

Literacy Brokering: Learning to Navigate a New Community Among Sudanese Refugees

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Abstract

In this paper, I present a cross-case analysis of data from two related ethnographic case studies of literacy practices in two Sudanese refugee communities in the U.S., with the purpose of exploring the ways in which (a) participants' beliefs and values about community influenced their literacy practices, and (b) the ways in which *literacy brokering* was used as a tool to both learn about literacy practices and build community. Findings indicate that community issues shaped many of the participants' literacy practices. Additionally, literacy practices were an important mediator of both relationships among the Sudanese community itself and between Sudanese refugees and Americans. Finally, literacy brokering was an important method of informal learning in which participants were able to gain access to language, literacy, and cultural knowledge.

Keywords: Literacy practices, literacy brokering, community, refugees

1. Introduction

While investigating the literacy practices of Sudanese refugees in the U.S. (Perry, 2009), I learned that several participants owned bilingual Bibles in both Arabic and English. These bilingual Bibles facilitated both participation in church services and interactions with Americans. When questioned about which language he preferred for the Bible, one participant emphatically replied:

“English! Because we need to practice....You can talk with the people about the Bible in English.”

Another participant reported that her church friends frequently helped her during services, when she used her bilingual Bible to follow along with what was happening:

When I have the Bible in my language and English, somebody will help me, because he know the English. He tell me the name in the Bible. I will know. I will write down in Arabic to know. Next time when they read the page, I will know.

These data illustrate a number of important themes among the results of this study, including the ways in which texts and literacy practices mediated community participation among the refugees, and the informal help they sought in learning a new language (English) and learning about new texts and practices, a phenomenon I describe as *literacy brokering*. In this paper, I present a cross-case analysis of

data from two separate but related case studies of literacy practices in two Sudanese refugee communities in Michigan in the U.S. The first case investigated literacy practices among orphaned refugee youth (Perry, 2007, 2008), while the second focused on literacy practices among Sudanese families. Here, I focus specifically on how these refugees navigated a new context, and what their practices reveal about community participation – both in terms of participation among the Sudanese community and participation with new communities in the U.S.

The experience of migration is central to this analysis. All of the participants in this study were born in southern Sudan, and all became refugees as a result of the protracted war in Sudan, sojourning in various countries before ultimately being resettled in Michigan. Participants' literacy practices changed as they migrated from one context to the next and navigated new literacy landscapes – they encountered and adopted new practices or abandoned or transformed old ones. Unlike most in their villages, the orphaned youth had opportunities to become literate once they left the Sudan, and many of their oral practices transformed into written ones (Perry, 2008); the parents in the families, while already literate in Arabic, developed English-language literacy practices and encountered new genres and new literacy practices (Perry, 2009).

The following research questions guided this analysis: (1) How do participants' beliefs and values shape particular language and literacy practices related to community participation? And (2) How does the practice of literacy brokering transact with community participation?

2. Theoretical Framework

I situate this study within a conceptual framework that views language and literacy as practices that are shaped by social, cultural and political contexts. A focus on history, culture, community, family and other layers of context is essential in understanding the ways people engage with and participate in activities (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991).

2.1 Literacy as a Social Practice

Rather than emphasizing literacy as a skill to be possessed, theoretical perspectives that view literacy as a social and cultural practice emphasize the everyday ways in which people use reading, writing, and texts in the world – that is, what people actually do with written language. Literacy practices are shaped by social, cultural, economic, political, and ideological factors (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Purcell-Gates, 2007; Street, 2001). Context, thus, plays an important role in shaping literacy in a particular community. Because practices are shaped by context and change over time, a sociocultural perspective on literacy challenges us to examine the ways in which literacy practices are adopted, rejected, adapted, and/or transformed (Luke, 2003). Such an examination is particularly salient when individuals move across contexts and encounter new languages, new texts, and new literacy practices.

Cope and Kalantzis (2000) and the New London Group (2000) urge us to recognize that the world is in a process of rapid change, as globalization and increased migration change communities, and as new technologies fundamentally alter the semiotic systems through which we make sense of the world and the ways in which knowledge is created and shared. They argue that the most important skill that learners need to develop is the ability to negotiate various dialects, discourses, genres, and other ways of making meaning.

2.2 Literacy Brokering

Literacy brokering is one specific type of literacy practice that occurs in a variety of contexts and for a variety of purposes, and it is an important tool that people use when learning to navigate a new literacy landscape. Drawing upon previous discussions of brokering of written texts (e.g., Mazak, 2006; Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, & Meza, 2003), as well as those related to broader conceptualizations such as language brokering (e.g., Morales & Hanson, 2005) and cultural brokering (e.g., Chu, 1998; Gentemann & Whitehead, 1983), I define literacy brokering as a process of seeking and/or providing informal assistance about some aspect of a given text or literacy practice. Brokers bridge linguistic, cultural and textual divides for others. While the activity of brokering, broadly defined, certainly

includes oral practices and traditions, I focus my analysis on print-based literacy brokering practices. Literacy brokering is a complex activity that may involve one aspect of a text, such as translation of word meanings, mediation of cultural content, or explanation of genre aspects of a printed text, or it may involve many of these aspects at once (Perry, 2009). Scholars conceptualize brokering in different ways. Orellana and her colleagues (2003) and Mazak (2006) examine brokering in the context of language difference, in which brokering occurs as individuals who are literate in one language seek help with a text in another language. Other researchers, in contrast, treat brokering in the context of illiteracy, low literacy, or learning disability, such as Prinsloo & Breier (1996) and Farmer (2000). In my own prior analysis of data from the Sudanese family study (Perry, 2009), I found that while participants often needed language support, they more frequently needed help with cultural or genre issues surrounding the text.

