

God Grew Tired of Us: “The quality of mercy is not strained”

By Ramon Valle
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God Grew Tired of Us, written and directed by Christopher Dillon Quinn, co-directed by Tommy Walker

It took four years to film *God Grew Tired of Us*, about the “Lost Boys” of Sudan. The result is a straightforward documentary remarkable for its simplicity and honesty. Layer by layer, the film reveals the lives of its protagonists—their endurance, vicissitudes and hopes in two worlds very different from one another: the United States and their native land.

God Grew Tired of Us is about three of the Lost Boys—who originally numbered approximately 25,000—separated from their families during the bloody Second Sudanese Civil War that began in the mid-1980s and only ended in 2005. It was a catastrophe, fueled by imperialist ambitions, that resulted in the death of two million people and the displacement of another four million.

The film does not attempt to give us a full account of the reasons for the strife; it shows us the “what” and the “how,” but not the “why.” Like numerous other films about political and social tragedies in Africa, it fails in this respect and thus portrays the events that befall the Sudanese, specifically the Lost Boys from the Dinka tribe, rather superficially. As far as the film is concerned, one group decided to oppress another, and that’s that. But much more has been at stake in the Sudanese tragedy, and oil has played no small part in it.

When British rule ended in 1956, the legacy of colonialism endured. As it had done elsewhere, Britain consciously sought to divide the Sudanese people along tribal, religious and culture lines. In fact, the colonialists had divided the country into north and south and governed each region separately, fostering rivalries between Arabs, Christians, Muslims and others throughout the land. It also tried to drive a wedge between the many tribal groups.

When oil was discovered, all the major powers saw this as an opportunity to interfere. In 1998, following pressure applied by the US oil companies on Washington, a 1,600-mile pipeline, with a capacity to transport 250,000 barrels a day, was opened between Unity State in the south of Sudan and the port of Beshair on the Red Sea. According to reliable estimates, Sudan has reserves of more than two billion barrels of oil.

Fifteen years before the construction of the pipeline, in 1983, Sudan’s president Gaafar al Nimeiri introduced Islamic *sharia* law when massive popular demonstrations broke out against the austerity program imposed by the International Monetary Fund. An uprising immediately took place in the south, whose population is mostly Christian or follows popular African

religions.

Nimeiri was finally overthrown in 1985. The civil war that followed produced a horrifying death toll. The fundamentalist National Islamic Front Government that took power in 1989 went to war against the south. A report by Amnesty International stated: “The civilian population living in the oil-fields and surrounding areas has been deliberately targeted for human rights abuses—forced displacement, aerial bombardments, strafing villages from helicopter gunships, unlawful killing, torture, including rape and abduction.” That’s the campaign that sent the so-called Lost Boys on their epic journey.

God Grew Tired of Us examines very little of this background; the filmmakers seem content to give us the bare bones. This is a drawback even in a fiction film, but it is especially so in a documentary about such an immense calamity. No one who sees this film would suspect that oil and the struggle to control it was, in large part, the reason for this civil war that led to the Lost Boys’ tragedy.

We see certain things: the persecutions of the fundamentalist regime; how the 25,000 young men and children from the Dinka tribe in the south, many three to eight years old, manage to escape the persecutions and massacres; how they embark upon a five-year trek, barefoot and bedraggled, through 1,000 miles of hostile and inhospitable terrain, to the Kenyan and Ethiopian borders; how only half of them make it across the borders, the rest having been killed by starvation, disease and bombing raids; and how they finally settle in Kenya’s Kakuma refugee camp, run by the United Nations, where they live for 10 years. The film captures, without any concession to sentimentality, this heroic feat as participants recount their stories to their filmmakers.

While living in the Kakuma camp, the International Rescue Committee arrives and, through a process that remains ambiguous at best, chooses some of the young people to be relocated to the US.

At the film’s outset, we see a crowd of children and young men going over the names of those who have been selected to leave the camp for America. It immediately strikes the viewer that, despite the horrors they have experienced, the young, inquisitive, smiling faces show hope in the future.

The film concentrates on the lives of John Bul Dau, as charismatic a main character as you have seen in any movie recently, the very earthy Panther Bior and Daniel Abul Pach.

