

Institution: University of Oxford
Unit of Assessment: UOA 24A Anthropology
Title of case study: Supporting the People of Sudan's Blue Nile through Recent Crises
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>James' ethnographic research on the fortunes of war-displaced communities from the Blue Nile region of northern Sudan generated unique insights that have been crucial in providing a long-term contribution to the work of the United Nations, and to humanitarian agencies assisting Blue Nile refugees: firstly, in 2008-11, during their resettlement from Ethiopian camps; and secondly, from late 2011 to mid-2013, during their renewed flight, mostly over the new border to South Sudan. The research has contributed to: (a) improving public understanding of the Blue Nile crisis internationally and within Sudan, while also providing detailed background on recent refugee history to field-based agencies; and (b) promoting cultural continuity among the refugees themselves, particularly Uduk speakers who have resettled in the USA. The multimedia project 'Voices from the Blue Nile' has opened up rich research-based materials, including video, audio, photographic and cartographic material, to Blue Nile refugee communities and to educational and cultural projects worldwide.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Wendy James was Professor of Social Anthropology at Oxford until 2007, when she retired. Her earlier ethnographic research produced deep cultural, historical, and political understandings that enabled her to engage in further, applied research during the war years (from the time of the first Uduk displacement in 1987 onwards), after the brief peace settlement (2005-2011), and following the renewed conflict from late 2011. Some of this research was facilitated by various externally funded consultancy roles and formal appointments she has undertaken relating to the Blue Nile region (henceforth, BN) and its people since 1993, including those for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the UK government. For example, during January 1993 she was the consultant anthropologist to a TV documentary, set in a transit camp mainly for Uduk refugees in Ethiopia. Events encountered there stimulated her initial reflections on emotions in history within this community. These were later published in two articles, which showed how personal experiences of fear, border-crossing, and violence were remembered and how they came to re-shape historical events. [Section 3: R1,R2] In addition, between 2002 and 2013 James made a series of personal visits to Blue Nile communities resettled in America, to understand better the wider human outcomes of the war years.</p> <p>James' research on the region led to the publication of a major book on the war years, [R3] accompanied, through collaboration with Dr Judith Aston (UWE), by a website based on James' 1994-2000 multimedia research materials from Bonga refugee camp in Ethiopia: <i>Voices from the Blue Nile</i>. [See Section 3] The book explored not only the dynamics of the civil war as it engulfed the BN, with many local communities finding their youngsters caught up on both sides of the conflict, but also the responses of displaced civilians, their uncertainties over returning home, and their keen updating of traditional cultural practices. Details concerning the ways in which these changed over time in the refugee camps were provided in later articles. [R4,R5] James' research subsequently analysed the dilemmas for returnee communities resulting from the creation of a new international border between North and South Sudan, as compared with the flexibilities of border life in past centuries. The secession of South Sudan, in July 2011, had left the BN with its returnees inside the North; and the old 'safe havens' had disappeared. Conflict with national forces resumed almost immediately, and large numbers fled again; some back to Ethiopia, but most over to Maban county, Upper Nile, in the new state (where they had many long-standing contacts). [R6] James' insights and research findings went far beyond the usual scope of needs-focused questionnaire surveys. She was able to gather personal stories not only of displacement and suffering, but of proud participation in the Sudanese civil war. [R1,R2,R3] She observed how older forms of family and community life, in the Uduk case matrilineal descent groups, were being recreated. [R3] By continuing to take audio-visual recordings, she could provide rich illustrations of the changes she observed across the fields of story-telling, music, song, dance, [R4] together with practices of divination and healing, [R5] thereby building up a unique archive of cultural change in times of crisis. She was thus able to place current events in a longer historical context, and wider geographical setting, than would be possible for most agency consultants. [R6]</p>

3. References to the research

Selected Publications

- [R1] 1997: 'The Names of Fear: History, Memory and the Ethnography of Feeling among Uduk Refugees' *JRAI* (N.S.) 3: 115-31.
- [R2] 2009a: 'Crossing points: Journeys of transformation on the Sudan-Ethiopian border' in G. Schlee & E. Watson (eds) *Changing Identifications and Alliances in North-East Africa*, vol II, pp. 235-49. Oxford: Berghahn.
- [R3] 2009b: *War and Survival in Sudan's Frontierlands: Voices from the Blue Nile*, pbk. with updated preface [hardback 2007]. For accompanying research website, see below. Mark Duffield writes: "Essential reading for anyone wishing to understand the effects of war and humanitarian action on the peoples of Sudan" (quoted on back cover).
- [R4] 2010: 'Music, Song, and Dance of the Blue Nile Borderlands: Revivals in the Refugee Context' in H. Aspen, B. Teferra, S. Bekele, & S. Ege (eds) *Research in Ethiopian Studies: 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies. Aethiopistische Forschungen 72*: 290-305. Online: http://portal.svt.ntnu.no/sites/ices16/Proceedings/Volume_4.pdf, pp. 1171-83.
- [R5] 2013a: 'The Listening Ebony Revisited' in W. van Beek & P. Peek (eds) *Reviewing Reality: The Dynamics of African Divination*, pp. 239-56. Berlin: Lit Verlag.
- [R6] 2013b: 'Whatever Happened to the "Safe Havens"? Imposing State Boundaries between the Sudanese Plains and the Ethiopian Highlands', Ch. 11 in C. Vaughan, M. Schomerus, & L. de Vries (eds) *The Borderlands of South Sudan*, pp. 213-33. Palgrave Macmillan. Available online: *JASO-online* 5(2): 105-24 (<http://www.anthro.ox.ac.uk/publications/jaso>).

