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REFUGEE TRANSITIONS

A Publication of the *Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors*

Issue 30

Central African Republic

Africa's Forgotten War

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From Norms to Reality

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REFUGEE TRANSITIONS

Refugee Transitions exists to report on a wide range of refugee and human rights issues of relevance to the work of STARTTS; to focus attention on the impact of organised violence and human rights abuses on health; to provide ideas on intervention models that address the health and social needs of refugees, to debate and campaign for changes necessary to assist refugee communities in their settlement process and ultimately bring together a vehicle for personal expression.

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People walk on the tarmac to reach a refugee camp close to the airport of Bangui on December 14, 2013. AFP PHOTO / FRED DUFOUR

CEO's Message

Welcome to the 30th Issue of Refugee Transitions,

As I write these words, the world continues to produce refugees at record rates, with numbers of displaced people reaching figures not seen since the aftermath of World War II. Even more concerning, few of the situations involving war, torture, and other forms of violence that are currently displacing people and leaving women and children in particularly vulnerable situations are anywhere near being on a pathway to peaceful resolution. Now more than ever, the term global humanitarian crisis applies.

Clearly, such a crisis causes huge movements of people searching for safety and a place to thrive, and cannot be dealt with effectively, and certainly not humanely, solely by responses designed to manage or prevent the flow of people across from danger to safety. Regional and global approaches are needed, both to address the causal factors, but also to create interim solutions to the safety and livelihood concerns that drive people across borders. It is also equally important to ensure that those that are able to make it past the many barriers and challenges to a place of safety are assisted to maintain their dignity and regain control over their lives and the chance to thrive.

Certainly, the many stories of resilience and success against all odds that we witness on a daily basis as part of our work at STARTTS are irrefutable evidence of how well this can work when it works well, and how important it is to create the conditions for this to happen.

In this issue of Refugee Transitions we bring you several such stories, highlighting projects such as STARTTS Families in Cultural Transition program and the increasing role of sport in our work, as well as a number of articles exploring in some depth some of the lesser known human right crises, such as the worrying situation in the Central African Republic, and the plight of the Ahmadiyya in Indonesia, whose dire situation has gone largely unreported in the mainstream media. This issue of Refugee Transitions also focuses one of the most ambitious projects designed to prevent torture in South and South East Asia, as well as bringing us closer to the challenges and achievements of the Mandaean community in Sydney.

I hope you enjoy this great mixture of articles!

All the best,

Jorge Aroche

Chief Executive Officer / STARTTS

PHOTO: David Maurice Smith/OCULI

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A Chadian Muslim family stands under the protection of French troops of the First Parachute Chasseur Regiment taking part in the Sangaris Operation after their car broke down in the 4th district of Bangui on December 28, 2013. AFP PHOTO/ MIGUEL MEDINA

Central African Republic
Africa's Forgotten War

Pullo families wait after arriving at a centre for displaced muslims fleeing the anti-balaka militia, in Yaloke, some 200 km east of Bangui, on May 4, 2014. The centre is run by the NGO Caritas Centrafrique and the Catholic church. About a quarter of the Central African population of 4.6 million have fled their homes since the start of the ethno-religious conflict. AFP PHOTO / ISSOUF SANOGO

MODERN CONFLICTS

A sectarian war erupted in the Central African Republic when Muslim rebels overthrew the government of President François Bozizé in 2013, amid widespread violence. The conflict continues unabated with little international media coverage, but time is running out. ***OLGA YOLDI*** *writes.*

While the world's attention is focused on the Islamic State attacks in Syria and Iraq and on Boko Haram in Nigeria, few in the Western world would have heard of, let alone be able to locate the Central African Republic (CAR).

Some may know of a conflict that has left one million people (a quarter of the population) internally displaced, 68,000 refugees, an estimated 140,000 people dead, an economy destroyed and worrying levels of instability and insecurity. And while the situation is not quite as dire as in 2013, the atmosphere remains tense and unpredictable. Although a number of peace building attempts have been made at various times, no resolution has been reached, and the country continues to be gripped by violence and lawlessness.

Little literature exists on the CAR, a landlocked country in Central Africa spanning 623,000 square kilometres, and a population of 4.4 million people, where Muslims make up about 17 percent of the predominantly Christian state.

The CAR fared particularly badly even as a French colony as well as from the Arab slave trade, and according to Eric G Burman, from the Small Arms Survey, it received less attention and resources from France than the other French territories.

"The Arab slave trade raids from Chad and Sudan led to a severe decline in the population in CAR," Burman wrote in a report. "With ramifications for development as well as ongoing ethnic and religious tensions and successive governments kept their armed forces and police relatively small and poorly armed." Since independence the CAR has endured five coups, cyclical chaos and poor governance.While it is rich in resources, with forests, gold, diamonds, timber, oil and uranium, CAR is one of the world'spoorest countries and remains largely underdeveloped due to instability, and a chronic lack of both economic development and infrastructure.

It is surrounded by troubled states and porous borders such as Chad, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Republic of Congo and Cameroon. It has attracted warlords such as Joseph Kony, the leader of a cult-like militia from Uganda, and tyrants like Jean-Bédel Bokassa - the self-crowned emperor accused of cannibalism that ruled the country with an iron fist from 1965 to 1993, torturing and killing political rivals.

The current conflict was triggered a decade ago when François Bozizé came to power following a coup that ousted President Ange-Félix Pattasé who had been democratically elected. This triggered the African Bush War.

In 2013 Bozizé was also ousted by a loose coalition of Muslim rebel groups called Séléka (meaning 'alliance'). Backed by Chad and armed with guns and rocket launchers, they gained control of the north, centre and the capital, Bangui. According to press reports, their ranks included Chadian and Sudanese mercenaries and inmates freed from Bangui's main prison, who attacked Christians and looted villages.

Michel Djotodia, the Séléka leader, appointed himself interim president of the Transitional National Authority. He promised to write a new constitution and conduct elections in 18 months. He officially dissolved the Séléka fighters, but proved incapable of restraining them.

