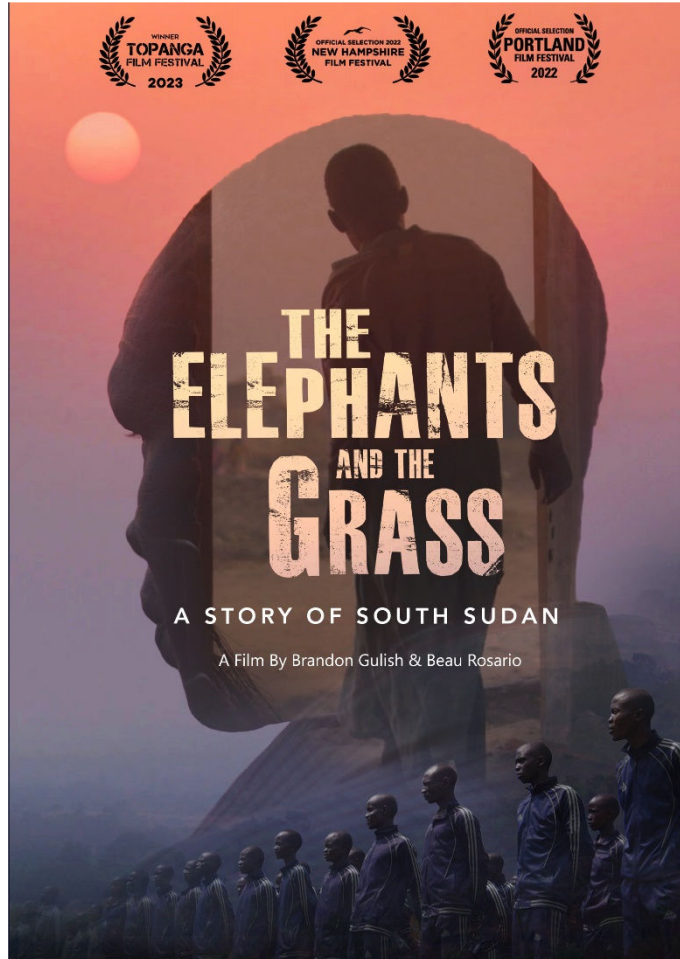




THE ELEPHANTS AND THE GRASS



STUDY GUIDE

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Elephants and the Grass

Shamira Muhammed and her mother face a life-or-death decision in war-torn South Sudan, opting to trek 100 miles through harsh terrain to reach safety in a Ugandan refugee camp. The doc also recounts the ongoing struggle for peace in a country ravaged by one of the deadliest conflicts since WWII.

South Sudan

South Sudan is in eastern central Africa. It is bordered by the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda. It has a population of more than 12 million people. South Sudan's capital city is Juba. It is a biodiverse country and has rainforests, swamplands, and savannahs. It is also very ethnically diverse, with a large number of different ethnic groups. Some of the largest are: Dinka, Nuer (Naath), Shilluk (Chollo), Azande, Bari, Kakwa, Kuku, Murle, Mandari, Didinga, Ndogo, Bviri, Lndi, Anuak, Bongo, Lango, Dungotona, Acholi, Baka, and Fertit.¹ The official language of South Sudan is English. Arabic is also spoken there, in addition to a variety of ethnic languages include Dinka, Nuer, Bari, Zande, Shilluk.

Uganda

Uganda is located to the south of South Sudan. Like South Sudan, it is also home to many different ethnic groups. It has a population of more than 49 million people. Uganda became an independent nation in 1962, but has experienced periods of internal conflict and political instability. At present, its government is relatively stable.

Formation of South Sudan

Before 2011, South Sudan was part of Sudan, which is located to the north. While Arabic and Islam are more dominant in Sudan, Christian or animist beliefs are more common in South Sudan, and these differences contributed to conflict between the two areas. There were two periods of civil war in Sudan, from 1955 to 1972, and from 1983 to 2005, where millions of people died. A peace agreement in 2005 gave the south autonomy for six years. After that, in 2011, there was a referendum, and in it, 98 percent of the population voted to succeed from Sudan. South Sudan was formed in 2011. It is the world's newest country.

