General Ibrahim Abbud takes power over the country

1962 ***Philister begins her education at Mundri Primary School.***

1964 After 10 days of general strikes and campaigns in October, Abbud is overthrown. A transitional government replaces him, led by Sirr al-Khatim al-Khalifa.

1965 ***January – Philister and her family leave southern Sudan as refugees, walking for 35 days until reaching Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), then settling in Mbale, Uganda. She enrolls in Nambulu Primary School.***

1967 ***Philister's elder brother, Silvano, dies in a motorcycle accident in Mbale.***

1968 ***Philister begins secondary school at Nabumali High School in Mbale.***

1969 General Gaafar Nimeiry rises to power after another coup.

1972 The first civil war ends between the Anya-nya movement and the Government of Sudan with the signing of the Addis Ababa Agreement. Southern Sudan is granted local autonomy.

1974 ***Philister leaves Uganda and returns to southern Sudan. She begins work at the High Executive Council for the South as secretary and resolution officer.***

1978 Chevron discovers oil in southern Sudan.

1983 The second civil war begins between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M), led by Dr. John Garang.

President Nimeiry imposes his government's interpretation of Sharia law on Sudan.

	Isaiah "Yithaya" Ayuel Deng, Philister's future husband, serves nine months as a prisoner of conscience in Juba prison for speaking out against the Nimeiry government.
	Philister attends South Devon Technical College in Torquay, United Kingdom, and earns a diploma in development administration.
1985	President Nimiery is overthrown in a coup; another transitional government forms.
1986	National elections are held and a coalition government, led by Sadiq al-Mahdi, takes power.
	Philister moves to northern Sudan, where she becomes one of many internally displaced people (IDPs) from the south in Khartoum.
	Philister becomes the director of establishments in the Council for the South, located in Khartoum.
1987	*April — After a 10-year courtship, Philister marries her colleague, Isaiah Ayuel Deng, also known as "Yithaya."*
1989	June — A military coup overthrows the elected government of Sadiq al-Mahdi. Lieutenant General Omar al-Bashir takes power.
	September — **Philister and Yithaya's son, Emmanuel, is born.**
1991	*March — On Good Friday, Philister's father, Reverend Canon Ezra Baya Lawiri, her sister, Sicilia Baya Lawiri, and her cousin Fubi are killed in crossfire between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the SPLA, near the Central Equatoria town of Rokon.*
	Philister summons her surviving family members to come to live with her in Khartoum.
	The Council for the South is dissolved — both Philister and her husband lose their jobs.
1992	*Avoga Fashion House is opened and Philister becomes a full-time tailor.*
	December — Philister's younger brother, Ben, dies in Khartoum.
1994	*Philister begins work as assistant manager in Human Resources and Administration in the Ivory Bank in Khartoum, the first indigenous southern Sudanese bank in the country.*

1996 *Philister begins documenting and reporting human rights violations against IDPs from southern Sudan in Khartoum.*

1998 *Philister attends a 45-day training of trainers in the Philippines, teaching her new skills in how to document human rights violations. She transfers these lessons to workshops she delivers to human rights lawyers of the Sudanese organization Al-Manar, as well as other civil society activists.*

1999 *Philister joins other women activists in writing and publishing a book detailing the horrors of the war in southern Sudan:* **The Tragedy of Reality: The Southern Sudanese Women Appeal for Peace.**

2000 *Philister is the founding chairperson of an organization of female IDP intellectuals, named Southern Women Solidarity for Peace and Development.*

2002 The Machakos Protocol — a ceasefire — is signed between the SPLA/M and the Government of Sudan.

2003 Fighting begins in Darfur, Western Sudan.

Philister attends the University of Juba (then temporarily located in Khartoum) and earns a diploma, with distinction, in rural development.

2004 *Philister simultaneously earns a postgraduate diploma in peace and development studies and a BA in rural development through the University of Juba.*

2005 The SPLA/M and the Government of Sudan sign the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Naivasha, Kenya. The Government of Southern Sudan is formed.

The Interim Constitution of Southern Sudan provides the south with greater autonomy and promises gender equality. A quota is enacted that allows for women to hold 25 percent of government positions.

July — John Garang, president of Southern Sudan and vice president of Sudan, is killed in a helicopter crash. His deputy, Salva Kiir, assumes Garang's leadership roles.

2006 *The Institute for Inclusive Security, based in the United States, launches the Coalition of Women Leaders for Sudan, of which Philister became a member.*

Philister represents the voice of South Sudanese women at the South-South Dialogue Conference in Nairobi, Kenya, and signs — on behalf of women — the covenant between community leaders, politicians, militia leaders, women and youth.

	November — Southern Women Solidarity for Peace and Development holds a one-day forum for women's civil society groups and the all-male Constitutional Review Commission, in which Philister introduces the idea of adding a gender quota to the Electoral Act of 2008.
2007	***Philister earns her MA in peace and development studies from the University of Juba after having written her thesis on gender participation in the governments of Sudan in the context of political conflict.***
2008	***July — Philister's father, Reverend Canon Ezra Baya Lawiri, is commemorated as a courageous Sudanese Christian, with a statue erected in his image in the Salisbury Cathedral in England. Philister speaks to an audience of thousands on her father's life and work for the church and the people of Southern Sudan.***
	The Electoral Act is passed in Sudan, featuring a gender quota that guarantees 25 percent of government seats to women.
	Philister is nominated and appointed as one of the nine members of the Electoral Commission of Sudan that would oversee Sudan's general elections of 2010. She was the commission's youngest member and one of only two women.
	Philister is appointed by the president of Sudan as a member of the council of the University of Juba.
2009	March — President Omar al-Bashir is indicted by the International Criminal Court on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity related to the crisis in Darfur.
	Philister begins the process of moving back to Juba in southern Sudan.
2010	April — National elections are held, and women make up 54 percent of the voters.
	September — Philister is appointed chair of the National Civil Service Commission for South Sudan.
2011	July — South Sudan becomes the world's newest nation after the people vote overwhelmingly for independence in a referendum to decide the country's future. Women make up 52 percent of the voters.
	After independence, Philister is re-appointed to her position as chair of the National Civil Service Commission for South Sudan.
2013	***January — As part of a 20-woman delegation, Philister travels to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, with the Coalition of Women Leaders for Sudan and South Sudan (under the Institute for Inclusive Security). There, they meet with the African***

Union's High Level Implementation Panel in an effort to bring women's voices to the negotiations between Sudan and South Sudan.

August — Philister travels to the United States to participate in the Women PeaceMakers Program at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice.

NARRATIVE STORIES OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF PHILISTER BAYA LAWIRI

The Lessons of Lanyi

She waved with her whole body, her arms spread wide as she greeted the many people flying past.

"*Mede*!" Philister shouted — hello in Moru, her mother language.

Villagers smiled at the 6-year-old girl in the back of the Chevrolet truck as it bounced down the flat, red murram road.

It was the end of January in 1960, the start of a new decade and the middle of another dry season in Mundri, Western Equatoria, Southern Sudan. It was a time when the mangoes were ripe and the days slow, a break from the demands of school, of farming maize and sorghum. The drive from Mundri — where Reverend Ezra Baya Lawiri was a teacher in a theological college — to Lanyi — where his ancestors had lived for more than 10 generations — was only 21 miles. Every year he brought his wife Hana and their growing family — Silvano, Margret, Kenneth, Sicilia, Helen, Philister, Vibia and Ben — to the village of his ancestors, his mother and his brothers. It was a month during which his children could spend evenings gathered around the *äku* fire, learning of the remarkable deeds of their great-great-great grandparents, of battles fought and famines overcome. By day, they could run free at the foot of lush, emerald mountains, tasting the sweet-sour *ngoba* and *ladra* berries that grew wild there.

After one hour, the Baya family arrived in Lanyi — a place Philister knew by the smell of roasting goat slaughtered especially for their arrival, and by the circle of earthen houses that made up the ancestral homestead of her clan, Kyilaba.

"*Dede*!" she cried out when she saw her grandmother. She was the first person she hugged. They shared the same Moru name — Avoga — and, during these visits, a home. Philister preferred to stay in her hut rather than the larger two-room house her father had built next door.

A cloud of children closed in around them — age mates, cousins, friends.

"Come on, you need a village tour!" they would say, year after year. And so she ran after them, a mob of Small People and goats, led by Avo'bu, a teenage boy tending to the animals, guiding them to grasslands and water points, and the children to bushes of purple, grape-like *ngoba*, and of tinier yellow *lengo*.

"But where are the mangoes, the best ones?" Philister asked, her mouth full of berries. Avo'bu smiled and pointed at a cluster of trees at the base of a green mountain wall. The children continued their race until they reached the edge of the forest.

Philister climbed the delicate trees, cautiously stepping on thin branches to reach the biggest, most golden fruits, yellow but blushing pink in the heat.

"There are so many!" she called out to the children below. They ran tree to tree, comparing each one's offerings, shaking them in a plea to release their gifts.

"Philister! Be careful of the *gowe*!" Avo'bu warned. These tiny bugs climbed busily up the bark in long queues, the same color as the mangoes they ate. They could swarm a hungry child, covering them in stinging bites until they fell from the tree. It was a reminder that the kids were never alone in these forests. Above them, uncountable grey monkeys grasped fruits with both hands and gnawed around the large white core. The land was generous — there was enough for everyone.

Philister shimmied down the tree, planted her feet in the grass and sank her teeth into what she had deemed the perfect mango — its flesh warm from the sun, the peel sticky on her fingers, the juice dribbling down her chin. She loved it almost as much as the peanut paste, *kyi'di*, that her mother dutifully made for *Dede* every year before these visits.

But soon, the feast was interrupted by the violent crushing of leaves overhead. Something was making its way toward them, skillfully navigating the network of branches in the canopy above, thundering down the mountainside. The goats pawed at the soil uneasily. A glimpse of grey, a flash of pearl — unfinished mangoes rained to the ground below, abandoned by the monkeys as they dispersed to safer perches, protesting in chirps and screams.

They descended toward the earth before them as equals: baboons, invaders.

"Go! Get away from here!" shouted the children. They had been warned: A baboon could attack a goat — *their* goat — tear it open, eat it. They started dropping from the trees. All the young ones knew these baboons feared no child, only retreating when confronted by the Big People. Philister watched as her little brother clapped his tiny hands in an attempt to create a bigger noise. Sisters and cousins searched for stones among the grass and leaves, launching them as tiny rockets at the imposters.

This annoyed the beasts, who threw up their arms in defense of the missiles, the lips of their long faces pulling back, revealing pointed canines. As skillfully as the children, the baboons retrieved the stones, fearlessly firing them back at their new, small enemies. Avo'bu moved to the battle's front line, his slim, adolescent frame rising in opposition to the beasts, making of himself a small barrier between his goats — which were scattering helplessly in the opposite direction — and the primates.

The baboons inched back toward the trees, gripping trunks, baring teeth. Like 10 generations of grandfathers before him, Avo'bu seamlessly transferred the bow from his arm into his hands, removing an arrow from the goatskin *mvolu* at his back, and settling it against the taut sinew string, preparing to shoot. He pointed the weapon at the creature to which he was closest — a female baboon, a suckling infant at her breast. She stopped and turned her back to him, wrapping her arms around her baby. Her spine was curved, her body broad, stiff, ready to absorb the hit. He might arrow her, but she would save her child.

Don't shoot, Philister begged. But her prayers were silent.

The mother turned her face toward the boy. She peeled one arm from her offspring, and lifted her hand in the direction of the arrow, moving her four fingers back and forth three times. It was the same gesture local people used in this region.

Please, please, please.

Philister understood. She was pleading for her life, the life of her child.