Research Website

'Voices from the Blue Nile' (with Judith Aston): <http://www.voicesfromthebluenile.org>

4. Details of the impact

Long-term contribution to UN and aid agency activity in Sudan and with Sudanese refugees

James' research has had considerable impact for many years, beginning with her frequent consultancy roles and fact-finding visits from the late 1980s onward. Already known to the UNHCR and Ethiopian authorities, having played a role in their 1993 decision to move the Uduk refugees from their transit camp to a formal refugee scheme at Bonga further inside Ethiopia, she then prepared an official Progress Report for this scheme in 1994. This was followed by a Community Development consultancy for a Dutch organization in 2000. James' work by this time had drawn public attention to the fact that the civil war was affecting a large area and population within the BN region, not just a few ethnic groups as had previously been perceived. In 2003, she was appointed by the UK government to act as a Resource Person for the BN in the Sudan peace negotiations in Kenya.

In 2010, with a small number of other scholars, James was invited to present aspects of recent research [R2,R3] to a meeting in Juba, southern Sudan, with officials of the UN Mission in Sudan; here she spoke specifically on security issues still facing the BN in the aftermath of the 2005 peace settlement. This followed a week as tutor on a Rift Valley Institute (RVI) field training course, during which she gave seminars on the effects of war and displacement for the people of 'transitional' areas like the BN. The two dozen attendees included senior and junior members of development agencies, both Sudanese and international, and several diplomats. The Director of the RVI confirms: "James' original published research established a place for the peoples of Blue Nile in the world of learning; her documentation of their subsequent fate in Sudan's continuing civil wars is an exemplary case of an ethnographer keeping company through changing circumstances with the subjects of their research." [Section 5: C1]

Building on this long-term impact and the wide reach and reputation of her academic work, James' research has had impact in two further key ways since 2011:

Assisting emergency aid and human rights agencies by improving public understanding of the fresh BN crisis

On South Sudan's secession in July 2011, the UN presence in BN was terminated, although demobilization of former fighters was incomplete. Within two months, returnees faced aerial and

ground attacks. The majority crossed the new border to South Sudan; by mid-2013, five new camps had been set up there. Within this context, James was contacted by **Médecins Sans Frontières** (MSF) in March 2012, and following considerable email correspondence, the Humanitarian Advisor of the **Analysis & Advocacy Unit** in Brussels wrote that she was “in the middle of reading *War and Survival* with much interest and pleasure. We have ordered two copies also for the field teams, as there is much interest to understand more about the region and the populations with whom we work. This book, and your extensive comments, are a perfect point of departure for myself and the teams.”[C2] As a result of this correspondence, James was then invited to speak at a meeting in London for MSF staff, including the former MSF Head of Mission for Darfur, and CNN journalists (circa 30 attendees). James’ research [R3] was welcomed and provoked discussion regarding problems encountered in South Sudan’s brand-new camps for BN refugees. MSF staff asked (among other questions) why there were differences in behaviour between the camps. James was able to explain that those in the more southerly camps, like the Uduk, had already spent a generation as refugees in Ethiopia, and were familiar with all the bureaucratic procedures of the aid world; further north, the majority were Ingessana, and had not had the same experience of mass exile, nor previous neighbourly contacts with the Maban. A summary of James’ contributions was included in the MSF newsletter of 21 March 2012.[C3]

In January 2013, the **Danish Demining Group** of the Danish Refugee Council reported on the new camps in Maban county. In emphasizing the cultural history of various BN refugee groups, they drew on an earlier report by James on the Uduk for the Minority Rights Group (1995) (www.minorityrights.org/download.php?id=881c) illustrating the relevance of the war years for the new crisis.[C4]

As the counter-insurgency in BN escalated further in early 2013, several high-profile human rights organizations (already well known for work in Darfur) undertook investigations on the ground and produced reports: of these the most consequential was by **Amnesty International**. The key field investigators came to Oxford to consult James for their forthcoming report “‘We had no time to bury them’: War Crimes in Sudan’s Blue Nile State” [C5], which included local interviews alongside satellite photos of bombed villages. They use James’ *War & Survival* [R3] as a key source illustrating the roots of the new BN conflicts [C5, pp.12, 64]. The lead author of the report writes that James’ book “*was crucial in establishing a base of knowledge ... on the sociopolitical makeup and the history of that region... Her command of local languages provided unmatched insight... Her description of past conflict patterns ... provided our team with important intuitions ... It also sensitized us to local perceptions and cultural sensitivities, enabling us to interact with inhabitants of Blue Nile in a considerate manner. Upon our return ... we used James’ works as important reference tools. We were able to check specific testimonies against broader historical patterns as described in her works, and to locate particular locations mentioned to us by witnesses.*”[C6]