2.3 Community

According to St. Clair (1998), the construct of *community* lies somewhere between individuals and larger institutions and mediates between individual agency and social structures. In contrast to most conceptualizations that may be vague or imply homogeneity, St. Clair advocates for a definition of community which recognizes both commonality and diversity. I adopt this construct of community, as I find it particularly useful in describing communities in diaspora, such as the Sudanese refugees in this cross-case analysis. That is, the Sudanese community in Michigan represented a diverse range of ethnic, linguistic, religious, and other groups that likely would have had little to do with each other in their native country, but which had more or less coalesced into a community in the U.S.

3. Methodology

In this cross-case analysis, I examine data from two case studies of literacy practices among two groups of southern Sudanese refugees in the same city in the U.S. Both cases are part of the larger Cultural Practices of Literacy Study (CPLS) (<http://cpls.educ.ubc.ca/>), which is designed to both describe

the literacy practices of marginalized communities and create a database that allows for principled cross-case analyses of ethnographic literacy practices data. As with all cases included in the CPLS project, these separate studies used a common methodology for data collection and analysis, which permits legitimate analysis across cases.

3.1 Participants

To locate appropriate participants for both studies, I used representative sampling through reputational case selection (Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte, 1999). Because I was interested in literacy practices and schooling for the refugees in the U.S., criteria for participation in the first study included being an orphaned youth who ultimately attended an institution of higher education. For the second study, I purposefully selected families that represented different levels of formal schooling to challenge the stereotype that African refugees are mostly uneducated. I also sought families with young children in kindergarten or first grade with at least one adult in each family speaking English well enough to be able to communicate with me to a reasonable degree. Table 1 presents a comparison of the participants in this study.

Insert Table 1 about here

3.2 Role of the Researcher

My interest in the local Sudanese community began after I served in the U.S. Peace Corps in Lesotho, Africa. I volunteered as a tutor with local orphaned Sudanese refugee youth, which began my close involvement with the community over 5 years. During both studies, I acted as a cultural broker and community mentor for many refugees, who often asked for my help with everyday issues. I also provided academic and ESL tutoring to all participants, as well as their children. In return, participants invited me to share in community events. These roles provided me with access to multiple Sudanese contexts and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of brokering.

3.3 Data Collection

Data collection for both studies relied upon participant observation, interviews, and collection of artifacts. Data collection for the youth study occurred from April to October 2003. Data collection for the family study occurred over 18 months, from February 2005 to July 2006. Observations and participation occurred in a variety of settings, including homes and community contexts. I wrote field notes in each setting, including observations as well as word-for-word and paraphrased transcriptions of conversations. I conducted a variety of interviews, in English, with participants that were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Some interviews were open-ended, recording general oral histories of participants' lives. Other interviews were semi-structured, eliciting specific information regarding literacy and educational practices. Finally, I collected and/or photocopied textual artifacts that were available to the refugees in a variety of contexts, such as flyers for ESL programs, and texts created by participants, such as essays or application documents.

3.4 Data Analysis

Initial data analysis for both of these projects followed the methodology developed by the CPLS team; for detailed description, see Purcell-Gates, Perry & Briseño (2011). Briefly, data analysis involved identifying each *literacy event* in the data (Heath, 1983), and then coding those events with a set of theoretically derived codes including: participant, text, language of the text, mode (e.g., reading or writing), function for reading/writing that text, purpose of the literacy event, and social activity domain. Coding occurred in AtlasTi, a qualitative data analysis software that allows for various types of data management, coding, and analysis (AtlasTi, 2007).

For this cross-case analysis, I revisited the data, selecting literacy events that related to community participation. Many of these events were marked with the code for the social activity domain of community participation, but I also identified events in other domains that also appeared to involve aspects of community, such as civic participation and spirituality. I then identified the events

that also represented a brokering event. I used AtlasTi's query tool (1) to find all co-occurrences of various domains, such as community participation and civic participation, to see where these literacy practices overlapped in participants' lives, and (2) to locate all co-occurrences of the "brokering" code family with the domains.

4. Findings

With respect to the first research question – How do participants' beliefs and values shape particular language and literacy practices related to community participation? – the results of the cross-case analysis suggest that community was an important motivation in shaping many of the literacy practices in which participants engaged. Much language and literacy learning occurred as participants adopted new practices or adopted new languages and texts for old practices. With respect to the second research question – How does the practice of literacy brokering transact with community participation? – findings suggest that literacy brokering was an important tool for helping Sudanese participants gain access to these languages, texts and practices. In the following sections, I provide contextual information about the Sudanese community in Michigan and describe the ways in which (a) literacy practices reflected beliefs and values about community, (b) these practices mediated various aspects of community, and (c) literacy brokering was a learning tool used by the Sudanese in mediating community.

4.1 Context

A strong sense of community pervaded the Southern Sudanese community in Michigan. As Ezra explained, "We are a community-oriented people." Of course, this description could apply to most communities, yet participants appeared to view their traditional sense of community as qualitatively different from the type of community they experienced in the U.S. Ezra explained that "here, I find it rather strange that you live with somebody next to you, either on the right or on the left, or somebody above you or below you, and you don't know each other. It's strange. It's totally foreign to me."