Avo'bu slowly lowered the bow. The other baboons had retreated, threatened by the presence of a teenaged boy who acted as a Big Person. Only the mother remained.

"Go!" he yelled.

She turned, and galloped toward the trees, her baby's fists still visible, clenched around the thick silver fur on its mother's shoulders.

They protect their own, Philister thought. *They are like us.*

"Look at the sun," Avo'bu told them. "It's time to go back to the homestead." The goats needed to be returned to *Dede*'s house, tethered to poles before nightfall. Like Philister, they would sleep in the same room as Grandmother. It was for their protection.

That evening, the whole family ate goat meat, just as the baboons had hoped to do. As the fire stretched toward the black sky, the elders praised Avo'bu for protecting the livestock earlier in the day.

"These baboons, they are a nuisance," one of the uncles, Kalonga, said. Where there was one, there could be 50 more — an army. They could survive on wild seeds and blossoms, but they would also destroy fields of grain. "You have seen how they love fruit — guavas, bananas, mangoes," he continued. "But you have also seen their teeth, the fangs of a carnivore. They crave meat — especially goat."

"But Avo'bu, he knew what to do. He used the bow. This is our way," Uncle Kayama added. "Invaders, challengers, they come. But we have always defended our goats and our land with our arrows. The Moru arrow is strong — it will never disconnect."

"No," the children responded together.

"You also are part of a connection that cannot be broken," Kalonga said. "You are the children of a long Kyilaba line. Do you know who came before you?"

"My father, Ezra Baya," Philister answered. He laughed in approval, his face illuminated in bursts of light from the *äku*, the fire in the center of their community.

"Very good," Kalonga answered. "And who is your grandfather?"

"Lawiri. He is my father's father."

"And who is next?"

"Lawiri's father, called Lorola."

"And who came before Lorola?"

"Lorola's father is called 'Imba.' The moon."

"Yes."

"And before Imba, his father was Urugu."

Everyone clapped and cheered for Philister and her five generations.

"Ah, she is very brilliant. She is going to do something great one day," her father said thoughtfully, once everyone had finished. This was his habit, to speak last. His words had more weight this way.

Philister smiled. She was part of her great, great ancestors, tied to them like the red *manja* rope that bound the steel three-pronged head to the arrow. She thought of this weapon in Avo'bu's hands, the one that had spared the lives of the mother baboon and her child. Since the time of Imba, of Orugu, there had been such confrontations, such invasions, and such choices. These baboons, they did as they pleased: the arrow was the community's only response to their impunity, the arrow their only defense. Who was this creature that could hunt like a lion, protect its family like a human, communicate like a Moru? Philister worried that one day the aggressors would demand more than mangoes and maize. She feared they would be back. And they would take everything.

The Great Trek

Lu-nyaka'da titi ämäri

aba amaro ya,

ago aba cina amaro,

mi'de ri mileya

mi'de ri mileya

It was a song that had been chosen carefully. Her voice rang clear, unclouded by 94 years of words and prayers. *God, show us the way in our walk. And in our whole walk, You lead us. You lead us.* Hana sang not for her own journey, but for that of her daughter, one of her five surviving children out of the 10 she had borne.

The others surrounded her — more daughters, a son, nephews, nieces, grandchildren. She had called them and they had come.

"Let us put Philister in the hands of the Lord," she asked. Her seventh child sat next to her, bags packed and clutching a ticket for an airplane to California that was scheduled to leave in an hour. She had told her mother of the recognition she had received for her activism, how her story was to be documented, how she had been selected for this opportunity from among so many.

"Praise God," Hana had said, lifting her hands in witness, in awe. "You are great."

"Go ahead, and go well," her mother continued. Loved ones formed a circle around her, crowded into one of the three rooms in Philister's modest Juba home, a home always open to all. Hana spoke in faith of her daughter's safe return. "God will bring you home. And when you come back, He will lift you up."

Tears fell, for the absence that was soon to be felt and for the memories that refused to leave.

It was, after all, a song they had heard before.

Sixty people struggled to fall in line, a line that stretched past the clearing, the village where they had spent months in hiding. Reverend Ezra Baya stood on a rock, his knobbed walking stick in hand, a thin path already parting the jungle before him. His face was serene. Women, children, men, Moru, Dinka, Nuer — they looked to him to lead them. He was ready.

"As you all know, today we begin The Great Trek," he called out. "As we leave our land, our homes, let us put ourselves in God's hands. Let us trust in Him as we begin this journey, that He will deliver us to safety, and that one day, if He wills it, we may return again and live here in peace."

"Amen," the group responded.

The Reverend began to sing.

Lu-nyaka'da titi ämäri

aba amaro ya,

His students from the theological college joined the prayer, their voices proud and sure. Mothers smiled, closing their eyes, lifting their faces toward the early morning sun. They all knew the words.

ago aba cina amaro,

Older men hummed, the palms of their hands open toward the sky.

mi'de ri mileya

Even Milton and Marako, the two *Anya-nya* soldiers who were to be their guides, bowed their heads and sang softly, rifles slung across their backs.

mi'de ri mileya

Philister felt the concert of voices quiver in her stomach. She knew they were walking to the border of Zaire and then Uganda, and that they would all undertake the journey together. Her mother had explained it to her three days before, as she frantically ground sorghum into flour outside of their hut in Gorilebe, the village in the bush.

"Your father will continue his teaching there," she had said, using a hot steel plate to iron sticky discs of flour. "The Church is sending us."

"Does he know the way?" Philister asked. "How long will it take?" She kicked the red soil at her feet. She was 10 — too young to help her sisters prepare food for the trip.

"God has provided us with soldiers, and they are Morus. They will protect us and guide us," Hana said, not wanting Philister to worry. She placed the paper-thin bread in the sun to further dehydrate. They would be lighter this way, easier to carry. It would be a long walk ahead.

Philister watched as her mother crushed the dried sorghum patties into flakes, packing the pieces into bags. She knew this *ebere* would later be soaked in water, topped with forest honey. Just as she had not been hungry during these six months in the bush, she knew she would have enough food in the weeks ahead. Yet Philister still hoped there would be meat to be had for the duration of

this walk. She had grown accustomed to the fresh buffalo cuts that Uncle Munyä would bring back to their new village home. Everyone knew that wild meat was tastier than cow or goat.

Other than the prayer, which would become a daily ritual, The Great Trek began without ceremony. Philister rushed through a maze of long skirts, sandaled feet and bicycle tires to reach the front of the group, nearest to her father. He took her hand. Milton stood in front of him, as he always would, and Marako at the back, flanking the group so that no one would be left behind, lost in the bush. They were young soldiers, not more than 20 years old, caretakers of this small nation of 60 citizens, bound together by their displacement and their faith in a better life beyond Sudan's borders.

Today, with their first steps eastward, they became refugees.

Philister was not afraid. She followed closely behind her father, the same way she had tip-toed behind Kenneth, Sicilia, Margret and Uncle Munyä through Western Equatoria's outback as they went to fetch meat from a buffalo that had already perished in the hunt. She would silently trail them for miles until they were so deep in the bush that she could not be sent back home. Only then would she make her presence known, jumping out and announcing her arrival.

"Whooooa!" she would call out. "I am here!" They would have no choice but to welcome her into their ranks.

On The Great Trek, there also was no option to be scolded and returned to the homestead. Only one day into the journey, Philister had traveled further from her birthplace than she had on any hunting expedition. Rather than tiptoeing, she trudged ahead on the single-file path that threaded itself through endless thick grass, tall on each side, swaying like waves—the only sea Philister had ever seen. Fields grew into thickets of forest and forests into villages, hidden settlements that had sprung up in the bush, symptomatic of the conflict that was violently reorganizing communities across the south.

I was a war child, Philister would say, decades later. But today she felt only like a child who had walked too far. Her feet ached. Blisters stung the skin of her toes and heels, her ankles and calves swollen, tender. She had dropped to the back of the line, far from her father. Alongside her walked her niece, Kamisa, 6 years old, her brother's eldest daughter. Philister cried, but this girl, the smallest on the trek, marched on silently, stoically. Her feet must have pained her too, but she never submitted to a single tear.

At 4 o'clock, when the sun had moved west in the sky, the migration halted.

"We will rest here for one day," Ezra Baya announced. He and Martin had chosen a clearing next to a stream, a life force providing fresh running water with which *ebera* could be prepared, broth boiled, and wounds cleaned. A fire was lit in the center, a makeshift *äku* resembling the one Philister remembered at the homestead in Lanyi.

After eating, Hana and her eldest daughter, Margret, laid large leaves on the ground and unrolled the family's sleeping mats on top. The group slept close together in tiers around the fire —

children in the middle, adults on the outer rings. There were leopards and snakes in the forest, but Philister was not afraid. Her parents lay near her, and the soldiers kept watch. The fire would keep them safe.

She thought of their home, of the small books she had been learning to read, now left behind. She remembered the government soldiers, marching into the compound, which housed both her family and the college where her father taught. The family had been warned of the approaching army. In response to the threat, they had fled just three miles from their home and into the bush, making trips back and forth to retrieve necessities — food, pots, mattresses.

The day the soldiers came, Philister was among the trees, enveloped in green, gripping the hot flask of tea she had been instructed to bring for her father. He had gone back to get a first aid kit. She did not see him. Instead, she watched as the soldiers took their truck, the Chevrolet. They tested its horn and acceleration, circling it wildly, crushing flowers in the college's garden. They broke doors of homes, of the school, walking in with their dirty boots, emerging with furniture, cookware, things they desired.

Philister ran back to her mother in the village, distressed that she could not deliver the tea. *The soldiers, they have come*, she told her. *They were in our house*. Her mother panicked.

"Ezra! He went back! Someone go! Get him!" She screamed. Her sister-in-law, Eunice, ran to her, holding her as she collapsed, her breathing rapid, her eyes searching those around her frantically for someone who could reassure her that her husband had escaped.

"Hana, we must wait. We will look for him as soon as we can. It's not safe right now," Eunice said. "He is in God's hands. We pray that He protects him."

Tense hours passed. Tiny, shrill explosions penetrated the afternoon. *Were they gunshots?* The air was heavy with smoke. *What was burning?* There was no one to answer such questions.

Hana would not take tea, would not eat. She waited.

She recognized the sound of heavy feet on the path to the village. Leaves crumpled like ash under each step. Philister ran with her mother, sisters, brothers toward the sound.

It was him.

Ezra's eyes were heavy, his clothes stained green and mahogany on the knees, the chest — scars of soil and grass. The whole of the village ran to hug him at once, spreading their arms in unison.

Philister heard her father whisper to her mother.

"He went back for that bicycle. We told him not to — just leave it, I had said. But he wouldn't listen. They shot him. He's …" He shook his head, eyes pained, lips pursed. Philister knew

he was talking about Hana's cousin. He had ventured back to his home earlier that morning. *Why do they hate us in this way?* It was the first of many such questions, questions without answers.

"How did you get away?" Hana asked.

"I crawled into the bush," Ezra said. "On my stomach. Only God knows how far. Finally, I started to walk. But here I am."

That was when Philister knew they would not be going back home again. Home was with each other now, in the village in the bush. Home was a place you had to leave, a place you would struggle the rest of your life to build once more.

She was exhausted from the long walk, but could not sleep. She stared up at the empty sky hanging above them. Stars shined through it like bullet holes piercing the darkness over southern Sudan.

"Dad?" she whispered. She saw her father reading his Bible as others slept.

"Yes, Philister?" he said. He wasn't angry that she was still awake. He was calm, as always.

"I forgot my baby."

"What?"

"My African baby. It's in Mundri."

Ezra knew. His daughter's doll, the one she had been given by the missionaries. It was gone now. Everything had been dismantled, stolen, burned. But he could not tell her that.