Some Séléka were integrated into the army, others refused and ran wild over large parts of the country committing mass atrocities, killing Christians, raping women, burning villages and people alive and looting, according to a Human Rights Watch report.

Their brutality sparked retribution when Christian vigilantes, known as antibalaka, rose to retaliate against the Muslim Séléka giving these a pretext for yet more aggression. According to John Lee Anderson from *The New Yorker,* the antibalaka militias were far more vicious than the Séléka and less organised "...The antibalaka's goal grew from simple reprisal against Séléka to ridding the country of Muslims entirely."

Soon the antibalaka gained the upper hand and Muslims became the target of vicious sectarian attacks. Many fled to surrounding countries, others are still trapped in enclaves, too afraid to come out. Before the war an estimated 700,000 Muslims were living in the CAR, now fewer than 90,000 remain.

In 2013 a UN report warned the CAR was on the brink of genocide. UN High Commissioner of Human Rights, Antonio Guterres spoke about "a humanitarian catastrophe of unspeakable proportions" and warned that the CAR's Muslims were facing massive ethno-religious cleansing.

The violence fuelled a humanitarian crisis. According to human-rights organisations, thousands of civilians were left without access to food or healthcare and the lack of security prevented aid agencies from providing humanitarian assistance.

Both the Séléka coalition and the antibalaka militias continued to rip the country apart. Due to the increasing violence, in January 2014 Djotodia stepped down under international pressure. But his departure triggered even more violence.

He was hastily replaced by Bangui's former mayor Catherine Samba-Panza as the new interim president. She promised to make the government more inclusive, end the violence and call for elections in a year. But her attempts to bring peace have so far failed.

Since the conflict started the responsibility to pacify the country fell on peacekeepers. The challenge of disarming the Séléka, containing the antibalaka and protecting the Muslim minorities may have been underestimated by the international community. By the time they established a real presence in the capital a large number of the Muslims had already fled.

Initially 2000 African Union (AU) peacekeeping troops were sent to CAR, and as the killing intensified troops were increased. But the CAR is a large country and they could not control the fighting.

The AU peacekeeping operation was soon followed by the African led International Support Mission in CAR (MISCA) that included troops from Burundi, Rwanda, Chad, Gabon, Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon and DRC. But MISCA remained passive in the face of violence. Member states of the

Central African Republic interim President Catherine Samba-Panza gives a press conference concerning the Bekou EU trust fund for the Central African Republic, in Brussels, on May 26, 2015. AFP PHOTO / EMMANUEL DUNAND

European Union's EUFOR (Finland, Estonia, Romania, Latvia and others) also began sending troops.

In December 2013 the French President, François Hollande sent 1200 soldiers to secure M'Poko airport where thousands of Christians had sought shelter. He said the French intervention would be short, calling the soldiers Sangaris, after a Central African butterfly that has a brief life. In April 2014 France voted to increase its presence to 4000 men.

They shared a mandate to help protect civilians, stabilise the country and restore state authority over the territory, as well as create conditions conducive to the provision of humanitarian assistance. But according to press reports, a lack of resources and disunity between the different contingents hampered their ability to contain the violence.

In 2014 Chadian peacekeepers withdrew from the CAR following accusations of human-rights abuses during fighting that killed 24 and injured over 100. Congolese units were also accused of committing human-rights abuses against civilians, including torture, killing and detentions and had refused to cooperate with other MISCA contingents, while members of the Cameroonian deployment due to wage arrears, refused to cooperate at all.

While all MISCA troops were coordinated by a multinational operational commander, General Martin Toumeta Chomu of Cameroon, each African contingent had the scope to act independently on the ground.

According to the African Arguments Online, this was partly due to the changing nature of the conflict which required situational reaction, but also because orders came from the individual national commanders of each of the contributing countries, rather than from coordinated international terms of engagement.

In February 2014 Amnesty International released a report in which it accused international peacekeepers of having failed to prevent the ethnic cleansing of Muslim civilians in the western part of CAR. The report said that several Muslim localities were now completely empty of Muslims.

President Hollande warned that the conflict in CAR was on the verge of Somalisation and pressed the UN for a mandate. But the UN was hesitant to involve itself in the conflict due to budget cuts and a reluctance for direct intervention, according to press reports.

In September 2014 the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) was deployed under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, and officially replaced MISCA. Twelve thousand peacekeepers landed in Bangui. They are still there. Their mandate has been renewed for the next five years.

Like MISCA, the MINUSCA commander does not have control over contributing contingents. While the UN's role is to authorise and advise the collective intervention force, it cannot ensure adherence to the mandate or create a sense of unity among the ranks.

It shares a mandate to help protect civilians, support the transition process, facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance, protect human rights, support national and international justice and the rule of law, and provide for disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration and repatriation.

Critics say MINUSCA is underfunded and ineffective at fulfilling such a large and complex mandate. Mathew Mitchell from the Journal of Diplomacy, attributes the failure of past UN peacekeeping missions to the vagueness of the Chapter VII mandate, which according to him, often leads to UN peacekeepers acting as nothing more than hapless bystanders. "The failure of these missions is not only due to the limitations of Chapter VII", he adds. "But also the commitment of troops and resources – or lack thereof – from developed nations."

Since the war started each faction has been working to consolidate their own economic and military power ...

Like AU and MISCA, all MINUSCA's contingents come from developing countries. They shoulder the burden of most peacekeeping missions in Africa, and tend to be inadequately trained and ill-equipped for their mission.

Canadian Lieutenant-General Romeo Dallaire, the commander of the Rwandan peacekeeping mission, spoke about receiving assistance in the form of flashflights without batteries or bulbs, inoperable and or antiquated armoured personnel carriers, and troops lacking weapons and training.

Despite the peacekeepers' presence, neither side has given up the fight. Armed groups are still controlling the country and moving freely among the population, while disarmament efforts have had little effect so far.