4.1.1 Diversity within community.

The Southern Sudanese community in Michigan was diverse, representing a wide variety of ethnic/tribal, linguistic, and regional affiliations. While most of the orphaned youth were Dinka (the largest tribal group in Sudan), some represented other tribal affiliations. Francis, for example, was from the Madi tribe, and he did not know anyone else in the area who spoke Madi. (Likewise, nearly all of the orphaned Sudanese youth were boys [see Perry, 2008 for an explanation], although one or two “Lost Girls” had resettled in Lansing.) Many of the Southern Sudanese families, including Viola’s and Falabia’s, had come from the Equatoria region in the far south of the country, while Akhlas and her family were from the Nuba ethnic group, hailing from the Nuba Mountains region in central Sudan. Tribal and regional affiliations were very important to participants in this study. Many participated in organizations associated with a particular regional or ethnic group: Akhlas had been elected the secretary of a Nuba organization that spanned several U.S. states; Chol frequently held leadership positions in local and state groups of orphaned youth; Isbon served for a time as the elected leader of the local Southern Sudanese community.

Another important community distinction appeared to be between the orphaned youth and the “families” (as participants referred to Sudanese refugees who were not part of the so-called “Lost Boys” group) – a division both reported by participants and observed by me. This division likely existed for a variety of reasons, including different tribal & regional affiliations. Additionally, the orphaned youth and families had taken widely divergent refugee pathways and had very different experiences as a result. The youth had left the Sudan at a very young age (Francis and Chol both estimated that they were about four years old when they fled) and had sojourned in both Ethiopia and Kenya, where they typically lived with groups of other youth and were educated – in English – before resettling in Michigan. The families, in contrast, usually sojourned in Cairo, Egypt (although Viola’s family sojourned in Lebanon) and typically had fewer educational opportunities in Egypt than the youth who had sojourned in Kenya. Similarly,

most families were fluent in the Sudanese dialect of Arabic, while the orphaned youth spoke little Arabic and instead tended to be more conversant in English. Shortly after I met her, Viola explained that there was not very effective communication between the various sub-sets of the Sudanese community. For example, she explained, “We don’t know the Lost Boys, and they don’t know us.” She added, “They feel like families don’t like them.”

Despite these differences, participants expressed a desire for unity and collaboration among the wider Sudanese community in Michigan. One factor that united most of the refugees in the area was that they were all Christian – an important factor in why they were refugees, as they had fled an oppressive Islamist regime in the Sudan. As Viola explained, “All of us are Christian... That mean all of us have to unite here.” Viola lamented the fact that the community remained leaderless following the tragic death of the elected leader, and she felt they needed a strong person to unite the diverse community. Viola believed that the community needed to “unite, to remember all the time we’re Sudanese.” Indeed, the community seemed to be uniting in many ways. Funerals, celebrations and other gatherings often drew a broad swath of the Sudanese community), and the community often pulled together to support each other. I once observed a welcome celebration in which Isbon presented the new family with \$900 that had been collected from among the entire community. However, in the absence of strong leadership, this type of community support was sporadic.

4.2 Literacy Practices Related to Community

Many of the literacy practices in which participants engaged reflected their beliefs about community and mediated their attempts to build and maintain a strong Sudanese community in exile. This is not surprising, given the CPLS theoretical framework, which explains the ways in which texts, literacy events, and literacy practices mediate social activity in various domains of life, including community participation. What is interesting and relevant here are the ways in which participants’ experiences as refugees migrating to a new context shaped the ways in which they used literacy – that

is, the ways in which they adapted old practices to fit the new context or adopted entirely new practices.

Efforts to organize the local Sudanese community engendered diverse literacy practices, many of which began before participants even arrived in the U.S. Chol described writing letters in the refugee camp to the Kenyan government or to the U.N. as ways in which refugees could protest the conditions in the camp. Other literacy practices in the camp were aimed at helping to preserve cultural and tribal identities; Ezra had helped develop a primer to be used to teach Dinka literacy, and he had also been trained as a translator in order to translate the Bible into Dinka. Ezra had a keen interest in linguistics, and he felt that preserving the Dinka language in writing was key to helping to preserve the Dinka culture for the refugees who were in diaspora.

As the orphaned youth resettled in Michigan, they continued literacy practices related to organizing and maintaining their communities, and they also developed new practices. Although never having used a computer before arriving in the U.S., Chol quickly adopted digital technologies and used the computer for both his schoolwork and for other purposes, such as typing up meeting minutes, writing letters to community members about the upcoming May 16th celebration to commemorate the start of Sudan's civil war (see Figure 1), or creating meeting agendas (see Figure 2) in his role as the planning committee's secretary.

Place Figure 1 about here

Place Figure 2 about here

Chol's informational letter regarding the planning meeting reflects the important ways in which refugees' literacy practices shifted or changed as they migrated to a new context. Participants – particularly the orphaned youth – repeatedly emphasized the oral nature of life in the Sudan, noting

that oral communication was valued much more highly than written. Prior to resettling in the U.S., such an invitation would have been circulated by word of mouth rather than written on paper (a scarce commodity) to a recipient who likely would have been unable to read it. As they sojourned in the refugee camp and resettled in the U.S., however, print became an increasingly important medium of communication for the orphaned youth, and they began to learn new literacy practices, such as issuing written invitations and developing written agendas.

The agenda that Chol created for the planning meeting is particularly revealing in the ways in which participants took up practices that mediated various aspects of the Sudanese community. The document reflects the ways in which community members were sensitive to various ethnic and tribal differences among the community, such as by considering dances from different Dinka sub-groups and for groups from the Equatoria region. The organizers invited members of the American community during this celebration, as well; Chol's agenda reflects attempts to reach out to the American community, such as through suggestions to contact various news outlets and to provide food that might appeal to Americans unfamiliar with traditional Sudanese foods.