Our three heroes, along with 2,000 more, are given refugee

status and relocated to the US, where they are scattered to cities as far-flung as Kansas City, San Jose, Fargo, Little Rock, Syracuse and Pittsburgh, among others.

Our heroes, who eventually resettle in Syracuse and Pittsburgh, get on the airplane, and their cultural shocks begin; having lived as cow herders and in thatch-roofed huts in their native land, they marvel and are mystified by a flying machine they have never experienced.

Their new apartment is a thing of marvel and wonder. A guide explains to them their new living quarters. A bed? And one for each individual? They register amusing befuddlement with toilets, refrigerators, trashcans, kitchen appliances. When they visit the local supermarket, they are astonished at the immense variety and quantity of foods, all brightly wrapped or canned, within their reach.

These scenes are amusing to the audience, not because they are funny in and of themselves, but because the boys, too, find their new surroundings amusing. They themselves cannot believe the contrast between their past and present situations. The scenes also serve to remind us: what if we were in the same situation? How would we feel and react? The scenes are touching, not complacent or condescending.

Yet the film is most interesting and moving when it gets past the cultural shocks occasioned by material wealth and shows us the harsh reality of having to adjust in a country where black men, especially poor ones, encounter racism and official hostility. They are indeed strangers in a strange land. And their dealing with the new realities—low-paying jobs at minimum wage, working multiple jobs in different parts of the city, dealing with the grind of a daily commute to work, having to wait in the cold for hours before being allowed in the factory, being unable to make ends meet in a land of plenty—in the end tells us more about present-day American life than about their homeland.

All these social pressures, beside having to go to school, take their toll on them, and their story takes a turn into loneliness and homesickness.

As Dut says, “I see things here different. Everybody is busy, time is money. How am I going to get friends?” They have enormous difficulties trying to figure out exactly where and how they fit in their new society, which is divided so sharply along racial, ethnic and class lines. After all, in Camp Kakuma they had already been warned by an American preacher not to “act like those people who wear the baggy jeans, who do all the bad things in America. If you fail there, we’ll regret ever having this party.”

As the boys—now young men—become more and more alienated and their ever-growing hunger for family gets stronger, they begin to depend more and more on each other for support. They create a relief network among all the boys scattered throughout the US.

As Bol says, “We’re not making enough money to buy a car. But we take care of each other. If someone’s sick or loses their job, you’ve got to take care of him. Guys are losing jobs now because of the economy, so whoever has jobs takes care of the others.”

In an interview during the film’s press junket, director Christopher Dillon Quinn stated: “The one thing that all of the guys who came to the United States were really surprised by—they

ended up in this isolation that I don’t think they were prepared for. John’s roommate called me up one day about a month after they arrived. He was sitting in the apartment by himself, and he said, ‘This is the very first time I’ve ever, ever been alone.’ The most significant thing that I learned from Dinka culture is the importance, the real necessity, of family. Family not in the nuclear sense but family in this big sense, of you should always engage with your neighbors and make sure they’re OK.”

By reading the young men’s emotional barometers as they go through their adjustments to a new culture and way of life, the film becomes gripping.

John Bul Dau has expressed, without any bitterness, that “America is a kindhearted nation, but there is one weakness, and that is the loss of sense of family. I have my own take on that. It is because of the people that have invented what they call a nursing home. What is this, taking your mother and your father away from where you live and leaving your children with nobody guiding them? Older people are the basis of the family. When you take them away, your children will grow up not hearing wise words.”

Do the Lost Boys become dehumanized by their ordeal? Do they succumb to American individualism, consumerism and love of money? Not at all. They develop an even greater burning desire to help others, especially those left behind in Kenya and to connect once again with their families, who might be dead for all they know.

John Bul Dau is presently raising money to build a clinic in his own country, and like the other Lost Boys, a large part of his income is sent to Sudan to help support his family.

This story of cultural clash is truly uplifting, but in an honest way that touches the heart deeply. When John Dau finally meets his mother at the airport after a 17-year separation, the moment is unforgettable.

The film ends soon afterward. It leaves us wanting for more.

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