The UN insists the peacekeepers have neutralised the fighters. "What we haven't done yet is stop the suffering of the people of the CAR, or succeed in being everywhere, which means that, on any given day, people are still being targeted for nothing more than their religious identity," Samantha Power, the US ambassador to the UN said.

France is now scaling down its mission. There are fears that when peacekeepers leave the situation will deteriorate and CAR will simply fall apart. It is quite clear by now that the UN alone will not provide a lasting solution to CAR's problems and neither will the government, which has become part of the problem rather than the solution.

Attempts at peace building have been unsuccessful so far. The fractured nature of the leadership structures makes it hard for any peace deal to be enforced by the various factions and the divisions within factions. Since the war started each faction has been working to consolidate their own economic and military power on a local basis and there are simply too many power brokers and too many interests at play.

As soon as a peace deal is signed leaders of rival factions reject it and new violence breaks. "They come here and say they want to reconcile but the minute they leave they show just the opposite," Antoinette Montaigne, Minister of National Reconciliation told *The New Yorker.* The absence of a national army, reliable infrastructure and institutions as well as an established government will no doubt hinder progress towards resolution.

Samba-Panza has tried different strategies to stabilise the country. In an effort to form a more inclusive government, she forced her cabinet to resign and appointed a Muslim prime minister, the country's first, who was allowed to name a few Séléka officials as ministers. But they were expelled by the leaders of the main Séléka army.

In spite of widespread insecurity, she has called for elections for August this year. Abdoulaye Mar Dieye, head of the African bureau at the UN Development Program said parliamentary and presidential elections were vital to restart development and offer traumatised people hope for the future.

"We have to have those elections because you cannot have a protracted transition," he said.

But critics say elections will achieve little. "None of the problems will go away just because elections are

People pray as they bury 16 coffins in the muslim cemetery of the PK16 district of Bangui on December 11, 2013. The father of a slain French soldier has described how disarmed Muslim fighters in the Central African Republic were lynched by a Christian mob in harrowing testimony that raised the spectre of a new wave of sectarian killing in the troubled state. AFP PHOTO / FRED DUFOUR

held," said Thierry Vircoulon from the International Crisis Group. "Only after restoring security and the reconstruction of key state functions as a priority."

Critics also say her government has not pushed hard enough for reconciliation and inclusion. "Score settling and positioning for the next election remains the chief preoccupations of most politicians in the capital." Vircoulon said.

There is no doubt that re-establishing the rule of law and addressing impunity are now the biggest challenge and the highest priority for the transitional government. Both the Séléka and antibalaka militias are responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity. In 2014 the International Criminal Court (ICC) opened an investigation into allegations of murder, rape and the recruiting of child soldiers.

Last March the government began discussions on a draft law to create a special criminal court within the national judicial system that would include national and international judges and would complement the work of the ICC to try those responsible for grave crimes and address impunity.

The massive influx of small arms into many parts of the country is the biggest threat to national security, law and order, according to a Small Arms Survey report. "The belief that weapons are necessary for self-defence has become widespread among civilians," the report said. An effective disarmament campaign is therefore needed not only for militias but also for civilians.

Outside the capital where MINUSCA's presence is sparse, the situation is even more volatile. Disputes between farmers and pastoralists over land, water and cattle have exacerbated old conflicts and created new ones.

Farmers tend to be mostly Christians and are perceived to be associated with the antibalaka, while herders are predominantly Muslims and are seen to be linked with the Séléka. Both militias have engaged in criminal activities including extortion and looting, causing poverty, destruction and suffering on civilians who in many cases are forced to flee.

According to an International Crisis Group briefing, the antibalaka have been stealing cattle and often killing the owners. They have also established control over the roads so they could extort livestock dealers. According to the briefing, Sélékas have also done well out of the cattle trade. "Séléka personnel play the role of armed tax collectors and make regular visits to extort pastoralists … they take over the administration of towns, occupying customs and police infrastructure."

In the absence of an effective government, or traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms, local communities have taken laws onto their own hands. Many young pastoralists have joined militia groups seeking retribution, while others have crossed the border and taken refuge in Cameroon and Chad.

The International Crisis Group's briefing say these clashes form a conflict within a conflict away from the international spotlight and the attention of the transitional government. They are causing the collapse of the livestock farming sector, the radicalisation of some pastoralist groups and the blockage of transhuman movements between CAR and Chad and pastoralists are turning to banditry in order to survive.

Stopping banditry and ending the illegal exploitation of natural resources are essential to restore security and end the war.

Séléka militias also control the diamond rich areas in the western part of the country as well as national parks where poaching is prevalent. According to press reports, the diamonds and ivory are smuggled into neighbouring countries before being exported around the world and the revenues are used to finance the war – buy weapons and pay and equip soldiers and mercenaries.

For decades revenues generated from diamond industry were used to enrich those in power instead of advancing the country's economic development. Government corruption led to mismanagement of high-value resources: diamonds, gold, wildlife, including elephants, ivory and timber.

In 2011 the World Bank estimated that diamonds sold in the informal market could represent between one quarter and one half of the national production. Diamond smuggling has increased since the war. Unfortunately the lack of effective government regulation and oversight for these resources has led to widespread illegal exploitation.

Stopping banditry and ending the illegal exploitation of natural resources are essential to restore security and end the war. Natural resources (agriculture, mining, timber wild life and pastoralism) are the backbone of the CAR's economy and they have the potential to become the engine of economic recovery and growth.

Tax revenues from regulated markets could help finance public services, nation building projects and create much needed employment. The government will need the financial and technical support of the international community to build institutional capacity, develop adequate legal frameworks and transparent and accountable systems of governance that will be free of corruption and patronage.

Only transparent and accountable systems in the allocation of natural resources revenues will reduce the structural inequalities, which are the root causes of the current conflict.

Inclusive peacebuilding initiatives on the other hand are vital to ease tensions, foster a sense of community and social cohesion. This could be promoted by creating projects for cooperation among factions and re-establishing relationships between the government and the wider community.