"These toys — these are things of this world," he explained. "And these things, we can lose them. As long as God allows us to live on this Earth, we might get them again, or we might get better ones. Do you understand?"

"I don't know," Philister said truthfully.

"Our human lives, they are much more important. Come here," he pulled her to his mat. Philister laid next to him, thinking of her books, the doll. Could she find such things in Uganda?

Protected by her father, she finally slept. The miles ahead would be waiting at dawn.

Pray, walk, rest, bathe, eat, sleep. The Great Trek followed this rhythm for 35 days. There were interruptions — an elderly person would collapse from malaria, or a child would contract diarrhea. Such misfortunes were met with first aid from the Reverend, and a day or two of rest as a concession from the entire group until the individual felt strong enough to walk again. They would also stop for meat. If Milton or Marako had been able to shoot a buffalo or an antelope, the carcasses would be divided among the families, and one to two days would be spent skinning the animal and drying the flesh. And so they were sustained.

A lorry met the refugees at the border in Zaire and delivered them to a Christian mission. Locals donated food and supplies to help the southern Sudanese in transit. The group continued to Arua in Uganda, transported in more trucks — the borders fluid, flexible. Arrangements had been made. No one was turned away.

Here, the group separated.

Ezra Baya held the same walking stick in his hand that he had on the first day of The Great Trek. He studied the faces of the people with whom he had left his country over one month earlier. All 60 had survived — men, women, children, Moru, Dinka, Nuer. No one had been lost.

"Through God, everything is possible," he told them. "Perhaps, in this life, we will meet once more."

He closed his eyes.

God, you showed us the way in our walk.

And in our whole walk, You led us.

You led us.

It was a prayer Philister would hear again.

Dancing in Bagisuland

Every even-numbered year, the earth shook in Mbale.

Hundreds of feet and wooden sticks pounded the roads, following the rhythms of goatskin drums as the voices of elders and peers summoned *Bagisu* boys, aged 16, 17, 18, 19, 20. Was this the year that they would become men?

"*Ah yea ah-wo-wo…*"

Thirteen-year-old Philister heard the people singing in unison, calling and repeating each line. She was walking home from school with her friends, only to be enveloped in the barefooted crowd, dancing, dancing, dancing — running free.

"*Seco mana fana papa wee* …"

You must be as brave as your father, Philister giggled, repeating the most important lyric in the song to her classmates.

It was a call to *imbalu*, to circumcision.

For one year leading up to the public ceremony, dancing groups of Bagisu would commandeer the roads. Men in ash-painted skin and women in bright sarongs formed a moving mass of clapping hands, swinging limbs and swaying hips. Overseeing the festivities were the sharp green ridges of Mt. Elgon, from whose peaks the Bagisu believed they were once borne.

"Come on, Philister!" her friends called, swallowed by the swarm of revelers. She hurried to join them in the running dance, a celebratory train chugging joyfully down the dusty Ugandan road.

It was her favorite tradition, this circumcision dance — a yearlong party to which Philister was welcomed as though she were also a native of Bagisuland, and not a refugee from southern Sudan. It had been this way since her arrival. Three years earlier, children at school had spoken with her in broken English until she had learned their local language. They had taught her how to soak, peel and steam *matoke*, the native green plaintain, until it could be mashed into a sticky yellow paste. She learned that she could live like the Bagisu, and she could belong.

Yet, even after celebrating the rite and dancing in its honor, Philister still had not seen a circumcision take place. This year, 1968, was the first in which one of her classmates was to become a man.

"Did you hear about Kibishi?" her friends asked her.

"No," she replied.

"He's going to be circumcised!"

Philister knew she had to prepare a gift for him, an acknowledgment that the boy with whom she shared jokes and banana leaf-wrapped snacks was no longer a child. She asked her father for a small sum of money — 10 shillings — and sealed it in an envelope intended for Kibishi once he had proved his courage. She waited for the long school holidays in December, the time during which the initiation would take place.

When the day arrived, it was Philister who was scared. She joined the noisy crowd enclosing Kibishi, who was bare-chested and surrounded by concerned relatives and community members. The group pressed in, close. He gripped a thick stick behind his neck as though it were a barbell.

"Will there be blood?" Philister shyly asked a friend.

"Yes, but Kibishi won't react. He can't show any fear."

"Why not?"

"He'll shame his parents. And if he tries to get out of it, he'll always be an *umsinde*." Philister understood this term — synonymous with coward — the label for any Bagisu man who forgoes public circumcision.

An older man approached Kibishi and kneeled before him, removing the cloth tied around the boy's waist. A small wooden-handled knife appeared. The clamor of voices intensified.

"Stay strong!"

"Don't cry — you are soon to be a man!"

"Today you become an *omsana*!" It was the day Kibishi could prove his bravery, his adulthood. He would only have one chance.

Red drops of blood soon stained the soil at Kibishi's feet. The first layer of skin had been cut. Relatives cheered and drums beat in approval.

"It's almost finished! You're as brave as your father!" The procedure was paused briefly as Kibishi thrust his fists into the air and danced, kicking his legs wildly. Philister wished to look away, to instead focus on Kibishi's eyes — glassy, unblinking, fixed on the horizon of Mt. Elgon.

The final cut was made. Kibishi was a man — he could build a house, farm his land, marry if he wanted. It was so simple, so painful.

In this way, odd-numbered years passed and even-numbered years were celebrated. But there was no ceremony to mark the shift that Philister felt occurring inside her and around her, no vocabulary to describe her and her age mates as female *omsana* or *umsinde*. By 16, her friends, who had once only run in a group, had begun dancing with boys — in couples — proceeding down the road as they always had, but pausing, shaking their bodies in improvised harmony. Hips moved, eyes met. Philister began to dance like them. She did not look any different from any Bagisu.

A teenager surrounded by the convoy, she felt liberated — singing, dancing, running free. But now, it seemed, the boys wanted more**.** In previous years, Philister had been too young to understand the game that was played within this ritual. The dance was also the time when young men began to flirt, to pursue their female peers. Did they fancy her, she wondered. And how would she know?

Tossing a fur into the air, one boy would make his selection — there would be no ambiguity. All went dark as the smell of leather filled Philister's lungs. A woman trapped inside a beast, she clawed at the carcass covering her face, flinging it to the ground — the skin of a leopard. She had been chosen.

"What is this?" Philister demanded. Laughs — cackles and giggles and cheers — surrounded her. She was to be *his*. A large, smooth hand pushed its way into hers. A hand without a face.

"Come on, he loves you!" her friends said.

"No!" Philister shouted. She retracted her fingers, backing away, rejecting the offer of courtship. You could say *yes*, you could become *friends*, and at the next circumcision festival, you could be carrying his child in your arms. To a backdrop of groans imploring her to stay, for the first time, Philister abandoned the merriment and walked back home.

If *imbalu* existed so that Bagisu boys could become men, what was the ritual during which Philister would become a woman? No feet or drums would shake the roads in anticipation of her transformation. But, as she strode alone down a path she had once shared with so many, this did not upset her. With her entire youth, she had embraced Uganda. She had learned to live like a Bagisu, to eat *matoke*, to speak their language, to rejoice in their milestones. Yet she had always known that one day, she would return to her own land. It was there that she would continue to grow, moving ever forward in a dance that would allow her to run free.

Yithaya

Deng Malual spent his years in the fertile grasslands of Duk Paywal, in southern Sudan's Jonglei State. In 1946, at the end of his days, he boasted 33 wives and claimed ownership over thousands of the strong, white, long-horned cattle dotting the plains. He was an ethnic Dinka, and a paramount chief. For the children he left behind, his legacy should have been one of prosperity, of wealth, of pride.

But for Yithaya Ayuel Deng, one of the youngest of his sons, it would be different.

A Christian convert, a graduate of political science, and an activist, he pursued life outside the pastoral community from which he was born, living in Beirut, Juba, Khartoum. He promised himself he would take one wife only, a woman who shared his commitment to social justice in a country so long torn apart by war.

The Addis Ababa Agreement had steered Sudan toward a time of relative peace throughout the country. Refugees had returned from East Africa, and the south struggled to realize and embrace their increased autonomy. Yet Yithaya's efforts for continued political change still required a great commitment — there were no boundaries between his passion and his work.

And so it was within the High Executive Council in southern Sudan that he would find her, his partner.

At first she wouldn't make eye contact as he slowly walked past, this new secretary in the Office of the President. He liked watching her. She would not be typing correspondences and answering phones for long. By the way she studied the documents before her, he could tell that even at 25 years old, she was an intellectual. She would do something great, this woman. He noticed the fine tailoring, the detail of her outfits, each day a different dress — black, blue, violet — always with matching earrings, a bold necklace. He saw the paperweight on her desk. *Philister Baya Lawiri.*

Philister, he remembered. She was someone he wanted to know.

"I'm sorry, Avoga," Hana said, using Philister's Moru name. "He's a very nice man, but how can I give my consent to this?"

"But I know him. I love him," Philister responded firmly. "Years have passed."

The whole family, including Hana, had met Yithaya. He had spent the Christmas holidays in Mundri with Philister's family, one of many visitors and relatives stuffed into the Reverend's already-full house. Yithaya was a popular, polite guest; Hana's siblings praised his calm demeanor, his quiet intelligence. He had taught their young niece to drive, encouraged her professional ambitions. He would not be a man to restrict her, to harness her potential. This was clear. But how could Hana be sure? Did tradition have no authority?

"He comes from a polygamous family!" It was her strongest argument, a fact that could not be denied.

"People … they can be different," Philister reasoned. Yithaya was only an infant when his father, the paramount chief, had passed away. He chose a different life from that of Deng Malual.

"I don't want this for you … to be one of so many wives. It's their way, it's always their way — these Dinka men."

Hana's voice resonated with the influence of the ancestors — Lawiri, Lorola, Imba, Urugu. This was a divide that outdated them all. Dinka tribes had long grazed their cattle on the rich green pastures throughout southern Sudan, while the Moru cultivated fields to yield sorghum and maize. Philister's lineage belonged to that of an agricultural people, a tribe not suited to a pastoral, nomadic life. What would her great-great grandfathers say if they knew she loved a Dinka?

Philister prayed for patience. She did not show her mother what Yithaya had brought back for her from a trip to America. She kept it concealed in a box, protected by cardboard and tissue paper — a wedding dress.

She was 28. There would still be time.

Reverend Ezra stood and raised his hands to gently quiet the crowd overflowing from his house in Mundri.

"What is the time?" he asked. Guests put down their plates of lamb, of *kyidi*, and searched for watches in pockets and purses, whispering amongst each other.

"Four o'clock," someone announced. Ezra smiled, placing his hand on Hana's shoulder.

"Ah, this is the very moment!" he said. "Our Philister is reciting her marriage vows to Yithaya." Applause and praise saturated the room. A church wedding had been Yithaya's suggestion — a promise to Philister, now aged 33, and to her family that she would be his *only* wife, in good days and in bad days. There would be no woman after her.

"Let us pray for them, so far from us, in Khartoum," Ezra continued. "We have given them our blessing. May they share a happy life, and a union that is today sanctified by God."

"God bless Philister!" a voice cried out.

The whole family cheered, a small sanctuary of joy celebrating in defiance of the renewed war that crept ever closer. Roads leading out of Mundri had become blocked, impenetrable — travel to Khartoum, even Juba, was no longer possible. There were no phones, there could be no delivery of letters.

From the vast sand-colored cathedral in Khartoum, Philister sent prayers to her parents over 1,000 miles south, unaware of the party being held in her honor. She promised that one day, she would tell them of this ceremony, of the hundreds of attendees, of the way she had ensured that her vows as a wife would be equal to those of her husband.

It was the stories that would survive — memories to be kept and cared for until safer times.

