From Storytelling to Writing: Transforming Literacy Practices Among Sudanese Refugees
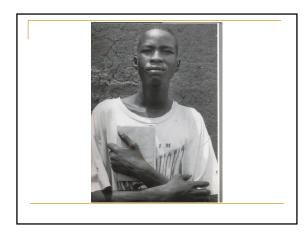
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n *Ours is an oral tradition. My people told stories about the raids and slaves–they sang about slavery. But they did not write books or newspaper stories about their suffering. And they certainly did not file reports to international human rights organizations. That is changing, as Dinka refugees move to the West and organize.* (Bok, 2003, p. 249)

Who are the Sudanese in Michigan?

n Refugees from southern Sudan (~1,000)

n "Lost Boys" = orphaned youth, mostly boys (~200)

n Languages spoken among the Lost Boys:
  q Dinka/other local language
  q English
  q Kiswahili
  q Arabic

Historical Context

n Civil war in Sudan: 1983-present

n Journey of the Lost Boys

n Kakuma: Education in the refugee camp
  q Free schools organized by UNHCR
  q Languages: English & KiSwahili

Theoretical Framework

n Sociocultural and sociolinguistic approaches to language/literacy (Barton & Hamilton, Gee, Heath, Hymes, Street)

n Language/literacy practices are:
  q infused with meaning and purpose
  q Dynamic and malleable
  q Shaped by social, cultural, historical, and political structures and forces

Theoretical Framework

- "Narrative" encompasses a variety of genres and purposes (Ochs & Capps)
- Narrative is a powerful form of sense-making (Johnstone, Wortham)
- As cultural texts, narratives shape individual and communal identities (Bruner, Wortham)
- Narrators position themselves in relation to families, communities, and world through narrative (Ochs & Capps, Wortham)

Research Questions

- What were the roles of storytelling in the lives of the Lost Boys in Africa? What roles does storytelling play in their current lives in Michigan?
- How have the Lost Boys transformed traditional storytelling as a result of their experiences as refugees?
- How does storytelling, and its transformation, relate to issues of identity and community for this group of refugees?

Methodology

- DATA COLLECTION:
- Participant observation
- Semi-structured interviews
  - 3 focal participants
- Artifact collection

- ANALYSIS:
- Creation of data matrices to organize emerging themes
- Transcription of interviews
- Discourse analysis
  - Narrative structure
  - Content/themes
  - Positioning
- Triangulation across data sources

Role of the Researcher

- Tutor/mentor
- Community board member
- Recruitment of participants
  - In-home tutoring
  - Community events

Focal Participants

- Chol (~19 years old):
  - Attends private university (business)
  - Community leader
- Francis (~19 years old):
  - Attends community college (pharmacy)
  - Several jobs
- Ezra (~26 years old):
  - Attends state university (poli-sci)
  - Deeply religious—community pastor

Findings: Variety of storytelling practices

- Talk *about* storytelling
- Enacted storytelling
- Transformed storytelling
  - Narratives whose purpose, audience, and medium were different from traditional storytelling

Findings: Variety of storytelling practices

- Stories read/heard:
  - Traditional stories/histories (community)
  - Literature (school)
  - Religious stories (church)
- Stories written/told:
  - Literature-type stories (usually school)
  - Personal narratives
  - Hypothetical stories/*irrealis*

Findings: Issues revealed through transformed storytelling

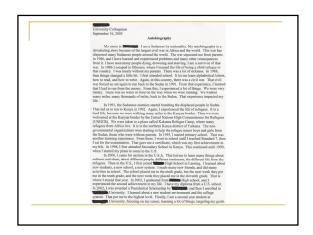- Three areas of transformation:
  - *Who* stories are for
  - *How* stories are told
  - *Why* stories are told
- Transformations reveal issues:
  - Tension between orphanhood and community
  - Tension between identity and positioning with community
  - Storytelling as critique

Findings: Issues revealed through transformed storytelling

- Traditional storytelling
  - Storytellers: parents, community elders, teachers
  - Purpose: education, preservation of history & culture, entertainment
    - Learning about family/community is key
  - Formal schooling: literature as subject

Findings: Issues revealed through transformed storytelling

- Transformed storytelling
  - Audience: non-Sudanese wider world
  - Purpose: share experiences, persuade, critique
  - Medium: speeches, printed texts, digital media
  - Formal schooling: different opportunities to engage in storytelling

Discussion: Important issues revealed

- Why this transformation???
  - New context, new constraints, new affordances
    - Orphans living in Western, English-speaking nations
      - Desire to maintain Sudanese identity
      - Desire to maintain Sudanese community
    - Access to new media
    - Influence of formal schooling

Implications

- Print literacy and the information age seem to be contributing to storytelling's transformation
- Sharing experiences through narrative can shape identity and help to build community
- Storytelling connects local communities to the global community
- Storytelling is a politically powerful tool