People's involvement and inclusion specially of young people is vital to rebuild the country, where unemployment is running at over 20 percent and 60 percent of young people live in extreme poverty. Efforts to reintegrate ex-combatants are also essential.

"A critical message to give the world about the CAR is the risk of radicalisation. Poverty, the massive displacement, and disenfranchisement due to displacement will only make matters worse," said Chaloka Beyani, UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons.

"If marginalisation, extreme poverty and lack of development are not addressed we'll see another front by Nigeria's Boko Haram or a similar group emerge, we need to take the steps now," he said.

Indeed prolonging the chaos and suffering will only make matters worse and the CAR will continue to struggle with poverty, malnutrition and banditry. Time is running out. A genuine engagement from the international community, cooperation and restorative approaches are urgently needed to bring healing and peace to this broken nation. R

Vietnamese refugees, including Sheila Pham's family, on Pulau Bidong, 1980.

The Art of Telling Vietnamese Refugee Stories

This year Vietnam marked the 40th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. ***SHEILA PHAM*** *looks at different ways of telling the stories of refugees from the war and what became of them afterwards in new lands.*

It was a pivotal moment when the South Vietnamese government fell on 30 April 1975, triggering a long chain of events around the world. For Australia, the Vietnam War was hugely significant; not only because a large number of Australians fought and served in the war, but also because it was embedded in great social change sweeping across the country.

Forty years on, the war continues to have a complex legacy, not least of which was the subsequent refugee crisis that led to an overhaul of Australia's refugee program.

In May 1975, the first boatload of people left Vietnam. They were the first of hundreds of thousands that fled over the following years. By late 1975, the first 400 Vietnamese refugees were selected to be resettled in Australia from camps in Guam, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia.

The scale of the refugee crisis was unprecedented, and the Australian Senate initiated a Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence to develop the appropriate national response. In 1976, the committee's report *Australia and the Refugee Problem* recommended that the Vietnamese were settled as refugees rather than "normal migrants" and that in order for this to happen there needed to be a new refugee resettlement policy. What followed was the introduction of a suite of services including housing, education and other sources of social support. According to the Refugee Council of Australia: "This report [Australia and the Refugee Problem] marked the beginning of new thinking which transformed the national refugee program from the humanitarian element of a general migration program to a dedicated and planned humanitarian program supported by a sophisticated system of settlement support."

100,000 Vietnamese refugees were eventually resettled in Australia; of those only 2000 came directly by boat. Countless others perished along the way.

I know all of this second-hand rather than first since it was my parents and extended family who left Vietnam. Nonetheless their story of escape is one that I've told publicly in live performance and on-air, and I'm constantly grappling with the question: What's the best way for me - an Australian with Vietnamese heritage - to tell these stories? Beyond their story of escape, how do I tease out some of the other stories from decades of Vietnamese resettlement in Australia? In what ways does the past relate to the present?

Another person who has become similarly interested in these issues is Phuong Ngo, a Melbourne-based artist. Born and raised in Australia, Ngo also grew up feeling somewhat disconnected from his family's rich culture and transnational history. His art practice goes across different media including photography, video and installation.

It involves him delving deep into his family's past, exploring the many intersections of history and identity. His work focuses on issues such as representation, and demonstrates how the personal is not only political, but also belongs to much grander narratives.

One of Ngo's works, 'My Dad the People Smuggler', involved him retracing the steps of his family who left Vietnam in 1981. His father organised numerous boats leaving the country and in his quest to learn more about that chapter of his father's life, he recently revisited a Malaysian refugee camp on Pulau Bidong.

Notes from artist Phuong Ngo about his visit to Pulau Bidong in 2012

Hello from Merang, Kuala Terengganu, launching point to a plethora of five star beach resorts, tropical islands and countless beaches; it is also the starting point for my excursion to Pulau Bidong Refugee Camp.

You may or may not be aware of this, but my artistic practice is very meticulously organised - I have timetables, plans and conduct extensive research. However, the reality of this carefully - planned expedition has caused me to reconsider my overly structured working methodology.

It is well and good to have plans and visions of what I hoped to achieve on this trip, but all the best-laid plans in the world could not prepare me for the emotional reality of visiting an abandoned refugee camp that housed my family 30 years ago.

For some reason I had expected this to be easy. Coincidentally, the day I arrived at the site also happened to be my father's birthday, which led to a few weepy moments alone in a forest clearing, recalling the series of interviews I had had with him in the 6 months leading to that day.

The day started with a quick drive to Merang jetty, where I waited for the boat to take me to the island. Once on the boat it was a quick and very bumpy ride to the island. Upon arrival, I immediately recognised particular monuments and details that still existed from the few photos that my parents had taken of the camp in 1981. After taking a few minutes to calm my nerves on the jetty by stopping to examine the clear tropical waters brimming with colourful fish, coral and other sea life (blissfully unaware of the significance of their habitat), I headed inland, towards what remained of the Vietnamese settlement.

Closed in 1991, the camp has been left to return to nature, but not before being pillaged by the locals. Nails, nuts and bolts had been removed; usable wood had been salvaged for housing, while now-headless Buddhas guard the concrete steps leading down to a secluded beach.

Whilst some travellers I encountered expressed dismay that the site had not been preserved for its historicity, I felt that there was something romantic in the idea that the locals had utilised materials salvaged from a site of political shelter to build their own social shelters, so that even as the site was returning to its natural pre-1975 state, parts of it lived on, thus unintentionally perpetuating the life of the refugee camp.

I made my way through the camp by a path that snakes around the island, but found that most of it was inaccessible and had been reclaimed by the forest. However, the biggest obstacle I encountered in collecting material to make this artwork was the sense that the camera was getting in the way of my experience, so I made the decision to shoot mostly video, which then allowed me 5-10 minutes of silence to absorb the experience while the camera recorded. At this point, I am still not sure what I have managed to capture, or what I will produce, but I think that the point of this trip was to share in the experience of my elders.