God Is Not Defeated

From England, from Uganda, from all corners of Sudan, Ezra Baya Lawiri's friends and relatives formed a motorcade of 50 cars. The caravan proceeded solemnly down the red road from Rokon to Mundri.

After nearly 20 years, they were bringing him home.

Philister felt the 100 kilometers unearth a grief long suppressed — for the wars that had claimed her youth, her home, her family. She wept bitterly. *Thirty-five days walking through forests, thirty-five years in exile, in displacement*. She thought of her father, recently immortalized in stone at Salisbury Cathedral — rounded shoulders, a gentle grin, hands clutching the Book, the source of his courage, his steadfast hope.

"Ah, Philister," Ezra would have said. "It is true. Our sacrifice has been great. But even now, remember: God is not defeated."

It was his favorite saying. No matter the loss, no matter what was suffered, his faith endured. Life would endure. It would triumph.

"I will remain in Mundri," Ezra had said. "Come what may." Once a refugee in Uganda, he had left southern Sudan to complete a Moru translation of the Bible — the definitive project of his life as a reverend and a scholar. At 74, even when confronted with a second, intensifying civil war, he had been unwilling to flee his country. An old man, he would not go into exile again. It was final.

Yet, indifferent to the Reverend's resolution, conflict consumed the south.

It was during the dry season of 1991 that the war reached Philister's hometown. Maridi, to the west, had fallen to the SPLA. Their soldiers started advancing toward Mundri. The Sudanese Armed Forces who were based in the area began a hasty retreat to Juba, hundreds of kilometers east. Mundri's remaining inhabitants were instructed to walk with the fleeing battalion, acting as insurance for the army — human shields on a forced march. Among them were Ezra Baya Lawiri, his wife Hana, his daughters Margret and Sicilia, and cousins, nieces, nephews, grandchildren.

There had been no rains yet that year. The family walked for days across the dry grasses, a land primed to ignite. On Good Friday, the tension exploded in a clash between the two forces outside of Rokon, in Central Equatoria. From the sky poured only bullets, shells — a storm unrelenting, unforgiving.

Ezra was claimed in the indiscriminate crossfire. Two days later, on Easter Sunday, the family in the same way lost Sicilia — a teacher — and a cousin, Fubi.

Once the surviving family members reached Juba, Philister, then in Khartoum, had received the news all at once.

Your father.

Your sister.

Your cousin.

Her heart broke.

For those who had survived, the future dictated an indefinite period of displacement. Philister and her sister Helen withdrew all of their savings and sent for her remaining family members to join them in the north.

To support the relatives under her care, Philister began tailoring. Time devoted to reflection, to grief, was an impossible indulgence. Instead, she cut patterns until her wrists and fingers cramped, sewing long, bright, form-fitting dresses modeled after those in Ghana, in Nigeria, in southern Sudan. *A riti onya ayani*, her father used to say. *You eat your sweat.* Work hard, and you will not starve.

And so, Philister cared for her family, yet also leaned on them, her mother, her sisters. She was profoundly shaken by the stories that continued to surface from 1991 — of days spent hiding in the forest, without food, without water.

"We fled to this large rock, part of a mountain," her mother had recalled. "'Grandmother,' one of the children said to me, 'Now our grandfather is killed. And my two aunts — also killed. We are all wounded. Why don't you pray to God to take our spirits?'"

Hana had paused, reaching for Philister's hand.

"What did you say to him?" Philister asked. She still found it difficult to talk to the children about what had happened on Good Friday, on Easter. All of the small nephews had sustained injuries; one of her young nieces had even withstood a gunshot to the leg. *Why would a bullet have chosen her, chosen anyone?* Such things could not be reasoned, explained.

"I told him, 'I will not ask God to take our lives. But I *will* ask Him to do miracles to save us.' I was very weak, but I sat up. I held my hands to the sky." In her chair in Khartoum, Hana leaned forward, turning her eyes toward the ceiling, transported again to the mountain in Central Equatoria. "I said, 'Oh Lord, we are lost in the wilderness, like the children of Israel. You help us. And do your will to us.'"

She closed her eyes, demonstrating for Philister how she had waited for the sign from above.

"In minutes, clouds gathered above that mountain," she said, her voice rising. "It rained. We washed. We drank."

It had been Arab soldiers from the Sudanese Armed Forces who had discovered the family hiding on the rock in the forest. They had carried them all to safety, fed them hot porridge, cleaned the children's wounds, given them a place to sleep. They had then transported them to Juba.

Yet it was this same army that had forced Philister's family from their home, that had sacrificed needlessly those whom she loved most.

From the bitterness of these trials, these memories, grew her fight. Not against the Arabs, the ordinary Sudanese, but a struggle in which she would challenge the Government of Sudan, their policies of divide-and-rule, and the war itself. For each year of conflict, she would spend one working for peace. This would be how she would prove true her father's words — that God was not defeated.

Hundreds of people journeyed to Mundri, to Ezra's home, now rebuilt with concrete — the stuff of permanence. It was always full, this house, even in its second life.

The Reverend's remains had been returned to Western Equatoria from Rokon. In Mundri, he was reburied with dignity at Christ Church, the house of worship he had founded more than 50 years earlier. *If only such a ceremony could be held for Sicilia, for Fubi.* But fate had seen them laid to rest in a mass grave, unable to be brought home.

From the Book of Timothy, Philister had carefully chosen the verse to be engraved on her father's stone, a memorial to remain in Mundri, come what may. That day, she unveiled the polished marble to clergymen, students, children and grandchildren.

I've fought a good fight

I've run the race

And I've kept the faith.

It was a final message to the first great peacemaker she had known.

Exposing the Shame

Women hurried into houses of canvas, of tin, as the black police lorry cut through the vast beige terrain. The string of improvised shelters formed a border between the miles of empty sandscape and the sprawling settlements of the displaced, communities from the south and the Nuba Mountains, transplanted by war to Khartoum. Two men — plain-clothed officers — exited the vehicle before releasing a young woman from the back of the truck. Her head hung low as she turned from the unrelenting sun, sobbing into a wrapped white parcel nestled in her arms.

New women arrived, emerging from one of the shacks, gently taking the bundle from her, placing it with care into the earth. She collapsed, watching helplessly as the small hole was filled.

Nearby, a lone woman walked along the brown road etched into the desert, bent at the shoulders. She leaned forward slowly to pick up sticks littering the path — dried bones of trees that had long ceased to exist. A faded cotton rag concealed her hair, wrapped and tied tightly to her skin. Sandals tapped lightly as she trod on the sand that settled as dust on her bare feet. Methodically, she placed her goods, branches and twigs, in a worn nylon bag.

Firewood, the policeman thought, watching her. She would return home, boil sorghum or millet, and generate a fresh batch of *aragi*, liquor. *So difficult to control, these women*. He sighed, opening the rear gate of the truck, grabbed the grieving mother by the elbow, and pushed her up and into the waiting vehicle. She resisted, crying out, pulled back toward the land that now claimed her son.

"Please," she begged. "I must pray for him."

"Back to Omdurman," he snapped. "Two more months."

The lorry sped past the common woman with the bag of sticks. She covered her mouth with her sleeve, concealing a cough, and her face.

Inside the settling cloud of sand, Philister emptied her nylon bag, returning the firewood to the desert. She had come to the settlement to document violations — there were hundreds of stories of abuse. But this case — a child who had died in prison, a mother, perhaps incarcerated unjustly — this, Philister would need to investigate. She walked back to her own car, a vehicle hidden far from the IDP camp, returned to her office, and phoned a colleague.

"Is there a way into Omdurman Women's Prison?" she asked.

The sewing machine buzzed, rapidly binding a white collar to a navy bodice. Satisfied, Philister cut the threads and released it, allowing the dress to be illuminated by the naked light of the bulb in the ceiling. Once again, she was thankful she could tailor, a skill that enabled her to create her own living, and her own camouflage. She examined the dress carefully. It looked not unlike the uniforms of the other volunteers from the Presbyterian Church, the women who visited the prison

every week, providing "spiritual food" to those who were hungry for everything. They had recently recruited a new member.

It was a Sunday in January when Philister was ushered through the heavy iron gates in Omdurman, a portal into an enclosed squalor. Air hung still in a hot fog, heavy with odors of sweat, urine, feces. Hundreds of southern women, clothed in stained cotton sheaths, quarreled for bits of space. Many rocked naked babies whose faces were smeared with mucous, with tears. Their tiny mouths contorted in screams — infants imprisoned with their mothers. *These are my people*, Philister thought. *How can we live like this?* She squeezed through row after row of prisoners, humming the Christian hymns, cautious of the wardens who oversaw the service from the periphery. She scanned the faces for someone she could talk to, someone who could speak candidly of life in detention.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" she whispered to one inmate. The woman was touched, smiling, pulling her dress aside to create a bit of space.

"I can see things are difficult … how are you being treated?" Philister asked, concerned.

She shook her head, glancing in the direction of the guards before answering.

"It's terrible," she said quietly, looking straight ahead. "Everything we are given is inadequate."

"I'm so sorry."

The woman continued, unafraid.

"The water, it's dirty. Children, the small ones, they are contracting diarrhea, dying every week."

Philister thought of the baby in the shallow grave beyond the shantytown.

"Could it be cholera?"

She paused. "We think so."

A tall warden sauntered past, circling the crowd. Both women resumed the psalm, praising God. They had to be careful. These walls had ears.

"There should be proper sanitation to contain an outbreak like this," Philister said, once the guard started his stroll down another row. "Better toilets."

"Oh no! We can't even speak of toilets," the woman said, her fists clenched in her lap, knuckles protruding from taut skin — stretched, dry, cracked. "There is a hole in the ground, that's all."

"The food is not enough," she continued. "We eat once a day, maybe. *Fuul* — these beans. A bit of bread. We share with the children if we can. There is nothing for them."

"Why did they bring you here?" Philister asked.

"Why is everyone here?" she answered, managing a scornful laugh. "I was brewing *aragi*." These mothers, sisters, daughters, displaced by war, had become the breadwinners for destitute families. Brewing and selling liquor — illegal in Sudan under the restrictions of Sharia law — was one way they could support themselves, one way they could survive.

"When the police took me away, they beat me," she whispered, her hand lightly grazing her lower back. She later showed Philister the rough, raised lines of the sentence that she wore — 25 lashes carved into young skin.

"Look at us," she had said softly. "We are the marginalized of the marginalized."

Once home, Philister wrote through the night. She recorded all she had witnessed, both restrained and reassured by the formula she relied upon to share such stories: remember the date, the time, identify the perpetrators, the victims**.** Her mantra pounded ceaselessly within her, a heartbeat. *Document the truth. Expose the shame.* Unmask this government, make known their inhumanity, and force them to change.

In pursuit of this aim, Philister carefully compiled weekly records of the jail's population. If she could illustrate the extent to which the prison was overcrowded, fewer women would be arbitrarily detained, and perhaps the crises resulting from poor sanitation and nutrition could also be alleviated. She inquired about numbers, speaking to both the incarcerated women and the guards. It was only to prepare the appropriate amount of bread for distribution from the church, she had insisted.

The reports were damning. A prison which had been constructed to house 300 inmates now held over 1,000 people.

January 12th: 709 women, 150 children

January 26th: 809 women, 105 children.

June 8th: 951 women, 223 children.

Philister wished for her findings to be sent to the Special Rapporteur for Human Rights for Sudan, based within the United Nations headquarters in Geneva. To fax or mail such documents, such sensitive information, she would have to coordinate with allies inside foreign embassies.