Practices related to community organizing also occurred among the families. As recognized leaders, Viola and Isbon received mail, in both English and Arabic, related to community issues. Akhlas also was elected to leadership positions among the wider Nuba community at both regional and national levels in the U.S. During one visit to her home, I observed Akhlas hunched over a sheaf of looseleaf papers filled with Arabic writing, which she was copying neatly into a spiral notebook. As secretary of a Nuba community group, she had taken notes of "the things we talked about." The groups, Akhlas explained, organized various types of fundraisers: "We want to bring ideas together...what we can do in the country in the future," such as raising money to dig wells in the Nuba Mountains or providing funding for nurses and schools in the region, "to bring teachers who can teach people to read and write." As Akhlas explained, she felt a duty to support those left behind: "I like to do something in

my country. Everybody wants their country to be better. God, He bring us to America to do something for them—He doesn't bring us here for nothing.”

These examples suggest that literacy practices involving digital technologies, such as computers, were an area in which much learning occurred. Indeed, all participants reported that they had never used a computer before resettling in the U.S. However, community was an important motivation in learning digital literacy practices, particularly as participants sought to maintain connections with loved ones who were spread in diaspora around the globe or to stay abreast of news from the Sudan. For example, I observed some of the orphaned youth gather around Chol's computer to read an email from a friend or relative who was still in Kenya. Because none of the participants in either study had ever used a computer before coming to the U.S., they had to quickly develop computer skills such as navigating the internet or using a word processing program. Viola, for example, wanted to open up a Yahoo email account, so that she could stay in touch with friends and family who had resettled in other places. During one visit to the library, I helped Akhlas access news about the Sudan on the internet, and together we discovered how to change the language of the site from English into Arabic. Falabia she frequently used her computer to stay abreast of Sudanese news; she even had learned how to bookmark specific Sudanese news sites.

Participants' use of digital technologies, particularly in contrast to Akhlas' recording of minutes by hand, reflect the wide range of language and literacy practices in this community. At first glance, participants like Chol, Viola and Falabia appear to have learned more about, or perhaps better adapted to, the language and literacy context in the U.S. After all, these participants are effectively engaging in digital literacy practices in English, while Akhlas appears to be “stuck” in old practices, such as copying out her minutes by hand in Arabic. However, contextual constraints play an important role in shaping these practices. Chol's use of English, for example, reflects the fact that English was the *lingua franca* at meetings among a multilingual community. Akhlas' use of Arabic, in contrast, reflects the reality that

Arabic was the dominant language in her community organization. While Chol and the other youth were certainly more capable with computers, his use of a computer (and Akhlas' use of loose-leaf paper) reflects a reality in which orphaned youth had computers in the home and access to learning about them through their schools and in which Akhlas, like many refugees, neither could afford a computer nor had access to one at her job.

4.3 Literacy Practices Mediate Relationships with Americans

Although participants clearly felt it was important for them to develop and maintain a strong Sudanese community in their new home, they also felt that it was very important to integrate with their new American neighbors while they maintained their Sudanese communities, cultures and identities.

4.3.1 Merging with the American community.

Many of the orphaned youth had initially been placed in foster homes upon resettlement until they reached legal adulthood, and many maintained close ties with their American foster families. For the orphaned youth, and for families with children, schooling provided opportunities for interaction with American community members through after-school activities, such as playing on the soccer team, joining clubs and organizations, or, for parents, attending school events. One of the most significant areas in which Sudanese participants interacted with American community members was at church or through other religious activities. Most Sudanese refugees had been sponsored by a local church during their initial period of resettlement, and participants reported strong relationships with the churches and families that supported them. All participants in both case studies attended local churches, and they developed friendships with the American pastors, staff, and other parishioners at those churches. For many families, the strongest manifestation of their desire to integrate with the American community was their goal to obtain U.S. citizenship. As Isbon explained, "I want to get citizen because this now is my country...because the kids born here. I'm here now—because this is my home now." Among the orphaned youth, in contrast, there was a sense (at least in 2003) that, while they might want to obtain

citizenship, they also planned to go back to the Sudan to help build the “New Sudan”.¹ Participants did not appear to feel that becoming American citizens would require them to abandon their sense of themselves as Sudanese.

4.3.2 Literacy practices connected to American community.

Many of the participants’ literacy practices fostered the development of connections with their new American community. Chol, for example, participated in an organized cultural exchange, where he met with university students and shared (in writing) traditional stories from each culture. As I have written elsewhere (Perry, 2008), orphaned youth used literacy practices to educate the wider world about their experiences as refugees and about the political situation in the Sudan. Many of the literacy practices that mediated community between the Sudanese and Americans occurred in church or other religious settings. In addition to regularly attending services, participants – especially the women – were deeply engaged in the community life of the church. Viola participated in a book club sponsored by her church and invited me to join her for one of the “40 Days of Community” meetings. The church group, comprised of an American church staff member and several women from the congregation, all of whom represented international backgrounds (e.g., Sudan, Cuba), were reading *Better Together: What on earth are WE here for? 40 Days of Community Workbook* (Warren, 2004), written by a nationally-known minister and author of popular books. The book was a collection of 40 readings and activities to be completed over 6-7 weeks. Participants watched a video, used the book as a study guide, and prayed together. As part of their reading of the book, the group identified a need in the community and worked to alleviate it.

4.4 Literacy Brokering and Community

¹ In the wake of South Sudan’s historic vote to split from Northern Sudan, news agencies report that many of the original Lost Boys have returned to the Sudan to help with development and nation-building (Marlowe, 2007; Sieh, 2010).