As I am still trying to process the implications of this trip for myself, I must keep this short. I have been staying at a nearby resort for 4 days now, and it is only after visiting the camp yesterday that I have come to realise that the island I can see from my balcony is actually Pulau Bidong.

Needless to say, I have been humbled by a number of realisations on this trip, and chief amongst those is the revelation that although I am thoroughly grateful and have gone to great lengths to understand where I came from, I will never fully comprehend what my parents suffered and persevered through to give my siblings and I what we have today.

To make up for this vast chasm in understanding, I realise that I must instead succeed in telling their stories and making sure they are heard.

Pulau Bidong 2012. PHOTO: Phuong T.H. Ngo

In Ngo's notes, I particularly relate to his sentiment of creating work that is about sharing "in the experience of my elders". It's also something I think about as a writer, trying my best to interpret experiences from the past.

This is also the same camp my family ended up in, along with more than a quarter of a million other Vietnamese refugees. From 8 August 1978 the United Nations (UN) administered a refugee camp on the island until it officially closed on 31 October 1991. By that stage there were still several thousand people and the remaining inhabitants were forced to repatriate in Vietnam. It defies imagination to see how so many people passed through a small site around one square kilometre in area.

Forty years after the war, the island off the coast of Malaysia still looms large in the memories of those who stayed there for a time. Since 1999, the former refugee camp has begun to welcome visitors, an example of what could be called a 'dark tourist' destination.

Growing up, I would hear Pulau Bidong simply referred to as 'dao', meaning 'island' in Vietnamese. The Island. As a child I had no sense of its geography or its place in the greater scheme of things; no concept that it was one of the main refugee camps set up in the aftermath of the war and that my family were part of one of the world's great exoduses in recent times.

I recently found a photo from Pulau Bidong in an old album of my parents and they were just as surprised by it as I am because they had seemingly forgotten that the photo existed.

They're standing in a large group and they're smiling, happy to pose for the camera. They look young and very thin. The idyllic picture shows little of the underlying insecurity of their situation and their living conditions. When my parents talk of those days it's with mixed feelings, with my father telling funny stories about life on the island and the kind of deals he would make with people, while my mother would mostly just shudder about the horror of it all.

Their fates, as well as so many of the others, lay in the hands of the many UN staff and other administrators who were processing claims as fast as they could and on behalf of countries all over the world.

One visitor to Palau Bidong, Leo Cherne, called it "Hell Isle". Refugees crowded onto the island and as he recalled it, "lived in makeshift huts two and three stories

"When my parents talk of those days it's with mixed feelings, with my father telling funny stories about life on the island and the kind of deals he would make with people, while my mother would mostly just shudder about the horror of it all."

Forty Years On at Ashfield Town Hall, 30 April 2015. PHOTO: Garry Trinh

Vietnamese-Australian writers (L-R): TV Phan, Sheila Pham, Stephen Pham, Shirley Le, Katherine Le, Pauline Nguyen, Kim Huynh

high made of salvaged timbers from wrecked boats, plastic sheets, tin cans, and corrugated iron sheets. Latrines and wells were inadequate; tropical rainstorms sent rivers of filthy water through the camp; all food and clean water had to be imported from the mainland. Water was rationed at one gallon per day per person. Doctors were abundant, but medicine was in short supply. Sanitation was nearly non-existent and hepatitis was rampant."

In reflecting on all of this, what has become clearer is that it's easy to become fixated on certain points in time, and continually reinforce one of the most salient parts of the collective story of Vietnamese refugees.

Boat journeys and refugee camps are just one chapter of a story that has continued into the present. What of the newfound Australian suburban reality that followed which brought on a whole new raft of feelings? What stories of resettlement could be spoken more of and in what ways can these stories be told? Yet there's something telling about this fixation on the refugee journey perhaps, a clue of the major source of trauma that continues to underscore the experience of the Vietnamese community as a whole in Australia.

To mark the fortieth anniversary of the end of the war I organised a special storytelling night on 30 April 2015 at Ashfield Town Hall. It was not an entirely comfortable experience to organise an event on such a sensitive anniversary, when Vietnamese community leaders in Sydney have chosen to organise a cultural festival later this year in November instead. Yet I felt it was important to create a space to promote under-told stories of Australian life and the anniversary felt like an appropriate one to mark in some way.

For more than six months, I worked with a group of Vietnamese-Australian writers at different stages of their writing careers, encouraging them to share stories to an audience of fellow Vietnamese-Australians from our generation as well as the wider community. We were greatly supported by Ashfield City Council and there were 175 people in attendance, more than twice what was originally anticipated.

The numbers of people attending indicated to me that there is a hunger out there to hear tales that aren't well represented in mainstream outlets. On the night, each of the seven storytellers told different stories about various aspects of their lives: growing up in the suburbs, aspiring to be more than what they were, mingling with others who recently migrated to Australia and navigating difficult family relationships weighed down by heavy histories. These were important stories about the post-refugee experience, about how we relate to others seemingly like us and others who seem more different.

The story I chose to tell that night went far beyond Australia to Austria, which I visited last year for the first time. Partly what drew me there was the possibility of meeting family friends who lived in Salzburg. They had left the refugee camp on Pulau Bidong in June 1980 after a three week stay, almost exactly a year before I was born in Australia. I often heard about them growing up; Austria was one of the first countries I knew of. My father would often mention that a good friend of his lived there, whom he called Cong. Cong was someone he'd grown up with in the town of Can Tho and later collaborated with when organising a boat.

Early on there were letters and photos exchanged, showing the new lives they now had on opposite sides of the world. But they had lost touch in the ensuing decades. That is, until I showed up in Salzburg.

Austria had only accepted around 2000 Vietnamese refugees, a fraction of Australia's total intake. Seeing how isolated they were in the middle of a landlocked country in Europe changed the way I see the Vietnamese refugee experience. I never fully understood that to be displaced with a large cohort of your compatriots was in some ways a real luxury, and how important having a community was in order to maintain culture, language, a sense of continuation after major disruptions like war and migration.

