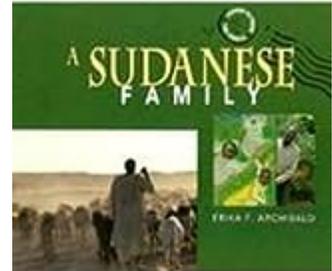




**Erika F. Archibald.** *A Sudanese Family*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 1997. 56 pp. \$22.60 (library), ISBN 978-0-8225-9753-7.



**Reviewed by** Lidwien Kapteijns (Department of History, Wellesley College)

**Published on** H-AfrTeach (October, 2000)

## **A Refugee Family from Southern Sudan: A Book for Young People**

*A Refugee Family from Southern Sudan: A Book for Young People*

This small and attractive book is part of a series on refugee families having entered the U.S.A. from different countries in the world. This book is about a southern Sudanese family of four, who come to Atlanta after having lived in Khartoum, a small Nuer village in southern Sudan, Kenya, and Tanzania. After a brief introduction, the story opens with the family's arrival at the Atlanta airport, where they are welcomed by a church group that has agreed to sponsor them for several months. The book, in two brief chapters, sketches this family's background: a description of the small cattle-keeping village from which the parents came, and a very brief history of the northern Sudan and the north-south conflict after independence in 1956.

The book then lists the family's moves from the village to Khartoum, where, in 1985, Dei, the elementary school boy who is the protagonist of the book, was born. As the father moves to Cairo on a church educational fellowship, mother and son move back to the village, then to a Kenyan refugee camp, back to the village, and again

to Kenya, where father, after a long search, rejoins them. The family then moves to Tanzania, from where they, after application to the United Nations, are given refugee visas to the U.S. With the help of World Relief, the family comes to the U.S. in 1994.

In Atlanta the story emphasizes the family's unfamiliarity with the airport escalators, the new household utensils, supermarkets and new food items. The reader also learns about father's long hours of hard work in a hotel and Dei's adventures at school (including the soccer team). The book ends with the family's departure to San Diego, California, in search of a better economic future. However, before this, the reader is told about two Nuer customs that seem otherwise unconnected to this story: Nuer facial markings and marriage customs.

There are many problems with this book. First, although this is presented as juvenile literature, the book is formally and stiffly written; it describes and barely explains, and it is not playful, light or creative, not even when it retells a folktale. An example of such formality is the introduction, which explains that people disagree about the fact whether refugees are a problem for

the U.S.A. or a blessing and that this book won't take a position on this issue. Such a beginning is neither engaging nor appropriate at this level. Second, the book never adequately explains why the family flees, and how it is possible that it can move back from the village to Khartoum, back to the village, to Kenya and again back to the village and so forth. It does not explain why there is a war and what form it takes, beyond brief references to the fact that southerners feared a northern take-over at independence and that southerners were religiously oppressed in Khartoum in 1985. The book incorrectly claims that there never was peace between north and south since independence, thus overlooking over ten years of peaceful co-existence, in which southern and northern politicians failed to forge a more lasting peace. The book depicts the hostilities between north and south as inherent in the two geographical units and fails to point out that the war begins again in the early 1980s, when the Nimeiri regime moves towards a quasi-Islamic fascism that was intensified by subsequent military regimes. The civil war and the discrimination of secular intellectuals, regional oppositions, as well as Christians of various southern backgrounds which ensued are not adequately explained or described. Thus the reader is left with the dry description of the family moving back and forth, without getting any

idea of real conditions and experiences.

Third, the book is patronizing in tone; for a family that has lived in Cairo, Kenya and Tanzania, an escalator and a supermarket cannot have been as strange as the author suggests; and even if they were, this is a patronizing way of introducing the family to the young American reader. The insertion of two brief chapters about Nuer customs towards the end of the story is artificial and just further exoticizes this family in the eyes of a young American reader. Fourth, the book has a bit of a Christian bias. Since this is a family probably admitted because of religious persecution and resettled with the help of Christian charitable organizations, such an emphasis might well be justified. However, in that case it should be made explicit; references to the nice church welcoming committee and the family's Bible readings otherwise do not make enough sense.

The book has beautiful maps and pictures, although the ones of wild animals are barely relevant to the story.

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**Citation:** Lidwien Kapteijns. Review of Archibald, Erika F., *A Sudanese Family*. H-AfrTeach, H-Net Reviews. October, 2000.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4611>

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