After following human rights reports from Sudan for months, the rapporteur prioritized a visit to Omdurman Women's Prison on the agenda of his trip to the country. Even to enter the

premises of the U.N. offices to speak with him, Philister would need a disguise, clothing that would perhaps allow her to be mistaken for the wife of a security guard. If it were known that she had provided incriminating information to the United Nations, Philister too could be apprehended by state security forces — tortured and put under surveillance. First, she wrapped her hair in a cotton cloth, then tied it close to her head. She put plastic sandals on her feet, and slung a nylon bag over her shoulder. She was a common woman, carrying only the truth.

After meeting with Philister, the rapporteur made a request to the Government of Sudan to visit Omdurman Women's Prison. Grey suits and diplomatic passports descended upon Khartoum, relaying inquiries and concerns to the penitentiary officials. Was it true that there were children locked inside? Was the jail really filled beyond capacity?

Such conditions would be unacceptable — surely the Government of Sudan would enact necessary measures to improve the situation in Omdurman.

Philister wandered with ease through the spacious rows as the women offered their prayers in chorus. The air was less polluted with sweat, the floors free from human excretion.

"Where is everyone?" Philister asked, kneeling next to a woman seated at the end of a row.

"They're gone," she said, grinning. "They released almost everyone, because the U.N. came. It won't be long for me now."

Philister reciprocated the smile. She studied the group. Absent were the mothers with young children. They had been returned to their homes, the frail shacks creeping toward the city limits of Omdurman, of Khartoum. She counted those who remained. One hundred women — out of one thousand.

It had worked. Her reports had revealed the violations occurring on an invisible frontline within this war. She had led these women, her people, one inch closer to justice.

But victories such as this were cruel, fleeting.

Each week, the prison once again grew dense with bodies of new inmates shuffling for space in confinement. Cries of infants soon returned, the latrines overflowed, and cholera reoccupied the insufficient water supply.

Within one month, the number of women in Omdurman Prison had once again soared past one thousand.

Philister continued to spend Sundays with women in the jail and at the IDP camps, rising early, preparing herself for the struggle. She wrapped her hair and tied the cloth tightly. She wore plastic sandals on her feet and carried her torn nylon bag. Her mission was unchanged. Document the truth. Expose the shame. Push toward change — and fight for every inch.

A Number of Years

Philister felt small, dwarfed by the stone structures of the University of Juba. She told herself that she was only passing through — the campus, the region. Like her, the institution was a conspicuous outsider in northern Sudan. *It's not only me*, she thought. *Even our schools have been displaced to Khartoum by this war.*

She recognized a curious grey head hovering in and out of student crowds, an elder like her, drifting past the masses of youth pushing perpetually forward.

"Ezbon!" Philister called out. He was a Moru, also from Western Equatoria. "What are you doing here?"

"Philister!" he replied, pushing a well-worn bag over his shoulder as he rushed to greet her. "I'm a student," he declared proudly, wrinkles gathering at his eyes as he smiled.

"You? At this age? But you're retired!" Philister was shocked. Long before, he had left his work as a medical assistant at age 60, as was required in Sudan at that time.

"Yes," he shrugged. "So what?"

So what? To this, Philister had no response. *Go home, relax until the end of your days*, she thought. It was all that was expected of seniors.

"My dear daughter," he added. "Acquisition of knowledge has no age limit. Remember that."

They exchanged goodbyes so that Ezbon would not be late for class. Philister continued to wander between buildings, allowing herself to imagine the stroll to seminars and lectures, the weight of hardbound books in her arms, the thin pencil between her fingers in the exam hall. Could she excel in academics once again? She was 47, younger than Ezbon, but well over 20 years older than the students with whom she would potentially share classes — the sons and daughters of southern Sudan. Surely, it was too late, even inappropriate, to undertake such an endeavor.

Yet this old man's words encouraged her. It could not be denied that she desperately wanted to resume her education, an aspect of her life long neglected, forgotten. A relevant degree would validate and inform a life devoted to activism.

Why not? Philister finally reasoned. *Age was only a number of years.*

The very next day, she collected her documents, her school certificates, and once again visited the university. Estranged from and yet always driven by thoughts of home, she enrolled in a diploma in rural development. She was determined to learn how to *bring the towns to the people*, as Dr. John Garang, founder of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, would later advocate in his vision for the country. One day, when she returned to the south, this would be the knowledge needed to rebuild the nation.

The years had accumulated so fast. There was no more time to be wasted.

A young Ugandan teacher patiently held a world map at the front of the sixth grade class. An 11-year-old Philister looked on, bewildered by the puzzle of pastel shapes scattered across the large paper's surface.

"And where is this?" he asked, pointing to blobs of faded pink, of light green. Other children spoke up with confidence — England, Egypt, America. For the first time, Philister learned that these contorted ovals and squares were countries. She was perplexed, surprised to find that such places existed outside of stories, claiming homes on the strange picture her teacher displayed near the blackboard.

That day, she ran home from school and cried to her family for all that she longed to know. The conflict that had disrupted the fabric, the rhythms, of life throughout the south had also forced Philister to leave the fourth grade early, unfinished. At the age of 9, her education had become an unmourned casualty of Sudan's wars. Two years, two grades — lost.

"I don't know anything," she sobbed, confiding in her older brother Kenneth, then 23 years old. When the family had fled southern Sudan, he too had been forced to postpone indefinitely his own education, which he had hoped to pursue at the University of Khartoum. He was never able to prepare for the career he had wished for as a lawyer, later becoming a teacher instead.

"Don't worry, Philister," Kenneth said, reassuringly putting his arm around her shoulders, so much smaller and younger than his own. "I'm going to teach you everything. You'll catch up. I know it."

"But can you tell me the names of the other countries?" she asked shyly. "I want to learn all of them."

"Of course," he answered, smiling kindly. "When should we start?"

"Now." Philister opened the textbook she had brought home from school. To her, every waiting moment held a name, a nation.

Even though she had ranked near the bottom of the sixth grade class after her first cycle of exams, the whole family trusted that Philister would grow into a celebrated student. It had been prophesied, prayed for from her earliest years in Mundri. Sure enough, with each semester that passed, her grades rose. By the second term, she ranked 15th out of over 40 students. By the end of the year, she was third in her class.

At 15 years old, the prestigious Nabumali High School accepted Philister as a boarding student. Many government ministers and prominent politicians were Nabumali alumni; *if I study here*, Philister thought, *my future, my plans will open up*. Yet, restless and distracted, she would frequently

steal across the brown road to her father's house — conveniently adjacent to the school — escaping math lectures to engage in afternoon chats with her sisters.

"What are you doing here?" Ezra used to say upon finding his once-studious daughter at home instead of diligently preparing for exams.

"I'm on my way back!" Philister would answer, darting out the front door in a well-practiced series of hurried bounds. The Reverend always moved more quickly than his age should have allowed, chasing Philister out into the grass-covered garden, across the empty street, and back into the school compound, simultaneously shaking both his head and forefinger in disappointment.

He expressed the same sentiments when he found her out of place on another weekday afternoon, not engrossed in algebra, but serving a sentence handed down by teachers frustrated with her recurring absences from class. She stood on the dusty clay road, perspiring under an oppressive midday sun, taking orders from the *kawooka* — a local trash picker. Frowning in disdain at the demeaning work, she collected soda cans and candy wrappers, tossing them into a small, chugging tractor. Her eyes lifted and met those of the Reverend, who said nothing. He turned away and walked hastily into the house, ashamed.

It was her father who had been most defeated by Philister's low scores in the subjects of chemistry, mathematics and physics at the end of her secondary education. *Marginal pass* — the phrase had scorned her, her family and their struggle. She wished to destroy the school report, to ease the sting of the marks she was embarrassed to have earned.

"Since primary school, you have always been brilliant," Ezra had said. "What happened, Philister?"

She was both sorry and sincere, wishing she had not let her father down, that she had instead placed a triumphant third in her class like she had in the sixth grade. Armed with a reputable school certificate, she still decided to progress, to take up advanced A-level courses as a prelude to university studies. But when she completed the application required for further education, the document had pointedly questioned her background. *Are you a Ugandan national?* it asked. *No*, she had written, *I'm a refugee from southern Sudan*. For the past decade, she had been taught that this was not a fact to be hidden, not a reality of which she should be ashamed. Yet it had ended the process, and, in turn, her schooling. In Uganda, at that time, non-citizens were not allowed the opportunity to pursue education at such a level.

The future she had never planned started now.

In defiance of the setting sun, Philister's alarm shouted unsympathetically, summoning her from a nap — the only brief respite in a day whose hours were unrelenting. Its 10 p.m. declaration marked the time Philister normally began revising for the university exams of the following day.

It is all a struggle, she thought, as she peeled herself from her bed.

She had started her morning at the offices of the Ivory Bank, spent evening hours with her young organization, Southern Women Solidarity for Peace and Development. She had finally come home to a late dinner prepared earlier by Margret. It was her oldest sister who also took care of the house and Philister's son, Emmanuel, while she was out working to support the family. *Whenever someone is in need*, Ezra had taught them, *you come to their aid. Carry one another's burden*. They would survive together, for each other.

Moving quietly through the dim, empty kitchen, Philister mixed two generous spoonfuls of sugar into a mug of Sudanese tea, inhaling the scent of cinnamon that rose from the steaming water — a quiet pleasure in a busy life. Books opened and pages turned as the lightbulb buzzed quietly above her.

In this way, Philister earned her qualifications in quick succession: a diploma, bachelor's degree and then a postgraduate certificate — all in rural development — and finally, a master's degree in peace and development studies. Each certification was achieved with exceedingly high marks and distinctions. She had written on female entrepreneurship in the country, followed by a study of women in decisionmaking, culminating in an analysis of gender participation within Sudan's governments. The themes of her research remained loyal to one passion — the struggle of the women of Sudan.

After she had finished what she thought would be her final degree, Philister made herself a promise: *I will continue to learn until God takes me*. Her educational success had been predicted, delayed, and at last realized within a future for which she had not been able to plan. Yet, even at age 53, she felt there was no time, no number of years to be wasted. Every waiting moment still held a name, and a nation. By now, she knew what they were.

The Middle Bird

Hana shuffled into the kitchen, slowly lowering herself onto a wooden chair.

"I had a strange dream last night," she announced.

Philister and her oldest sister Margret halted preparations for the family's breakfast. They remembered the last morning their mother had made such a declaration, 17 years before, in 1991, soon after arriving in Khartoum. She had dreamt that her house was open, exposed to cold winds. Her late husband had appeared before her, lifted his hands, and the building's walls had been instantly restored. The dream had saddened Hana, reminding her of her loss and of the family's instability. But less than a week later, she had been surprised with a sum of money sent from the Reverend's friends in England. They had raised funds specifically so that Ezra Baya Lawiri's widow and children could buy a home in Khartoum. *One large and comfortable enough for them all to stay together*, they had stipulated — a provision of security during this period of displacement. Now, when Hana dreamt, everyone listened.

"What happened, Mama?" Philister asked.

"Well, there were four small birds," she recalled. "They were females, I just knew."

"What kind of birds?"

"I don't know, but they were mine."

"What were they doing?"

"One bird was so tired. It sat beside me." She glanced to her right, indicating where it had rested. "The other three were active, moving, flying in front of me. One bird was on the left. One bird was on the right. One bird was in the middle," she explained methodically.

"But the one in the middle, it was lifted! Lifted high!" Hana's hands rose. She paused, cupping her palms in the air before releasing them, allowing them to return to her lap. She lowered her eyes, aged but bright, to meet the curious stares of her grown daughters, now all present — Margret, Helen, Philister and Vibia. "That was all."

Philister was quiet. "But Mama," she said. "How do we interpret this kind of dream?"

"Let us wait," she answered. "Perhaps it will soon become clear."