Perhaps even more significantly, up until that moment of meeting them, I'd only ever met people from the boat who were related to me; so that harrowing journey might as well have been a creation myth about how we came to be.

Meeting these fellow passengers finally took away some of the anonymity of the others. I saw for myself that these other 'boat people' had names and rich lives and their own big stories to share forty years after the end of the war. ℞

AGENDA

Keeping their Traditions Alive: Mandaean Baptism in the Nepean River

By Richard Walker
Photos by David Maurice Smith /OCULI

It was 6:30 in the morning when I arrived on the banks of the Nepean River in Penrith. The grass was still wet with the morning dew, and the smell of incense wafted gently from the river bank. I was there to witness an event called Benja– the Creation of Life – that few Sydneysiders ever get to see, unless you are a member of the local Mandaean community.Every year, Benja is celebrated over five days, with up to 1000 members of the community coming to the river to be baptised.

I was there on the first of the five days, and watched a small group of Mandaean holy men preparing themselves for the relentless schedule of baptisms that was to follow. But that morning all was calm – the men moved about the river bank reciting their own separate prayers, purifying pots and containers in the river water, and generally readying themselves for the days ahead.

Each was dressed in the traditional flowing white robe known as the Rasta, the same garment that has been worn by Mandaeans for over a thousand years. A powerful sense of peace and calm rested gently over the entire scene and, apart from the occasional sound of a speedboat zipping past, nothing disturbed the feeling that what I saw before me could have been taking place more than a thousand years ago.

The Mandaean community trace the history of their faith back to the third century AD, making Mandaeism one of the oldest monotheistic religions in the world. It is considered by the Mandaean community as both a religion and an ethnicity at the same time, with a spiritual and cultural heritage formed through thousands of years of practice.

Mandaeans revere Adam, Noah and John the Baptist as major prophets, place great importance on flowing water as a source of life, and live a life guided by principles of peace, non-violence and compassion. Their traditional homeland is around the lower Euphrates, Tigris and Karun rivers in the Southern parts of Iraq and Iran.

In addition to being one of the oldest religions, it is also one of the most persecuted. Mandaeans have survived over 1000 years of persecution, largely at the hands of Muslims who generally consider them infidels. In modern times, particularly since the Islamic revolution in Iran and during the reign of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, they have occupied a precarious position in a number of societies.

Largely excluded from the protection of the laws of the land where they've traditionally resided, they have been mistreated, exploited and assaulted with impunity. However, since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the war in Iraq, persecution has increased dramatically. Imprisonment, torture and killings, and aggressive forced conversion to Islam, threaten the very existence of the Mandaean people.

There are now less than 100,000 Mandaeans around the world. It is estimated that only 4000 now remain in Iraq, and between 5000 and 10,000 in Iran. The rest have established diaspora communities around the world, Australia being one of the largest of these.

These communities are now struggling not only to preserve their unique cultural and religious identity, but also to prevent their extinction. Holding on to the traditions and ceremonies that have guided them for generations is crucial to this task.

"It's a matter of healing as well from the wounds and persecution that they suffered. When people are baptised it is a kind of redemption from all kinds of suffering, physical or spiritual."

Across the five days of the Benja, hundreds of Sydney Mandaeans will arrive at the river to be baptised. A small handful of holy men lead proceedings and guide the people, one by one, into the river to be completely immersed in the water.

"It is like opening the gate to the world of light," said Rabbi Dr Brikha Nasoraia, a Mandaean spiritual leader. "These [five days] are the days of creation in which the divine characters emanated into the universe. This is before the Creation, so we are celebrating the creation before the creation. This is just the start of the existence in which God, the great living being, created life. It is the beginning of light shining to the whole Universe of creation."

Baptism is one of the most important tenets of the Mandaean religion. Flowing – 'living' – water represents the connection to the World of Light, and baptism serves both as a connection to this world and as a means of purification.

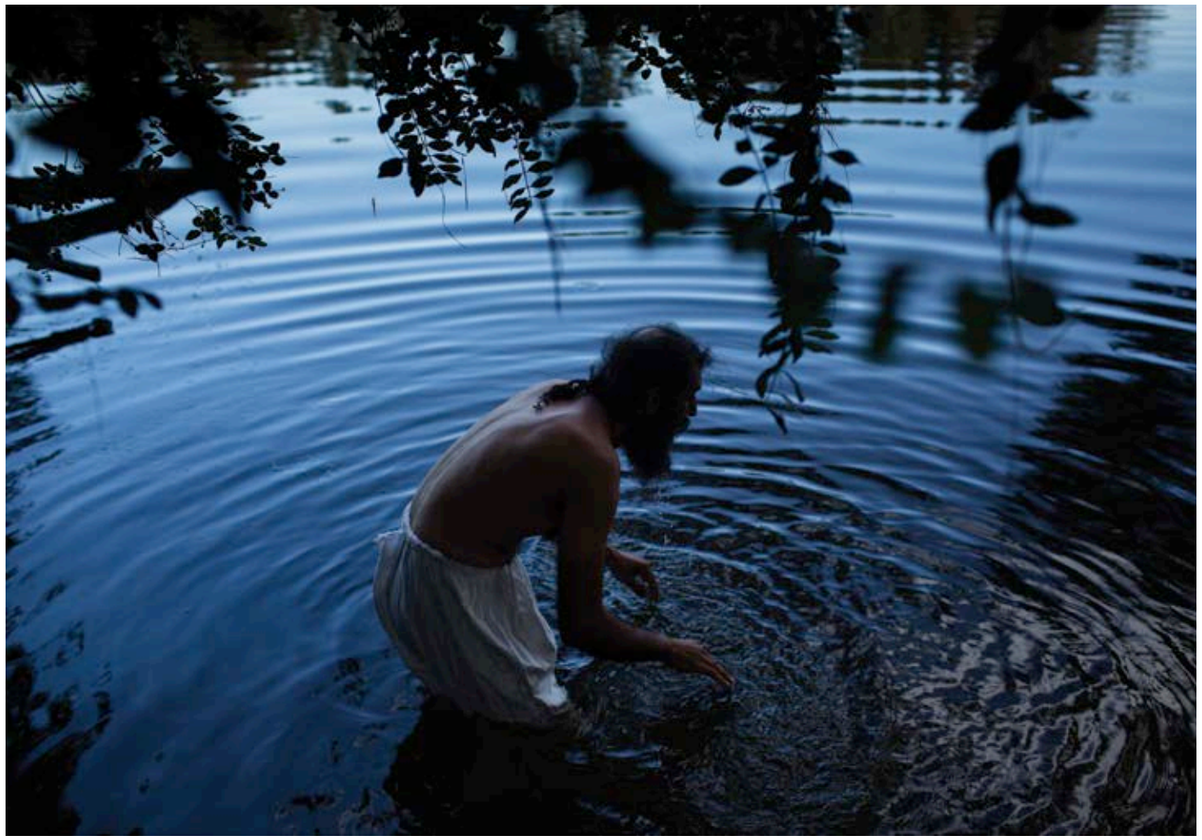
As Dr Nasoraia explains, "The idea [of baptism] is not only to have forgiveness but to have a holy union with the World of Light, with heaven and also with God. For Mandaeans it helps them to achieve enlightenment, purity and above all to revisit and be united with the World of Light."

