



A NEW HOPE

WITH SOUTH SUDAN NOW AN INDEPENDENT STATE, WE GET TO KNOW MELBOURNE'S VIBRANT SUDANESE COMMUNITY

When Ambrose Mareng's village in Sudan was attacked by government troops it was his responsibility, as the son of the chief, to lead the 251 children out of harm's way. The arduous walk to safety took more than four months and Ambrose was just 14 years old.

"We lived on wild roots and fruits, and we were always in fear of snakes and crocodiles," he says. "We lost one child."

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, there are 26,199 Sudanese-born residents in Australia. Like Ambrose, many fled from violence, choosing a journey of hardship that offered a fresh start.

"When I arrived in 2005, my first impression of Melbourne was that everything was new," he says. "A new world, a new beginning. Everything seemed green, beautiful, peaceful... I knew nothing would be as hard or as difficult here as what I had already experienced."

Years after his trek to freedom, Ambrose is once again a respected leader. He hosts a radio program for Melbourne's Sudanese community featuring news and current issues, with the main topic of broadcasts being the creation of the independent state of South Sudan achieved in July this year.

"It's a new hope of change," he says with obvious pride.

When the conversation turns to the future of the South Sudanese people, the subject of his five children is raised and a smile instantly appears.

"In Australia there is the hope of gaining education. This is the way that they can get what they want. They tell me they want to be doctors and football players."

Words: Chris Canty
Photos: Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Fairfax & Getty Images

Sudanese food, song and dance

The list of South Sudanese performers impacting on Melbourne's diverse musical landscape is impressive. Along with Ajak Kwai (www.ajakkwai.com), acts like pop singer and dancer Treza Kau can also be found performing around the city's music haunts.

Nearly all Southern Sudanese immigrants endured displacement and war. This may explain why so many of them have gravitated towards Hip Hop music, with acts such as SS Superstar (Lang Yearchak) and Grey Bull (David Thon Garang) developing a steady following. The most successful is Ajak Chol, a young rapper who became a sensation after his song *Take U To Da Movies* attracted more than 5 million Youtube hits.

Melbourne-based Sudanese are also making waves in fashion circles, most noticeably Ajak Deng, who has become the face of fashion super-brands such as Calvin Klein, while up-and-comers like Ayor Makur hope to follow in her footsteps.

Sudanese cuisine is quite hard to find in Melbourne though favourites such as Taste of Africa (34 Walker St, Dandenong) and Khartoum Centre (145 Nicholson St, Footscray) give an insight into typical Sudanese fare. Stews and traditional breads such as kissra and gurassa are the main staples.



The latter career aspiration is inspired by Sudanese-born AFL-listed player Majak Daw, who has captivated the Melbourne public despite not having played a game for the senior North Melbourne team – as yet.

But Ambrose has even higher expectations for his children. "I joke that one of them will be the next president of South Sudan in 30 years to come," he says.

TOGETHER AS ONE

For Sudanese-born Abraham Mamer, Melbourne's multiculturalism was the most striking aspect after arriving from New Zealand.

"In New Zealand there aren't many Africans, so my friends expected me to know everyone on the street who looked like me and [for me] to wave to them," he says. "But here in Melbourne, everybody is living together."

Today Abraham is the Director of a Sudanese Community Development Project at the African Australian Centre in

the Melbourne suburb of Footscray – providing settlement support and training to African migrants looking for employment in the area.

He says that South Sudanese independence brings with it hope that the city's Sudanese community will come together as one.

"It is the beginning of healing," Abraham says. "The anxiety of worrying about family back in Sudan can be eased and we can now focus and learn. We are no longer refugees; we are citizens and legal residents. Sudanese people will need to meet the challenge."

One of his top priorities is to create programs to teach the Sudanese how to apply for government funding and learn how to manage their finances.

"There might be 10 groups now who each receive \$500, but if we can put the funds together and work together, we can achieve our goals," Abraham explains.

Another positive aspect of South Sudan's independence is that the Australian media – which has hitherto focused almost exclusively on negative stories – now has something positive

Above left:

Ambrose Mareng

Centre: Ajak Kwai

Right: Majak Daw, the first Sudanese Australian drafted to an AFL club





to say about Melbourne's resilient Sudanese community.

"We were lacking good stories," Abraham says. "Until now."

Melbourne-based singer songwriter Ajak Kwai, who is known for her heartfelt songs of love and hope relating to her homeland, also reckons media coverage has not been balanced.

"There are Sudanese people doing really well for themselves, but these are things the news people don't talk about," she says. "Our community is learning very fast to fit in, with many young people studying and completing higher education in the past few years."

MAKING AUSTRALIA RICHER

Ajak insists it's not only about what Sudanese-Australians are doing for themselves, but also about the things they're giving back to Australia.

"Ours is a vibrant community," she says. "It is [one of] the best things that has ever happened to Australia [because] we have brought new arts, dancing, music, films and food."

A look at Melbourne's cultural scene

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verifies her claim, with Sudanese acts such as the Lopit Community Cultural Dance Club and Acholi women's dance group now a regular feature on the festival circuit. Sudanese-born hip-hop artists SS Superstar and Grey Bull are also making waves.

Community worker Abraham also points out that more Sudanese-Australians are starting to open their own businesses. "There are four shops owned by Sudanese in Footscray alone, and it filters down employment to other Sudanese," he says.

But when asked if Australia was still a land of opportunity for newcomers, his answer is more measured.

"Yes, I do believe that Australia is great country and if you have a thick skin you can achieve your goals," he offers.

"Support is needed for the young people

to complete their studies, however, and for families with younger children. Support is about making people independent not making them dependent on you. It is about helping them to help themselves"

Abraham holds the same thoughts in mind when looking at how Melbourne's Sudanese can help rebuild, or in fact, build South Sudan. "Sending one person to South Sudan to teach 100 people isn't as effective as training 100 South Sudanese people here. The trainees will become the trainers and they will [in turn] teach thousands."

And while none of our three interviewees have plans to move back to South Sudan, radio host Ambrose hopes to one day visit family who remained in the state, including his mother and brother.

But this time, he'll walk without fear. *