Resettling in a new context exposed Sudanese refugees to a variety of new textual genres and literacy practices, in addition to surrounding them with new and unfamiliar digital technologies, and a language – English – with which few were fluent. All of the participants in both case studies were educated, intelligent, literate, multilingual, and highly resourceful individuals; nevertheless, they often needed assistance to navigate the new literacy landscape in which they were living. When participants encountered unfamiliar language, texts, or practices, they utilized *literacy brokering* as an informal learning strategy (Perry, 2009). Participants turned to a variety of brokers – including Americans, other Sudanese, and their own children – when they needed help with texts and practices. As I described in the theoretical framework section, literacy brokering allowed participants to learn about lexico-syntactic/graphophonic, cultural, and genre aspects of texts. Importantly, brokering allowed participants to effectively engage in literacy practices, to learn new practices, and to use literacy and texts to mediate community. Data from both studies suggest that engagement in brokering fostered community participation in a number of additional life domains, including schooling, religion, and citizenship. The examples of Bible usage, at the beginning of this article, are excellent examples of the ways in which participants used bilingual Bibles as a resource to learn English and be able to effectively take part in the religious life of their new communities.

4.4.1 *Brokering events that mediate inter-Sudanese community.*

Few of the brokering events that I observed dealt with literacy events and practices within the wider Sudanese community. This makes sense, given that when Sudanese community members were interacting with each other, they continued to engage with literacy practices which had already been familiar to them before they resettled in the U.S., as Akhlas did when writing meeting minutes by hand. Literacy brokering occurred when participants adopted new technologies for engaging with these practices, however, such as when Viola opened an email account, or when Chol learned how to use word processing programs to create meeting agendas. In these cases, participants were continuing

familiar practices, but slightly shifting the ways in which they engaged in these practices as they adopted digital tools from their new context that could support these literacy practices (i.e., sending an email instead of a written letter).

One interesting instance of literacy brokering occurred between sub-groups of the Sudanese community. Toward the end of data collection for that study, Isbon and Viola asked for my help² with a letter they intended to send to Ohio. The couple had traveled there in order to help with a community problem: an orphaned Sudanese youth in Ohio had impregnated the daughter of Isbon's cousin, but he refused to marry or support her. Isbon's letter asked about the youth's intentions toward the woman and explained the family's position that he should "respect the girl" by marrying and supporting her. Isbon had written the letter in Arabic, but the intended recipient did not speak or read Arabic. Isbon and Viola were not confident in their written English abilities and wanted the letter to "sound nice", so they asked for help with this important matter. They orally translated the Arabic letter into English, which I wrote down. Together, we edited the English to ensure that it reflected their intended message. Determining how to address the envelope also involved brokered negotiation; after consulting with each other, Isbon and Viola determined that it would be best to send the letter indirectly via Isbon's cousin, who could pass it on to the youth in question. Viola then jotted down the percentage sign (%) and suggested that I use that in addressing the envelope. After some negotiation, I realized that she meant "care of", or %, to indicate that the letter should be sent via Isbon's cousin.

In this case, brokering was necessary precisely because the literacy event involved various members of Sudanese sub-groups proficient in different languages (Arabic and English). Due to the gravity of the situation, it was important to have someone who could broker the English language and ensure that the language of the letter was clear and proper. Additionally, addressing the envelope

² Although the participants in these studies relied upon a variety of literacy brokers, many of the events I describe are those for which I myself acted as the broker. These events are the ones for which I had the richest data, as I acted as a co-participant in the events, and my participation offered me additional insight into the nature of literacy brokering.

required a balance between a variety of cultural and practical factors – Isbon and Viola may not have known the youth’s address; it may not have been culturally appropriate for them to send it directly to the youth; and they also had to utilize standard U.S. address protocols (i.e., using the appropriate symbol for “care of”) in order to ensure that the letter was delivered at all. Thus, while involving extended family and community leaders in delicate family/community situations was a common, culturally acceptable practice, it was adapted to fit a new context – one in which negotiations needed to be carried out over a long distance, instead of in person, and one in which U.S. postal conventions needed to be followed. In this instance, brokering allowed Isbon and Viola an opportunity to enhance their English development, and also learn about the proper use of a written symbol for the purpose of sending a letter in care of someone else.

4.4.2 Literacy brokering in events involving Sudanese and Americans.

Not surprisingly, literacy brokering was a common occurrence in practices that involved both the Sudanese and American communities. Meaningful learning and cross-cultural community-building occurred in church and other religious settings, which also necessitated frequent brokering events.

In addition to supporting religious practices, churches and religious groups offered excellent opportunities for Sudanese refugees to reach out to their American neighbors to educate them about the situation in the Sudan, to seek financial support for projects or loved ones back home, or to share aspects of Sudanese tradition and culture. For example, Chol’s friend asked if I would help him with English in a letter that he had written to ask for help with his mother and siblings, who were still back in the refugee camp in Kenya. The letter explained that his mother was sick and caring for younger children, but had no money to pay for medical care, apart from what he could send her. He hoped that various local churches could set up meetings so that he could talk about the issue. In this case, brokering offered this youth an opportunity to learn both about standard English usage, but also about culturally appropriate ways to approach churches to ask for donations.