But for a community with a history of loss and pain as long as the Mandaeans, the importance of the Benja goes beyond worship alone. "Mandaeans are a very strong society," says Dr Nasoraia, "They suffered a lot. By doing this they achieve some kind of strength and special power. So it's a matter of healing as well from the wounds and persecution that they suffered. When people are baptised it is a kind of redemption from all kinds of suffering, physical or spiritual. That's why it is so important for them to participate."

As I stood observing the activities on the river bank, and spoke to the participants, I couldn't help but feel the weight of history upon me. For the people I met that day, the Benja represents a connection to a history of worship that has sustained the Mandaean people through generations, and a foundation of strength and community that gives hope for their continued existence as a people.

Community leader and president of the Sabian Mandaean Association Yassmen Yahya was my guide that morning. In the midst of a busy, modern life filled with work, study, family and more, she - and many other Mandaeans - put aside daily concerns and focus on a deeper meaning. "I feel peace inside me. You feel you belong to something, that's your identity, that's who you are - when you are with these people you are part of them and they are part of you."

The Mandaean community has been pursued across the world to the brink of destruction. And yet, here in a quiet Sydney park, a centuries-old culture in danger of disappearing is being maintained. Like a river running through time, the Benja and the ritual of baptism represent an unbroken line to ancestors of long ago. As Yassmen said, "All the persecution that has happened... how many people have been killed? How many people have been forced to leave their beliefs and their religion? But this thing still exists. For how many thousands of years, it still exists – we're still here." R



Belonging, Hope and Survival

By Nicola Conville

Yassmen Yahya fled Iraq with her young family to make a new life in Australia. She has since overcome many challenges and was recently elected as president of her local Mandaean community.

Can you tell us a bit about your background and the journey that led you to live here in Australia?
I fled Iraq in 2001, when it was still under Saddam's regime. My husband had been taken from our home in the middle of the night six months previously. It was so scary. The soldiers came at 3am - through the front door, the back door, from everywhere. My husband was still in his pajamas. It was winter and they wouldn't even let him put on a coat.

Over the next six months we searched everywhere for him. We didn't know if he was alive or dead. Finally I received a phone call from a man who asked me to meet with him. He gave me a small piece of paper with just two lines on it – it was from my husband, telling me to take our two young daughters and leave Iraq.

We fled to Jordan and eventually my husband joined us two years later. We had to pay money to the regime for his release. My youngest daughter was only one when my husband was taken and she was almost four when we got him back again.

In 2007 I came to Australia with the girls and my husband joined us two years later in 2009. It was very hard having our family torn apart during that time.

You were recently elected as president of The Sabian Mandaean Association. How did this come about?
When I first came to Australia I went to the Association to do some paperwork. At the time it was a community service run by older people and the computer knowledge there was lacking. I said, "Look, I know what I want, so if you let me use your systems I can get it myself."

I ended up helping them out in a volunteer capacity. I was going to English classes at the time, so after class I would go for two hours each day to help out.

Then I would pick up my daughters from school. Then I joined the board - I was actually the first female board member. After that, I became secretary. Then I was elected as president in December 2014.

I am the first woman to be elected as president of The Sabian Mandaean Association, and as far as I know I am the only female president in a similar role in the world.

Can you explain the importance of the Association?
Mandaeans are a minority group and we have suffered a lot of persecution. There are around 10,000 Mandaeans currently living in Australia, and 5000-6000 of these are living in the Liverpool and Fairfield area, where the association is based.

Our association focuses a lot on immigration and just telling people who we are and what we do. We have a community centre which we opened three years ago in Liverpool. It consists of a church for prayer and services and a community hall for events and activities.

We have also purchased land in Wallacia in order to build a place of worship and hold our baptisms there. It has taken a long time for us to get planning permission and it's a major project which we have undertaken with the help of the Mandaean Synod.

What kinds of services does the Association provide? And what are your responsibilities as president?
The centre is very busy and my role carries huge responsibility. A big part of my job is just ensuring everything is in place and runs smoothly.

The resource centre and church are open from 9.30am to 3pm, then the centre closes briefly and is open again from around 4pm until 10pm.We do a lot of casework and community work. We provide services for women, hold meetings and run classes and we hold playgroups for kids.

We also have picnics and run four or five large community events every year. We have a soccer team and run activities with that every weekend.
We have a big Mandaean soccer team cup every December. And we also hold information sessions about Centrelink and access to legal advice.