"In 1953, our country held its first elections. Do you know how many women voted?" Philister asked the crowded conference room, filled by members of her eight-year-old umbrella organization, Southern Women's Solidarity for Peace and Development. Participants — civil society

activists, parliament members, lawyers — fanned themselves with stacks of paper, turning to each other, shaking their heads.

"Twelve," she answered. "Twelve women."

A chorus of gasps rose from the round tables.

"Women could only vote if they had completed secondary education," Philister explained. "Of course, so many illiterate men voted. But why not allow the illiterate women?" The room laughed.

"This must change," Philister continued. "And now is the time."

She had fostered the spark that would fuel the cause of women throughout Sudan. It was two years until the country's first elections in over two decades, scheduled for 2010. All Sudanese aged 18 were eligible to register, to exercise this political right — it had been decreed in the new electoral laws. There was to be a new National Electoral Commission to govern the process, to appoint those who would oversee the voting in all of the country's 25 states. Nationwide networks of organizations such as Philister's had lobbied for two years to ensure the inclusion of women in this landmark moment — pushing for a gender quota that would allow for 25 percent of seats in legislature to go to women. They were successful.

Philister was proud of what had been achieved, especially as she juggled her civil society activism with full-time work at the Ivory Bank. Manager of administration, she had soared upwards in the country's only financial institution established and run by southern Sudanese. The responsibilities of writing personnel reports and of procuring assets were necessary to her survival; her whole family relied on her. It was why she asked not to be involved, not to be considered, when talk circulated about nominations for the Electoral Commission. *It will ruin me.* This was not reliable employment, not like the bank. *Forget it*, she had told the women from the political forum who had submitted her name — *it is impossible.*

The thought of such changes made her head pound. She fled the mounting pressure, representing the bank on a brief trip to their branch in Juba. She could clear her head, spend time with her husband, and escape mention of this Electoral Commission.

But to the south, too, the news followed her — this time as an unrecognized number on her mobile phone.

"Ms. Baya?" a deep voice on the other end asked.

"Yes, speaking."

"This is the Office of the Vice President of the Southern Sudanese government." Philister's eyes widened. "There is something crucial I want to discuss with you."

"What is it that could make the vice president wish to speak with me?"

"Well, I need your CV," he said matter-of-factly. "It's regarding the National Electoral Commission. You've been nominated to be a member. You know that, right?"

"Yes," Philister said, her voice small.

"We have three members from southern Sudan to be appointed, and one of the choices has fallen on you."

Was she expected to thank him, to praise this opportunity? Instead, she dug her fingernails into her palms.

"This will destroy me," she said frankly, her lips quivering. "It will destroy my profession in the bank."

"Wait," he replied quickly. "The Electoral Act says this is a part-time position. It will not affect your present job."

She was silent.

"Ms. Baya, this is recognition for your work!" the vice president insisted. "You have been very active. Were you not the voice of women at the South-South dialogue? You signed that important document on behalf of women — a covenant — between leaders, civil society, armed groups."

He was right. With three of her colleagues, she had traveled to Nairobi as representatives of women from across the south, ensuring that they would be heard among 300 other voices — politicians, religious leaders, militia, elders, youth — advocating for inclusion in southern Sudan's future. With the women's delegation, Philister had spoken with Dr. John Garang, founder and leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement. His press secretary had urged him to cut the meeting short so that he could liaise with waiting government ministers. Garang had refused. *These women are ministers too*, he had said. That day, Philister had been as powerful, as important as the state officials. And today she had been asked to become one.

"I will pray," Philister sighed.

That night she spoke with her husband, Yithaya, and with her colleagues. *Why would you refuse? Don't you want to be part of history?*

The next morning, she hesitantly delivered her documents to the government headquarters. Days later, the radio broadcast her appointment across the country from Khartoum to Juba—Philister Baya Lawiri: the first female electoral commissioner in Sudan.

By helicopter, Philister traveled to each of the 10 states in the nation's southern region. Membership on the commission allowed her an unexpected opportunity: to truly see her homeland

for the first time. Having only known Mundri, where she was raised, and Juba, the capital city, she was awed by the diversity of the landscapes. Surveying panoramas of the earth below, she discovered the dignified, old growth trees of Northern Bahr el Ghazal, the vast, grass-carpeted expanses of Jonglei, and again, the grand, ever-green slopes of Western Equatoria. A country defiant, beautiful.

On such journeys, Philister contacted and networked with powerful women — academics, activists, advocates, government officers, lawyers, teachers — encouraging them to submit applications for the posts stipulated in the new electoral law. It was her duty to recruit nonpartisan, university-educated candidates to potentially serve on the high committees of each of Southern Sudan's states — those who would work on the ground on behalf of the Electoral Commission. They would oversee the electoral procedures and appoint registration and polling officers. Women had long been absent from the voting process, excluded from decision-making. This was Philister's chance to bring them in at every level. She reasoned that if gender-sensitive members were appointed to the High Committees, they could better ensure the electoral participation of the female population throughout their respective states. Philister phoned such women, met them, inspired them to hand in applications, CVs. *This is recognition*, she told them.

After months of recruitment, the nine Electoral Commission members convened in Khartoum to screen the collection of nominees for the High Committees. There would be one committee in each of Sudan's 25 states, each with five members.

The meeting began with a discussion of candidates in the 15 states comprising the northern region of the country. Philister passed the CVs of at least 20 women around the oval table. It was beyond the responsibilities allocated to her as the southern coordinator, but an attempt to promote female political participation in the north as well.

"You will see that each of these applicants is non-partisan, each a university graduate in the social sciences," she said. The six commission members from northern Sudan examined the documents carefully.

"All of these nominees are women," one of the men observed.

"Yes," Philister answered. "Local women from every state in question."

"Why do you have so many applications from civil society activists?"

"I'm their representative," Philister said. "I'm here to bring their voices to the table."

Silence hung in the meeting, disturbed only by the turning of pages, the thumbing of paper.

"There is nothing that prohibits women from participating in the electoral process, as long as they meet the requirements," Philister added, interrupting the quiet of the room. "And in this case, they do."

"I'm not sure about that," another member answered. "Look at this one — she's partisan." He held up a CV. The commissioner next to him took it, looking closely at the name, the photo.

"Ah, yes — she has political affiliations," he confirmed. "Her husband is a member of the Umma Party." The others shrugged.

"So what? She herself has never joined," Philister replied, her voice sharp, penetrating. "Surely, we can assess her competency based on her own decisions, her own actions — not those of her husband."

"We have our doubts about her," the members agreed, setting the application aside. "It just wouldn't be fair."

The initial disqualification set a precedent maintained for the rest of the meeting. One by one, each of the Arab Sudanese women Philister had recommended were removed from consideration after accusations of bias, of partisan leanings.

"If women in northern Sudan are more active in politics than men, why don't they dominate the government here?" she asked, her voice measured with rage.

No one attempted an answer.

Philister left the room during the break, devastated.

When the meeting reconvened, the commission was to engage in the same screening process for those nominated to the southern states' 10 high committees. Philister was determined not to allow her candidates to be defeated again. She would not give up.

"Honorable Chairperson," she said, addressing Abel Alier, the head of the Electoral Commission, and, 30 years earlier, her first boss as a secretary in the High Executive Council in the South, where he had been President. "I know the southern Sudanese women more than any other person here. This is my domain."

"It's true," the chairman agreed.

She distributed the applications.

"You don't know them," she added, directing her words to the members who had disqualified her applicants in the earlier session. "I know them better."

This time, they remained quiet.

Philister barely breathed throughout the second half of the meeting, advocating tirelessly on behalf of her applicants. Each one was sanctioned as a member of a high committee — there were no objections. Every committee in each of the 10 states was established with at least one female member — some boasted two. The 25 percent quota had been achieved in the south, as had been stipulated in the Interim Constitution of Southern Sudan. For Philister, for the women she represented, *this was recognition*.

Early in the morning on April 11th, Philister landed in a Juba chaotic with the activities of election day. Queues of suits, of men in sandals, in shorts, ran parallel to women in a single-file of floral dresses — orange, green, red, blue. *You create a line for women together*, she had told the high committee members during capacity-building workshops. Today, she finally saw what an engendered electoral process looked like: polling stations with separate lines for women, for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers. These voters had been assisted by registration and polling officers — *they also must be women* — ensuring that special needs were met and their wait not excruciatingly long. *Accommodate them in every way you can*, Philister had advised.

The high committee members had done what she had asked. Together, their commitment, their struggle had created conditions that had fostered women's participation on an unprecedented level: more than half of those who voted in Sudan's elections were female —54 percent.

The women of the country were rising. Philister was among them — one of them — a small bird lifted high.

Bridges

A line had been drawn where Sudan was split in two. The border remained invisible, intangible — swallowing some tribes and excluding others. It cut through vast reserves of oil, the lifeblood of the south, destined to circulate through arteries and channels running only north. The country was split, free to pursue new political destinies, yet bound by two futures inextricably woven together through a network of pipes, migration and history.

During the decades of conflict, it was women who had acted as bridges — between poverty and survival, between exclusion and political consciousness. *What is there we didn't do?* Philister would ask her male colleagues. *We played all the crucial roles*. They were combatants, caretakers and communicators advocating to the outside world. *The war empowered us. It made us prove our capabilities*. And so, by transcending the border that intended to divide them, women from the north and south formed an alliance, developing a unified message based on shared concern for the fate of their nations: they, too, would play a role in shaping peace in their countries. *If men can do it, I see no reason why I should not be part of it*, Philister reasoned.

They called themselves the Coalition of Women Leaders for Sudan and South Sudan. Under the auspices of the Institute for Inclusive Security, they traveled to Ethiopia, to a summit hosted by the African Union. The topic of concern was the implementation of cooperation agreements between Sudan and South Sudan. It was an event to which they had not been invited, but in whose outcomes women were fundamental stakeholders. Yet there they were — 10 women from the north and 10 from the south — holding a parallel symposium in the same Addis Ababa hotel, on how peaceful coexistence could be achieved between their nations.

Yet the hostility that was present between the two governments could also, at times, be felt between the women participants. Philister, the focal point — a leader — in South Sudan's delegation to the coalition, heard whispers from her colleagues reflecting the bitterness, the tension that existed between the two sides. *We will stand by our government*, they said, primed to aim accusations at the women who had come from the north, those who risked arrest on return to Sudan for their participation in the coalition. This was not the context to which one brought partisan opinions. Participants could talk of politics, Philister knew, but political affiliations were inflammatory; they needed to be left in Juba, in Khartoum.

It was why Philister felt alarm when she was notified of plans that were being quietly formulated within her team. She was in the hotel lobby when one member approached her with an update.

"We have scheduled a meeting for 10 a.m. tomorrow," she told Philister.

"What is the agenda for this meeting?" she asked, her tone cautious, stern.

The woman glanced at the men in suits crowding the room, mingling. She lowered her voice. "We want to finalize our position papers," she said, "to be presented in the meeting."

"Position papers in coalition meetings?" Philister responded pointedly. "We are an advocacy group."

The woman was silent, confused.

"As the focal point, I am the chair of any meeting to be held," Philister continued. "And I'm telling you, there will be no meeting like this."

Her decree was final. In canceling this session, Philister had sidestepped a confrontation that could have destroyed the coalition and dissolved the solidarity it was hoped would develop between women from both sides of the new border. It was why she was one of the few activists nicknamed "Fox" — someone cunning, who could predict and avoid conflicts.

Instead, in the next meeting, the 20 participants were met with long ropes of string. They were each partnered with a woman from across the divide, standing cautiously opposite one another, instructed to create and then untie a knot without releasing the single fiber they held in each of their hands. Laughing at the absurdity, the arbitrariness of untangling the mess they inherited, they twisted their bodies, bending and stretching to find a space through which they could realize their objective: a straight line of thread, a direct link to one another. It became clearer what it meant to serve in such a coalition — they would unravel the complexities of binational agreements that had been ratified without them, and now advocate for inclusion in their implementation, together.