A great deal of literacy brokering occurred surrounding an African cultural celebration sponsored by a church in May, 2006, that members hoped a great many Americans would attend. The church women’s group was planning and implementing the cultural celebration, and Viola was in charge of creating an informational flyer. Viola wrote out the information for the invitation in Arabic, orally translated it into English for me, and then again asked me to make it “sound nice” in English. Viola was perfectly capable of writing out the flyer in English – as evidenced by the fact that she translated her own writing, since I neither speak nor read Arabic. Yet, because the intended audience for this document was predominantly comprised of Americans (African attendees already knew about the event and invited each other via word of mouth), it was important to Viola that a native speaker of the language edit her English. Events such as these, when the writer was capable but did not feel proficient in English, or when it was faster to have a native English speaker write out the text, were events in which the broker may not have been entirely necessary but expedited the event. Although the broker expedited the literacy practice, participants nevertheless had the opportunity to continue to enhance their written English abilities as they helped to negotiate and edit the writing of the text.

Other brokering events occurred at the celebration itself. The day before the celebration, I joined Viola and other women who were decorating the church’s social hall and preparing traditional African foods. Viola wanted to create a banner to welcome everyone – Africans and Americans included. Together, we discussed what to write; she asked me to write “Welcome to the African Festival” in big letters, followed by “Sponsored by the Daughters of Trinity Lutheran Church”, which she would then write in Arabic. As Viola wrote, she explained that she was saying “welcome” three different ways in Arabic—the Sudanese way, the Egyptian way, and the Middle Eastern way (see Figures 3 and 4).

Place Figure 3 about here

Place Figure 4 about here

Creating this multilingual welcome banner engendered other surprising literacy brokering opportunities. As Viola and I were working on our banner, the young son of one of the committee members (a refugee from Cuba) and his American friend came over and asked what we were doing. Absolutely enthralled by the Arabic writing, they asked Viola if she would teach them how to write in Arabic. Because Viola was busy with the preparations, we suggested that they copy what we had already written, which the two boys eagerly did. Viola posted their Arabic writing on the wall below the official welcome poster (see Figure 5). In fact, multiple brokering events occurred in the creation of the welcome banner(s), as I supported Viola in creating an effective bilingual banner, and as she helped the boys understand what they were copying in Arabic.

Place Figure 5 about here

The traditional African foods for the festival provided another area in which the women sought brokering in order to ensure that their American guests would be comfortable. Viola asked me to make labels for all of the foods that they were offering; she wanted to indicate the food's name and its ingredients. The women who cooked the foods dictated the Sudanese or Arabic names for the food, and when they did this, they told me to just spell it how it sounded (see Figure 6). As with other brokering events, although the women were capable of creating these texts themselves, they sought brokers who could ensure that the language was correct, because it was intended for an audience that they perceived as both more fluent than themselves and potentially uncomfortable with unfamiliar African foods. This case of brokering illustrates the transactive nature of brokering, in which learning is not one-sided; the women needed help transliterating the Arabic names of the foods, but they clearly also viewed the food

labels as an opportunity for learning on the part of the Americans, helping them understand what they might be eating. In such cases, the text serves as a tool that mediates cross-cultural understanding.

Place Figure 6 about here

The domain of schooling was another area in which a great deal of brokering occurred, as Sudanese parents supported their children's educations and as they attempted to navigate the unfamiliar expectations of their children's teachers and schools – expectations that were often radically different than those they had experienced in the Sudan. As I have described elsewhere (Perry, 2009), local schools sent home many different texts each week, and these texts sparked a great deal of brokering for the parents as they attempted to make sense of all of these papers. Texts regularly sent home by the schools included the children's homework, notes from the teacher, school or classroom newsletters, permission slips, information or registration forms for various clubs and activities, and flyers for community programs and events (such as library programs or Boy Scouts). Many of these texts represented attempts on the parts of the schools to welcome parents into the school community, or to support other community initiatives.

The schools expected parents to read or fill in, sign, and return these documents, yet the parents frequently demonstrated uncertainty about these texts, even when they understood the English used in them. The texts included embedded cultural content or information, to which the Sudanese parents did not have access. For example, Viola's son's school sent home a flyer about the Cub Scouts – a program for young boys through the Boy Scouts of America. Not knowing what the Cub Scouts was, and having no way to distinguish between programs that were offered by the school and those that were from non-school community organizations, Viola sought my advice about whether or not to enroll her son. I explained about the Cub Scouts to Viola, noting that the group met after school. Ultimately,

Viola decided not to sign up her son for Cub Scouts that year, because he took the school bus home each day, and she could not arrange her own transportation for the scouting program. In this case, Viola did not need help with the language of the text; she understood the English. Instead, she needed cultural information from the broker (me) about the Cub Scouts in order to help her decide whether or not to participate in that community organization. As a result, brokering offered her the opportunity to learn more about the cultural context of a community organization for boys.

Other times, parents were unsure or unaware of hidden cultural expectations, such as whether a community event sponsored by the school was required or optional. On one occasion, Akhlas carefully examined a packet of papers the school had sent home with her kindergarten daughter. One text was an invitation for an informational meeting concerning potential budget cuts across the district; the district schools superintendent would be answering questions from the community, and there would be light refreshments and childcare provided. Akhlas asked, "This meeting important? I go or not?" Again, Akhlas understood what the text *said*; what she did not know was how she should respond, how she should *act* based upon that text. She did not know how to differentiate between events in which parent participation was expected, such as parent-teacher conferences, and those that were entirely optional, such as this question-and-answer session for the community with the superintendent. In this case, brokering helped Akhlas learn about the expectations of local schools.