Salva Kiir and Riek Machar

Salva Kiir and Riek Machar are the heads of two opposing political groups in South Sudan. Salva Kiir was born in 1951. He belongs to the Dinka ethnic group, which is the largest ethnic group in South Sudan. He is a formal rebel commander. In 2005, after the peace agreement that made South Sudan semi-autonomous, he became vice president. That same year, the president died in

¹ <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/south-sudan/>

a helicopter crash, and Kiir became president. In 2011, he became the first president of South Sudan. Kiir is a Christian. In public appearances, he always wears his trademark cowboy hat. Riek Machar was born in 1953. He belongs to the Nuer ethnic group which is the second-largest ethnic group in South Sudan. In 2005, he became vice president of South Sudan. In 2013, there was a resurgence of conflict between forces loyal to Kiir and those loyal to Machar. Kiir sacked Machar, and accused him and others of planning a coup to overthrow him.

Ongoing Conflict in South Sudan

Since it was formed in 2011, South Sudan has experienced continued conflict. The CIA World Factbook explains, "South Sudan has struggled to form a viable governing system and has been plagued by widespread corruption, political conflict, and communal violence."² While there was temporary peace in 2011, the conflict resurged in 2013, with Machar and other members of the government being removed. In 2018 a revitalized peace agreement was signed. Under this power-sharing agreement, there were plans for a transitional government, elections, and a national army. In 2020, the transitional government was formed, however, the implementation of the peace program has been continually postponed.

The conflict has resulted in widespread violence on both sides, with the country split along ethnic lines. According to the CIA World Factbook, it has left 7 million of the country's 11 million citizens in need of humanitarian assistance.³ The website states, "South Sudan . . . after decades of civil war, is one of the world's poorest countries and ranks among the lowest in many socioeconomic categories."⁴ According to the World Bank, "South Sudan remains in a serious humanitarian crisis. An estimated 9 million people, including refugees in South Sudan, will experience critical needs in 2024, including an estimated 7.1 million who will require food assistance during the lean season from April to July 2024. Women and children continue to be the most affected." In addition, it adds, "The humanitarian crisis has been further exacerbated by the recent conflict in neighboring Sudan, which has led to an inflow of refugees and returnees into South Sudan."⁵

As explained by the World Bank, climate change is making the situation in South Sudan even worse. It says, "South Sudan's vulnerability to climate change and natural disasters compounds the country's humanitarian crisis, jeopardizing recovery, and undermining development efforts. Since its independence in 2011, the country has suffered from severe droughts (2011, 2015) and floods (2014, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022), resulting in high numbers of fatalities, displacements and loss of livestock which have severely impacted people's livelihoods."⁶

The conflict in South Sudan is so serious that numerous peacekeepers have been sent there by the United Nations. The Council on Foreign Relations reports that the UN Security Council approved 6,000 security forces to be sent to South Sudan in 2013, with an additional 7,600

² <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/south-sudan/>

³ <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/south-sudan/>

⁴ <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/south-sudan/>

⁵ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/southsudan/overview>

⁶ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/southsudan/overview>

peacekeepers already in the country at that point. Then, in 2014, it says, “The Security Council voted in a rare move to shift the mission’s mandate from state-building to civilian protection, authorizing UN troops to use force.”⁷ Additional peacekeepers were sent in 2016, and again in 2024.

Refugee Crisis

According to UNHCR, South Sudan’s refugee crisis is the largest in Africa. The organization reports that nearly 2.32 million people have fled South Sudan and 2.22 million are internally displaced. It says, “The vast majority (over 83 percent) of those fleeing South Sudan are women and children, with children making up 65 percent of the total South Sudanese refugee population. They are survivors of violent attacks, sexual assault and, in many cases, children have been separated from their parents and are traveling alone.”⁸ These refugees have fled to Uganda, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Kenya. Uganda is hosting more South Sudanese refugees than any other country.

According to ReliefWeb, refugees in Uganda are living in seven refugee settlements located in the north and West Nile areas of the country. In a recent report, the organization explains that there are many challenges to accommodating these refugees including simply finding space for them; providing healthcare, food, and sanitation; supplying mental health services; preventing conflict and violence; and providing children with education.⁹

Discussion Questions:

1. How have the people of South Sudan been affected by being forced into refugee camps, as shown in the film?
2. What do you think has been the effect of media harassment in South Sudan?
3. What types of trauma have the children of South Sudan experienced, as shown in the film?
4. What do you think some of the negative effects of trauma are on both adults and children?
5. As argued in the film, why does trauma need to be addressed?

⁷ <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/civil-war-south-sudan>

⁸ <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/south-sudan-refugee-crisis-explained/>

⁹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/uganda/uganda-refugee-new-arrival-report-focus-protection-mid-west-north-and-west-nile-january-june-2023>

Additional Resources

Books

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- Clémence Pinaud, *War and Genocide in South Sudan*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021.
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