After three days, they had identified common challenges concerning women from Sudan and South Sudan, as well as the areas in which they could effectively participate in working toward a resolution. They issued a communiqué to their governments and the African Union, putting forward their priorities. The initial negotiation process had excluded women and the conflict had once again erupted. Let the implementation of Sudan and South Sudan's cooperation agreements serve as an opportunity to redress this error, they insisted. During the demilitarization of the border, they proposed the inclusion of women in a task force on the ground — a bridge between communities in the conflict zone and the committees formed by the African Union. Gender-sensitive appointees could monitor and address rights violations that could potentially occur during the process; they could fill the vacant space that existed between the grassroots and their governments. This was the message they presented to the High Level Implementation Panel within the African Union; its leader accepted it in both letter and principle.

No one had expected women from Sudan and South Sudan to come together — uninvited — as one voice, with one agenda. Their strength lay in their numbers, their commitment to coalition. *When you are many,* Philister realized, *you can move mountains.* And defy borders.

Home

Stately blue steeples rose from the bungalow, its walls clothed in roughcast concrete. The land that supported the house was boggy after months of rains; it had required a sturdy, high foundation, adding unplanned height to the building. From the road, a bold indigo roof peaked above the property's gates, the structure unintentionally exalted — a modest monument to her struggle.

Before Philister had developed it, the plot of land bore only grass. She had quietly planned its future, proudly pacing along its edges, this square of Juba—a humble corner of the new nation to which it belonged.

It was hers.

After five decades of conflict, six years of transition and a one-week referendum, Sudan had been divided and the south reborn — independent by its own choosing. The new nation also made welcomed provisions for land ownership by its female citizens. *When rights are entrenched in the Constitution, they are demandable*, Philister had once explained to young activists. *When you don't fight for them, they become as privileges to you.* No longer did she need to supply her husband's name, his consent, to purchase as her own a patch of red soil, a piece of her country. It was a right for which she had fought — and women had won.

"Auntie, let me help," her nephew, Benjamin, had said when he learned of her plans. "Allow me to create the designs for this house. It will be beautiful, I promise." He was an architect now, the grown son of Sicilia, the beloved sister Philister had lost in the war. This would be a project for the whole family — to build a home always full, a place in which the future that would be created would serve as some compensation for the past that had been stolen.

Memories of these early years had sustained Philister during displacement, when life had been arrested, perpetually paused, advancing only through the presence of hope. *Until this war ends*, she had told her son, her nephews and her nieces*, we must survive like birds of the air*. They do not have fields. They cannot grow any crops. But they don't starve. They don't fall from the sky, dropping down dead. God takes care of them. *We must let Him take care of us*.

Philister never doubted that, in her lifetime, there would exist a *new* Sudan, a country where rains still would fall, but where, finally, the land would be encouraged to blossom. Even to dream, to conceive of such a future, required courage.

"One day, we will overturn these tables," the young southern Sudanese students at the University of Juba used to say.

"No situation remains static," Philister would reply, a peer twice their age. "Those who endure will be saved. Now, we suffer — but someday, we will be all right."

In such times, Philister had spoken quietly of a land waiting 1,000 miles south, yet carried with her everywhere, surviving in prayer, in song, in struggle.

Its name, its face, its colors could change, but this was home — the one place to which she had always belonged.

A land where I can stay in peace.

A land where I will not be chased like a dog from one desert place to another.

A land where I will eat honey, grow the foods of my choice.

A land I can consider as mine.

My ancestral land, the land of my memories.

A CONVERSATION WITH PHILISTER BAYA LAWIRI

The following is an edited compilation based on interviews conducted by Sally Kantar between Aug. 23 and Oct. 4, 2013. It is supplemented by additions from an interview conducted by IPJ Senior Program Officer Diana Kutlow on Sept. 26, 2013.

Q: Family is an important theme throughout your stories. Can you tell us about the family that you have raised?

A: When I got married, I had wanted to have a child. When he was born, I called him Emmanuel, meaning "God is with us." You know, my elder brother and my second brother got accepted to the University of Khartoum to study law, but my father persuaded my eldest brother to study education instead. In the case of my second brother, the war broke and we had to go to East Africa. And later on, my child — he also wanted to study law. Now, he is in the College of Law at the University of Juba. I want his life to be exemplary to others. The behavior of the children, it reflects on the parents.

I brought up my sister's son and my brother's son alongside Emmanuel. We were treating them like children of the same parents. People did not know the difference; they would think that we have three children. They are very close until today. I have three boys — they are all with me. I feel strongly that I work for my family. I invest all my resources in them. I feel that is a duty, and I always find joy in giving. In our society in South Sudan, when you have misfortunes, you can call members of your clan, you discuss, and then you all brainstorm how to help the situation. You may not know them personally, but you know the family trees.

Q: How is this desire to help — or "carry one another's burden," as your father said — rooted in cultural values?

A: I'm telling you, I consider Africans the most generous people. We spend more of our money serving others or cooking or giving to people. We are a communal society. When anybody comes to our house, we must give them food. A woman who does not cook food in abundance for people is a bad woman in our society. I was brought up that way. My father's house — a house of a priest — was a house for everybody. So many people would come, and my mother cooked a lot of food. Especially in South Sudan, the life of a person is food, and being good is giving. This is what we believe, that the hand that gives is a good person. We should be somebody who shares what little we have with others, somebody who comes to people's aid in a time of need. This is a South Sudanese value. The Sudanese also behave like that. It's similar.

Q: You have a high level of responsibility not only to your family, but also to the women of your country. How have you balanced your work in government with your commitment to civil society? And how did you sacrifice?

A: From the beginning, I was using my resources, even for the registration of Southern Women Solidarity for Peace and Development. When there is any conference, it is my car, with the fuel, to carry everything, to facilitate everybody. Sometimes, the workshops, I used to finance them. And some people considered it crazy: *Your meager resources, why should you use it on the public?* But if you

believe in a cause, you can always lose. You don't mind. I always hope that in every challenge, there is opportunity somewhere. So I always try to live positively.

Until now, I have two identities because of this work I'm doing. I'm a member of the government in South Sudan and also I'm working with my organization. This is a benevolent organization — I help women to empower them on their rights. When I work here, I don't earn money from it. As long as I'm not paid and I'm just giving my time to others, I don't see any reason to pull out. In the roles I have taken in the government, I'm always expected to be independent-minded, like in the Electoral Commission. I was to be nonpartisan, independent. It is the same way in the Civil Service Commission.

Also, I don't normally take my annual leave; I will always keep it, because I know that as a civil society activist I will have a lot of things to do. I sometimes can save two, three, four years. This is how I was able to combine civil society work with my professional work while I was employed in a bank. And until today, this is what I'm doing and this is what has enabled me to come here to San Diego.

Q: But your work for peace began long before your career at Ivory Bank. How did you first get involved in the documentation of human rights violations in Khartoum?

A: The Arabs were really suffering also. They were the ones who introduced me to this work for peace. I had a good friend, Magda Ali. I met her through my sister, Helen. Helen worked as a nurse, and Magda Ali was a medical doctor. Helen introduced me to Magda. And when she met me, it was because I was tailoring African clothes, and she started coming to me for these clothes. She even helped me to add more to my tailoring shop by allocating funding so that I could improve the shop.

We started sharing stories, too. I told her of how my father, sister and cousin perished in the war. Then she told me that when things like that happen, it's always good to document the stories so that you can expose them. It's not good to remain with these stories like this. That was when she started introducing me to this human rights work, to monitor human rights situations.

I told her that a lot of abuses were happening in the suburbs of Khartoum in the IDP camps. She was also a civil society activist who knows about all this — she had an organization called Al-Manar. Then through her connections she got funding for me to go and get trained in the Philippines. She sent me to do that training so I could impart the same knowledge to human rights lawyers from her organization. When I came back, I also started doing a "training of trainers" for human rights, underground. So that was how I got sensitized to the work for peace. I wouldn't have become an activist if I had not experienced suffering, and later shared these sad stories with Magda. I wouldn't have become an activist if I had not been a tailor.

Q: How did you transition into doing peace work and advocacy on an international level?

A: I had another friend, another Magda — Magda El-Sanousi. She was a civil society activist who believed strongly in social justice. She is very special in my life. We met one another in a workshop. She said to me, "Philister, we could do a lot of things." She asked me to identify some of the South Sudanese women intellectuals who could both read and write. We came together, and she brought

up the idea of a book. She felt strongly that the international community must be educated on what was going on in Sudan. Some people were afraid, but later on, we all agreed to do it — Magda was very sincere. So we took up the topics. We gave ourselves a timeline. Then we started doing our research writing.

The book was called *The Tragedy of Reality: The Southern Sudanese Women Appeal for Peace.* Magda wanted to make sure that we carry this book to The Hague Appeal for Peace. We finished it on time. She gave me and my colleague, Bruna Siricio, 40 copies. But how to carry these books? We were very worried. We thought we would be intercepted. We carried them among our clothes. We went to The Hague. We were one day late, but we tried to distribute the books to people. I was asked by several groups to talk about human rights issues in Sudan, but I gave that information under the condition of anonymity. We told them, "Don't record it. It could be dangerous for us. It could mean arrests on arrival [in Sudan]." I was explaining, but not giving official presentations. I was working sideways.

Q: Why was this book important to the struggle?

A: I found that people didn't really know much about Sudan. And people didn't know much about the suffering of the people of the south, the impact of the war on the southern population. So this book exposed everything. A lot of things were happening that were not being reported, because people didn't know how to tackle them. So those of us who were living inside Sudan, we did a lot of work to make awareness about what is happening. That was my first peace work.

Q: Looking back, how were southern women in particular both involved in and impacted by the conflict?

A: Women of South Sudan are very strong now. We have shifted roles during the war. We have even proved our capabilities to the men during the war. So we have become different, because of these things we have gone through. You know, when you go through these situations, it empowers you.

But when I say that the war empowered the women, I mean that it made the southern Sudanese women, especially, prove their capabilities. Because when the war intensified and men lost sources of livelihood, it was women who took the role of caring for the families. They would go to do some small income-generating activities, like food vendoring or selling tea, or doing what I was doing, tailoring. You become the sole breadwinner. You get some money, you are able to afford food in the house. You are able to send children to school.

Women were also combatants. Some of them perished with the men in the warfront. We were the ones caring for the wounded, even making food — a lot of things we did. We even organized rallies as activists. We used to go to international conferences, making presentations, raising awareness about the horrors of the war.

What is there we didn't do? We all played crucial roles. If we didn't do that, who would have done it? So we really proved our potential to men. And this is why we are really claiming our right to be included also. If it is mental work, and if a man can do it, I can see no reason why I should not be part of it. This is why we are claiming for space in everything!

"What is there we didn't do? We all played crucial roles. If we didn't do that, who would have done it? So we really proved our potential to men. And this is why we are really claiming our right to be included also."

Q: How did women help South Sudan to earn its independence?

A: We keep on telling the men, without the active participation of women in the [2011] referendum — women voted 52 percent — we wouldn't have created this country of South Sudan.

Q: In your opinion, what difference does it make when women are represented in the government? How does it impact policy and the way the state itself functions?

A: It impacts policies in so many ways. I feel that for the women to access political decision-making in the halls of power, it makes a lot of difference. First of all, women's political participation is a matter of human rights and social justice, because I know in any country, women constitute either 50 percent of the population, or they are more than men — and they deserve to be represented.

Secondly, women have very different experiences — they look at issues differently. For me, I feel that when women are in central positions of power, they tend to make decisions with a human face, because they are the mothers of the country. And in most cases, they exhibit a compassionate style of leadership.