Finally, unfamiliarity with a given genre also could impact parents' community participation related to schools. In the middle of the school year, Viola informed me that the schools had sent home something about ordering books, and she was unsure of how many to order. Viola showed me a flyer for the school's yearbook, noting that she did not know what a yearbook was. I explained the genre, noting that yearbooks are "for fun" and commemorate the school year and classmates. Comprehension dawned on Viola's face, and she noted that one of her children had a similar book from his preschool. She explained her initial confusion by noting that "I think maybe this a special book to study"; in the

Sudan, the government published study guides each year to help prepare students for the annual exams – and if it had been this kind of book, she wanted to order several. Once she had learned the purpose of a yearbook, Viola decided to buy only one, because her sons attended the same school and could share. In events such as this one, brokering was a clear process of learning about some aspect of a genre – its purpose, its use or function in the world, or various features of that type of text.

In the instances described above, literacy practices (in the form of texts sent home to parents by schools) attempted to mediate community, by inviting children to join in community organizations, by inviting parents to participate in the community of parents and schooling, or by offering texts that commemorated the school community itself. In these instances, however, the texts were not enough; brokering was required to help parents learn knowledge about U.S. school systems, U.S. community organizations, certain genres, and cultural expectations that American teachers and schools hold for parent participation in their children’s schooling – knowledge and expectations that were literally quite foreign to the parents.

5. Discussion

In this analysis, I explored two issues: (1) How do participants’ beliefs and values shape particular language and literacy practices related to community participation? And (2) How does the practice of literacy brokering transact with community participation? Although the limited space in this paper is not enough to completely address these complex issues for two separate extensive, ethnographic studies of literacy practices among Sudanese refugees, the data presented in this paper are a representative sample of the ways in which various literacy practices reflected participants’ beliefs and values related to community, and of the ways in which literacy brokering facilitated both community participation and language and literacy learning.

5.1 Change: A Prominent Theme

Findings from this cross-case analysis suggest that *change* is a prominent theme: Changing contexts shaped both the literacy practices in which these participants engaged and the types of learning that occurred in those practices. Change is not a surprising theme when examining communities that have been displaced, that have migrated and sojourned, and that have ultimately resettled in a new country. As participants left the Sudan, sojourned in second (and in some cases, third) countries, and finally resettled in the U.S., they encountered languages, texts, and literacy practices that were unfamiliar to them in their Sudanese contexts. For the orphaned youth, the opportunity to become literate at all did not even exist until they left the Sudan.

As Sudanese refugees increasingly are in diaspora around the globe, it is not surprising that they utilize literacy practices in such a way to mediate community; that is, community becomes something that is textually mediated when it can be no longer physically or spatially mediated. Whereas participants once lived in close proximity in tight-knit communities, they now find their communities spread over much greater areas – indeed, all over the globe. Under those circumstances, relying on written forms of communication takes on greater prominence. However, turning to new or less-common forms of communication also means learning or further developing skills related to literacy. These skills might include a new language, a new alphabetic system, new cultural expectations, or even new textual genres.

5.2 Community-in-Exile

Maintaining an existing sense of community, building a new community, or forging connections with Americans appeared to be important values held by Sudanese refugees in Michigan. Literacy practices appeared to be particularly important tools that mediated community for this group of refugees, who must adapt and integrate in a new country and culture, while simultaneously maintaining a Sudanese identity. The orphaned youth, in particular, poignantly commented on the importance of literacy in preserving their community and culture. For the orphaned youth in particular, literacy

seemed to be viewed as an especially important tool, precisely because of the generation gap and the lack of access to traditional education. Ezra noted:

There are problems with oral communication or oral forms of keeping things, because if there are no experts or if the older people who are much informed about certain issues are no longer there, then the new people will not know anything, and they will be lost...The new generation will not know anything about the old generation and so there will be a cut.

In this sense, developing literacy skills and practices in a community with strong oral traditions is crucial not only for its ability to maintain a community-in-exile, but also for its ability to preserve an increasingly threatened culture and way of life.

For the refugees in this study, maintaining a sense of themselves as Sudanese, and building a strong Sudanese community meant that they needed to learn new literacy practices and adapt or appropriate others. For example, with the support of various brokers, participants quickly learned how to use digital technologies that facilitated communication with refugees in other cities, other states, and other countries. As Francis explained, "It's the easiest way to communicate at times, because to call a person in Africa costs five dollars, but the Internet is free of charge." Participants used the Internet to stay abreast of important news from the Sudan, which only received minimal coverage in the mainstream media. Participants also appropriated practices; that is, they learned a new practice, but engaged in it for their own purposes. Isbon, for example, began reading the Bible in English instead of his native Arabic, not only for religious purposes, but also in part because it enabled closer relationships with his American congregation.

5.3 Connecting with Americans

Popular rhetoric in the U.S. characterizes immigrants (including refugees) as unwilling to learn English or American customs or to otherwise integrate with U.S. society. Indeed, such beliefs appear to be common in many countries with increasing immigrant populations. Data from this analysis shows

that, at least among the Sudanese community in Michigan, that characterization could not be farther from the truth. Of course, participants maintained a strong Sudanese identity, but they did not see being Sudanese and being American as mutually exclusive. Sudanese refugees sought opportunities to connect with their American hosts and neighbors. Doing so offered opportunities to adopt and adapt new practices, as well as to help Americans learn about their culture, beliefs, and traditions. The two celebrations I described in this paper – the May 16th celebration and the African cultural festival – are excellent examples of the ways in which literacy practices could be used to connect with and teach the American community. Chol's agenda indicates sensitivity to potential American attendees by planning ahead to include some American foods. Similarly, while food dishes at a celebration in the Sudan likely never would have been labeled, the women who planned the African cultural festival took pains to adopt an American practice – labeling each food and its ingredients – so that their American guests would know what they were eating.