The Amnesty report has had wide publicity, their office recently mentioning coverage in 41 media sources. The report prompted Lord Alton in the House of Lords to ask what assessment the Government had made of the situation in the BN, and to demand that the government do more to respond to the suffering of the BN people and other victims of Sudanese government bombardment.[C7] A further 60-page report by the **International Crisis Group**, ‘Sudan’s spreading conflict (II): War in Blue Nile’ (2013) also refers to James’ 2009 book. [R3; C8, pp. 3, 33]

Promoting cultural continuity among Blue Nile refugee communities

James’ research has helped sustain cultural continuity among BN refugees in the diaspora. Her multimedia archive project ‘Voices from the Blue Nile’ [Section 3] opens up rich research-based materials, including video, audio, photographic and cartographic material, to BN refugee communities, and to institutions concerned with their welfare. The website materials already online, mainly documenting life in the Bonga refugee camp, have been effective in promoting cultural continuity and historical awareness. For example, Uduk communities in North America invited James in 2012 to a Salt Lake City (SLC) Fourth of July reunion of Uduk families from across the continent, primarily to talk to the rising generation about their history and culture. James’ contribution to the event included three presentations drawing on her audio-visual archive, using materials not yet available on the website. A mentor for the expatriate Uduk and Maban community associated with a prominent SLC church writes: “*Your Power-Point presentations of the history of the Uduk peoples and their village culture were the first view of that era that any here had ever*

seen. We digitally preserved copies of that presentation so that their children and their children's children shall never be deprived of that knowledge... When you... sent me one of the two known original Uduk/Twampa dictionaries, original language primers from 1956, and .WAV files of recordings of language and music from the 1960's... those are priceless!... All of this is being written to DVD's so that each refugee family may have copies of this history... Wendy, I had never appreciated what could be done with anthropology!..." [C9]

It is planned to deposit the original audio and visual materials from James' research in the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, as a contribution to their growing Sudan collections. These will be shared, facilitating engagement, with the source community. In a recent illustrated article, collaborators Judith Aston and Paul Matthews (UWE) describe their approach to further expanding access and participation in curating and using these resources, for example by enabling informants to respond to James' commentary, and "to contribute their own recordings to the presentation, as a means of extending the narrative." [C10] A spontaneous tribute from a former refugee to the value of James' work appeared online in 2010: "As a native from southern Blue Nile (Uduk land) I greatly wondered whether I will once have information such as Wendy's about my homeland stories and events. I am very grateful to those wonderful people scholars who have given us a hope to feel and aspire." [C11]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- [C1] Letter (29.9.13) on file from Director of Rift Valley Institute (London and Nairobi).
- [C2] Letter (20.3.12) on file from Humanitarian Advisor, MSF Analysis & Advocacy Unit, Brussels.
- [C3] MSF Newsletter, March 2012, Dialogue 11: "Living in Uncertainty: What Future for Sudan and South Sudan", p.10 as 'Blue Nile: A Sensitive Borderland'
http://www.msf.org.uk/sites/uk/files/Dialogue_11_Sudan_and_South_Sudan_FINAL_2012091032_24.pdf
- [C4] 'Displacement, Disharmony and Disillusion: Understanding Host-Refugee Tensions in Maban County, South Sudan' (28.1.13): references James' work, pp. 2, 12-14 and fns. 22, 24
<http://www.danishdemininggroup.dk/about-danish-demining-group/publications/reports-articles-evaluations/>
- [C5] Amnesty International (2013) "We had no Time to Bury them": War Crimes in Sudan's Blue Nile State' (10 June, pp.12, 64),
<http://www.amnestyusa.org/sites/default/files/afr540112013en.pdf>.
- [C6] Letter (17.9.13) on file from Amnesty investigator.
- [C7] *Daily Hansard*, House of Lords, 9 July 2013, columns 154-56.
(<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201314/ldhansrd/text/130709-0001.htm>).
- [C8] International Crisis Group (2013) Sudan's spreading conflict (II): War in Blue Nile (18 June).
<http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/204-sudans-spreading-conflict-ii-war-in-blue-nile.pdf>. See pp. 3, 33.
- [C9] Letter (16.10.13) on file from Mentor of the Uduk and Maban refugees associated with the Free Evangelical Church of Salt Lake City. Evidence of the activities of one specific Uduk congregation can be seen at: <http://www.slcevfrees.org/ministries/uduk.php>
- [C10] Judith Aston and Paul Matthews, 'Multiple audiences and co-curation: linking an ethnographic archive of endangered oral traditions to contemporary contexts', pp. 41-61 in *Oral Literature in the Digital Age* (eds M. Turin, C. Wheeler, & E. Wilkinson). Open Book Publishers, 2013. Available as e-book. See p.44.
- [C11] Online tribute: February 21, 2010. <http://africanarguments.org/2008/01/22/survival-and-governance-in-sudan-s-frontiers-a-review-of-two-recent-books/#comments>.