Q: How do you see your previous work manifested in South Sudan's governance today?

A: Two of the women who I trained [to serve on the Electoral High Committees of 2010], are in the Electoral Commission for South Sudan. One is the deputy chairperson, and another is a member. They are the two I mentored. When I see that somebody has been elevated — it is a pride for all of us as women. I always celebrate our strengths, celebrate our successes. For me, that is very, very important. And that is the thing I will continue doing all my life.

Q: How does the Constitution of South Sudan both protect the rights of women and provide for their inclusion in decision-making?

A: I'm really proud of South Sudan, because the laws are very gender-sensitive. With the making of the Constitution in post-conflict South Sudan, we made sure we would have equal rights with men. The Constitution says women and men have equal rights in enjoyment of economic and political things — all. And women have the right to own land, property. It used to be if you had female children, and your husband dies, you could be stripped out of that land with your children, because they are girls. The relatives will take it. It is happening in many countries.

But I am very happy that in South Sudan, things are different. You can get your land if your husband dies, and you have the right to the land title of your deceased husband because you co-owned it. South Sudan is very exemplary — maybe because they have recognized our contribution during the time of the conflict. So I am really proud of that. I can own land. I can develop my own plot. I can do all my business. Nobody can interfere with me.

"South Sudan is very exemplary — maybe because they have recognized our contribution during the time of the conflict. So I am really proud of that. I can own land. I can develop my own plot. I can do all my business. Nobody can interfere with me."

We also have this 25 percent affirmative action in the Constitution in South Sudan — a gender quota for women in government. But we must exceed 25 percent. For me, I always tell the women that I don't talk of this 25 percent. This is only a Constitutional obligation. It is only the minimum. But there is no sky limit for us.

Q: How do you envision getting more women involved?

A: We, Southern Women Solidarity for Peace and Development, had a workshop. I invited women legislators, women in executive chairs of commissions, women in civil society. And the theme of the workshop was "Uphold 25 Percent Affirmative Action for Women's Participation in Decision-making." I made a presentation on gender and governance. I made statistics of all the key decision-making positions in South Sudan, from the top levels, down to the ambassadors appointed. Most of them fall below the benchmark of 25 percent. There is a wide discrepancy between the professed idea, the constitutional mandate, and the reality on the ground.

The women became very serious. I told them I had called them there for strategizing. So they agreed, in the group discussion, to make a database of women professionals. They will network with all of the civil society organizations, so that they come up with a very comprehensive list. This information should be given to responsible authorities, so that when they are making appointments, they can consult this list and see the people with the relevant skills and experiences. When we fall below [the quota], it is always said that women are not there. Now, we will ask, "Whom do you consult to say women are not there?" We are there! So we are going to prepare this database, and send it out. That is what they came up with.

Q: Outside of the leadership sphere, what are some of the unique challenges facing South Sudan's women today?

A: In the rural areas, there are cultural practices and traditions that are challenges to women. Girls, they need to be educated. This is really the backbone of everything. Without education, you cannot participate. And often, it is the girls who lose their education. This is why there is so much disparity.

When the income of a family shrinks, and they have three or four children, and two girls are in school, they may deprive the girls and let the boys continue.

The girl child may have the potential to do better, but parents can compel their children to get married early, even below the age of 18. In South Sudan, in many communities, girls are seen as assets to them, because when they grow up, a girl may command maybe 100 or 200 herds of cattle for the family when she marries. And because they pay cows for you, your brothers may be able to marry. In other communities, they demand cash as bride wealth. You are like property, so divorce is not easy. Even if you have an abusive husband, you may have to stay with him — your parents may force you to stay, because divorce would entail returning some of the cattle. If the cattle has been used for marrying, for your brother, it is difficult to retrieve.

Another challenge is forced inheritance. Among some tribes, when you are married and if the husband dies, the next of kin will take you on. They will have to inherit you as a wife whether you like it or not — this is the forced inheritance of widows. It can really affect you psychologically. Because when you marry your husband, there are some special qualities you like in him. And now you are forced to marry somebody else whose character you don't like, just because he is the brother or cousin of the deceased. It happens, until today.

Q: What are you doing to address these issues?

A: Well, we have started collecting statistics about these kinds of violations on early marriage. We are really struggling to see that there is a marriageable age stipulated in the law, a minimum of 18 years. I am trying to develop a project on addressing violence against women and promoting respect for women's human rights.

I was developing a project where women — gender activists, women leaders, traditional leaders, chiefs in the village — will sit and dialogue, so that their awareness will be raised on women's rights in the Constitution, and also on international human rights instruments. They can understand by talking about or with some of the women role models who are very powerful from that community. We want to do this so that parents really know that they need to uphold women's rights, and what they can do for that. We are trying to develop a project of that kind so that we can target most regions or states where violations are very rampant.

Q: Dialogue has also been an important tool in your work with the Institute for Inclusive Security, in the Coalition of Women Leaders from Sudan and South Sudan. What other national concerns are you trying to address with the support of this group?

A: To me, the biggest challenge is the relationship between Sudan and South Sudan — normalizing the relations between the two countries. We must avoid war. We want to have peaceful coexistence with our neighbor. And we want to live peacefully. We have a common history. We were, once upon a time, the same entity. And we still have relationships. We agree on one common goal — that is, that the cooperation agreements must be implemented. And we want women to be part of it.

Q: What lessons have you learned from your involvement in this coalition?

A: There is a need to have a unity of purpose. When I differ with somebody, then it doesn't mean that I should work against her as a woman to bring her down. One of the training officers was teaching us about leadership. He said that we were brilliant women, that we could even overturn the tables in South Sudan, but the problem is that we were having "PhDs." We said, "what are these 'PhDs?'" And he said "Pull Her Down." As long as we don't stop holding these PhDs, we will never, never be able to access the halls of power and remain there permanently. We should always be working hard to bring those who are down up to the same level with us.

Also, when somebody has to speak for the coalition, you will see people volunteering to do it. But we always say no, you don't just volunteer to represent people. People must choose you. I believe that. I feel that when you are in a group, you can volunteer to serve people. To me that is right. But in a group, people must choose you to represent them. It depends on trust, on the way you articulate issues. If they have confidence in you, then they can choose you to represent them. Volunteer to serve, but not to represent.

"… you don't just volunteer to represent people. People must choose you. I believe that. I feel that when you are in a group, you can volunteer to serve people. To me that is right. But in a group, people must choose you to represent you. … Volunteer to serve, but not to represent."

Q: What personal advice would you give to younger activists?

A: When you live with people, try to leave a good legacy. Because who knows — you will also meet again. You don't work in isolation. And when you end up badly, or you overlook them, you'll find them somewhere better than you. Or, later, even your child will find them. But when you keep good relations, wherever you go, people will always respect you. They will always try to come to your aid. So always remain harmonious with people. Feel like one of them.

Q: Your father, Reverend Canon Ezra Baya Lawiri, has been honored as one of South Sudan's great religious leaders and scholars. What do you imagine he would think of your accomplishments and your activism?

A: In fact, if my father were to live, he would be proud of me, especially the work that I do. What I'm doing, I follow his footsteps. And if he had lived, the independence of South Sudan would be like a promised land, because he was unstable during his life when he was living as a refugee. If he had lived, really, I know that he would be very busy with his community, because he was a very big, very good peacemaker. He would be working with his community, with reconciliation, be reaching to them the spirit of forgiveness. But unfortunately, he was taken before he could see what is happening.

Q: At this stage in your life, what motivates you to continue to do peace work?

A: When you are committed to peace, it becomes part of you. You cannot leave it. I feel like I have never detached myself from this peace and social justice activism. I know many people use civil society work as a springboard — once they go into the government, they abandon it. But for me, I don't abandon it. I remain connected with the people I've been working with in my organization, championing the cause of women. The objective is to empower women in social, economic and political development of the country. But without sustainable peace, democracy cannot thrive. Nothing can take shape without peace. This is how I think about it.

Q: What do you think you can bring back from the Women PeaceMakers Program to further your work in South Sudan?

A: Peacebuilding is a process. We are always in the process of learning. By being here, I've also learned a lot of things from my fellow Women PeaceMakers. I've also read a lot of stories of the previous peacemakers who were here. In fact, I find a lot of unique experiences — very inspiring. This experience has really empowered me. It has really recharged me, to go and work vigorously back in my country. And some of the best practices I've got from my fellow women — maybe when I go back and am faced with similar situations, I'll try to replicate these experiences in my own situation.

"From my coming to San Diego, I've realized that I've accomplished a lot. I didn't know that. … I knew that I had worked for peace, but I didn't know that I had managed to change things."

From my coming to San Diego, I've realized that I've accomplished a lot. I didn't know that. When I applied for this program, I knew that I had worked for peace, but I didn't know that I had managed to change things. So I'm really very much inspired. It has made me recharged to go and do more, and reflect on all the past stories.

BIOGRAPHY OF A PEACE WRITER — Sally Kantar

Sally Kantar is a teacher and freelance writer. She is currently an M.A. candidate in conflict resolution at the University of Bradford in England, where her dissertation research explores the use of critical pedagogy as a tool for social change on the Thai-Burma border. She holds a B.A. in journalism, with a concentration in magazine writing, from Michigan State University, and her final narrative writing project there detailed the journeys undertaken by local refugees from their homes in Sudan to central Michigan. For the last several years Kantar has lived in Thailand, working with community-based organizations dedicated to the pursuit of justice and peace in Burma. While there she taught and developed social justice education courses in conflict and resistance studies, history, peacebuilding, teacher training and writing. Kantar also served as the editor of a collection of autobiographies of young activists affected by Burma's civil war.

JOAN B. KROC INSTITUTE FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE
at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies

The mission of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (IPJ), based at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies, is to foster peace, cultivate justice and create a safer world. The IPJ was established in 2000 through a generous gift from the late Joan B. Kroc to the university to create an institute for the study and practice of peace and justice.

The institute strives, in Joan B. Kroc's words, to not only talk about peace, but also make peace. In its peacebuilding initiatives in places like Nepal and Kenya, the IPJ works with local partners to help strengthen their efforts to consolidate peace with justice in the communities in which they live. In addition to the Women PeaceMakers Program, the institute is home to the Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series and WorldLink Program, and produces several publications in the fields of peace and justice.

ENDNOTES

[1] 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.

[2] This conflict history has been greatly informed by *Hope, Pain and Patience: The Lives of Women in South Sudan*, edited by Friederike Bubenzer and Orly Stern (Jacana Media, 2012).

[3] Wax, Emily. "Widow of Garang steps in to continue his mission." *Sudan Tribune*. August 30, 2005. http://sudantribune.com/spip.php?article11372 (accessed Oct. 19, 2013)

[4] This figure, drawn from the 5th Sudan Population and Housing Census (http://southsudaninfo.net/wp-content/uploads/reference_library/reports/5th_sudan_census26_april_2009.pdf) is contested. Some, such as the Darfur Relief and Documentation Centre, argue that the population of both South Sudan and excluded regions of Sudan is much higher. (www.pambazuka.org/images/articles/470/Sudan.pdf)

[5] Refugees International. *South Sudan Nationality: Commitment Now Avoids Conflict Later.* [Field Report] May 29, 2012. www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?docid=4fc8605a2 (accessed Oct. 19, 2013)

[6] International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. *South Sudan: Annual Report, July-December 2011*. Sept. 13, 2012. www.ifrc.org/docs/appeals/annual11/MAASS00111ar.pdf (accessed Oct. 19, 2013)

[7] Kagumire, Rosebell. "South Sudan: Women Dream of Independence." Inter Press Service. Jan. 13, 2011. www.ipsnews.net/2011/01/south-sudan-women-dream-of-independence/ (accessed Oct. 19, 2013)

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