Participants in these studies also shared Sudanese literacy practices with their American friends. Chol wrote traditional Dinka folk tales to share with U.S. college students. Viola helped English-speaking boys write a few words in Arabic – and celebrated their enthusiastic work by publicly posting it.

5.4 The Role of Literacy Brokering

Literacy brokering – informal help with texts and practices – played an important role in many of the literacy practices that mediated community, both within the Sudanese community itself and between Sudanese and Americans. As findings from this analysis suggest, brokering is a strategy in which a much informal learning can take place. This learning may involve basic information about how to spell a word in English or what the purpose of a particular type of text is, or it may involve the mediation of community-building opportunities or instances of cross-cultural understanding. Brokering could be as simple as expediting a literacy practice or providing the expertise to polish up a piece of writing so that it sounded nice in English. The literacy events in this paper, however, highlight one

particularly important aspect of brokering, which is the fact that various participants in a brokering event each contribute important knowledge and expertise – when it comes to brokering, no participant knows nothing, and no participant knows everything. This transactive nature of brokering is illustrated in the event in which Viola and I jointly created the welcome banner for the festival. Viola had a clear picture of what she wanted to create, and she also held all of the Arabic language expertise between us, but she was not entirely confident in her English abilities. In this instance, brokering involved negotiation between both participants in order to create an effective bilingual text. The same could be said of the event in which I helped the Sudanese women create food labels – the women clearly held the cooking expertise, and they knew what was in each dish, only needing me to provide correct spelling (and in some cases, the correct word) for the ingredients, and to transliterate the Arabic and Sudanese words into English orthography.

In these events, literacy brokering and specific texts (e.g., the food labels) also facilitated learning on the part of Americans, who gained access to aspects of Sudanese culture and tradition. In other events, the opposite was true – literacy brokering allowed the Sudanese to gain access to American culture (such as expectations for parent participation in school communities). When church friends pointed out the passages in Akhla's bilingual Bible during English church services, this brokering helped her to be a full, and confident, participant in this community.

5.5 Conclusions

One implication of this study is that a focus on literacy practices – what people *do* with texts to accomplish meaningful social and cultural goals – can reveal the ways in which various communities develop and use literacy in ways that are both relevant and useful. Paying attention to the ways in which issues of literacy transact with issues of migration highlights the dynamic nature of literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Literacy practices change over time, and literate actors adopt new practices, adapt and appropriate others, and perhaps even reject old or unnecessary practices. Paying

attention to these changes in literacy practice also highlights the important adaptive learning strategies people use as they encounter new and unfamiliar languages, texts, and practices, such as brokering.

As researchers, the results of this analysis also suggest that we must think carefully about how we define community. When I first conceptualized this analysis, I thought it would be easy to think about the participants of both case studies as a unified community. Methodologically, this was easy to do; conceptually, it was less easy. As I paid attention to participants' words, as I thought more about their backgrounds and experiences, and as I more carefully examined their literacy practices, it became clear that I had to think of the orphaned youth and the families as sub-sets of a larger community. These sub-sets certainly were connected, but in some ways, those connections are artificial. Back in the Sudan, the orphaned youth and the families might never have considered themselves to be part of the same community: except for their uniting against the oppressive Northern regime, these participants represented greatly different ethnic, linguistic, and regional backgrounds, and their refugee pathways experiences also differed a great deal. As a result of moving to the U.S., these participants felt the need to create a community that likely never would have existed in the Sudan.

The results of this analysis have important implications for educational practice. Educators who work with English language learners must recognize that their students encounter far more than a new language and a new culture when they relocate to a new context. Learners also may be encountering new textual genres, new media and technology, and new ways of using literacy in the world. When learners ask "what does this mean?" in conjunction with a text, they may be asking about the literal meaning of the words on the page. Or, they may be asking about hidden cultural meanings or even the textual genre itself. While the specific findings here are necessarily limited to this study, they may nevertheless help us understand some of the ways in which all people, not just Sudanese refugees, engage in informal learning that can help them accomplish certain important goals, such as community-building.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Victoria Purcell-Gates for her support during data collection and analysis of both original case studies included in this analysis.

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Table 1. *Participants' levels of education attained in Africa, participation in educational programs in the U.S., and their occupations in Michigan.*

	PARTICIPANT	EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN AFRICA	EDUCATIONAL PARTICIPATION IN U.S.	U.S. JOB
Orphaned Youth	Chol	Some high school	High school; local private university	Dishwasher at state university
	Ezra	High school diploma	State university	Full-time student
	Francis	High school diploma	Community college	Fast food
Akhlas' Family	Akhlas	7th grade	ESL class offered at workplace	Seamstress
	Amin	Some high school	ESL course through school district	Dishwasher at hotel
Falabia's Family	Falabia	Nursing degree	Community college (ESL, general ed, phlebotomy)	Hospital janitor
	Primo	High school	Community college (ESL, nursing assistant)	Hospital janitor
Viola's Family	Viola	Law degree	Community college; applying to law school	Factory line
	Isbon	Some college	None	Hospital janitor

Figure Captions

Figure 1: Chol's letter regarding the annual May 16th celebration.

Figure 2: Chol's agenda for the May 16th celebration planning meeting.

Figure 3: Creating a welcome banner for the African cultural festival.

Figure 4: The bilingual welcome banner.

Figure 5: Viola posted one of the American boys' Arabic writing below the welcome banner.

Figure 6: A food label, created to explain to Americans what they were eating.