I work at STARTTS full time, and after work I usually go to the community centre. Sometimes I don't get home until 11pm. I'm also dealing with emails and phone calls constantly.

Because the centre is solely run by volunteers, I need to make myself available to them when they need help or they're feeling frustrated, or they just need someone to talk to. We do, sometimes, cover volunteers' transport or food costs, but it's very nominal. My weekends are also spent at the community centre.

How do you fit the role in around your family life?
It is very demanding, but my family is very supportive. My husband is great and while the girls are older now – Sally is 16 and in year 10, and Sarah is 19 and in her second year at UTS - to some extent they actually need me more than ever. It is really hard trying to manage everything.

Most of the time Sally is with me. She comes to the centre for a few hours in the evening after school. On Sundays we have family time after I finish at the centre. We always enjoy a late dinner together and just spend time talking and catching up. It is very challenging trying to balance everything.

Did you have to break new ground in terms of being accepted as a female in a senior position in your community?
When I first joined the board I was the only female. Another woman joined the board a while ago, but she didn't stay for long, unfortunately.

It was very difficult initially, because I was responsible for finances and sometimes people don't like to ask a female about such things. But people saw that I worked hard and began to believe in me. And I also had the support of our community leaders. I've been working in the community since 2008 and will hold my position as president for two years.

I am doing a social work degree part-time but I have put off my studies for now because I am so busy. When I finish my presidency, my plan is to finish my degree, focus on my career, and maybe just relax for a little while!

What are your plans for the future?
I want to build systems within the association so that if someone leaves, the service they provide doesn't disappear, which is what has been happening up until now.

I'm getting a lot of support from STARTTS to put systems in place and implement policies and procedures so that whoever comes after me won't have to start from the beginning.

It would be great to get some funding for the centre too so we are not just relying on volunteers all the time. That would help to take the pressure off.

Why is it important for you to be so active within your community?
It means that there's hope, and reassurance of the survival of the community for a long time. The "Mandi" community, as Mandaeans call it, is a home away from home.

It is the home to Mandaeans who are making a life here. The importance for me to be so active is because it's where I belong, something that I have been trying to attain since I left Iraq – and I'm not the only one. A sense of belonging, hope and survival is what is driving the community to give back and assist in any way we can. ℟

HEALTH

Releasing the Pain: Physiotherapy with Victims of Torture and Trauma

*Physical pain and emotional pain often go hand in hand for trauma survivors. STARTTS Physiotherapist **VEENA O'SULLIVAN** relates some practical insights into how she helps survivors release their pain and heal from trauma.*

ILLUSTRATION: ARTQU

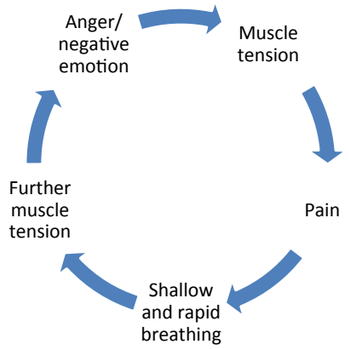


Diagram 1
Connection between breathing and muscle tension

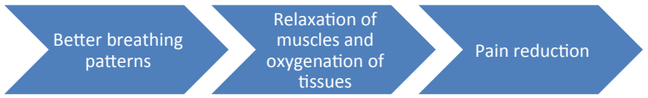


Diagram 2
Breathing as a tool to manage pain

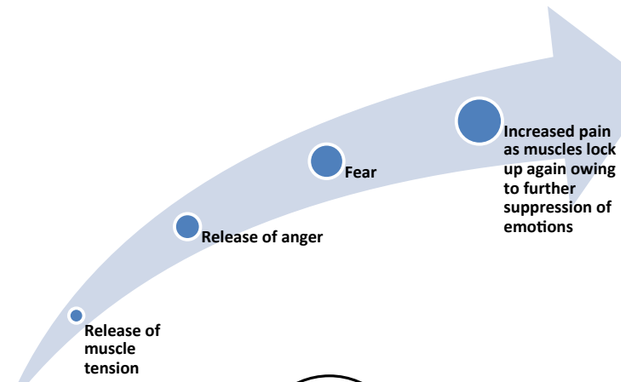


Diagram 3
Reason for increase in pain

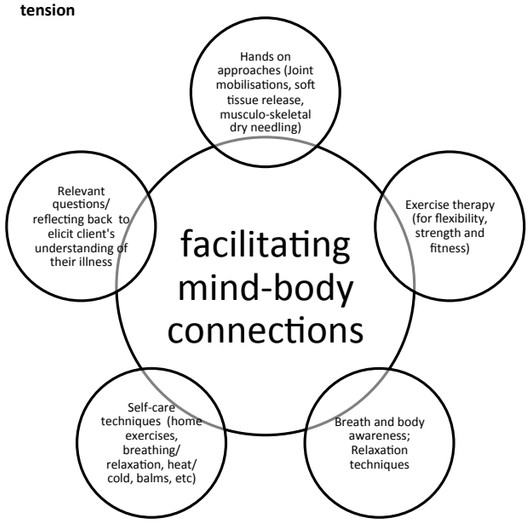


Diagram 4
Integrative approach used in physiotherapy

Physical pain is rarely an isolated sensation; it is almost always accompanied by emotion and thoughts. Traumatised clients tend to dissociate traumatic memory from feelings and the accompanying physiological sensations.

As a result, emotional trauma gets trapped in the body and it is often somatised in the form of chronic physical pain. Refugees who have experienced trauma don't normally realise this because the process is usually unconscious.

In our physiotherapy sessions I guide clients to gain some insights as to how their body sensations, feelings, and images from traumatic experiences are inter-related. They then gain awareness of the body-mind connections, and learn how to prevent and release pain.

STARTTS acknowledges the multiple needs of clients who have undergone severe trauma and torture. It provides a holistic and culture-sensitive approach to healing by addressing the biological, psychological and social aspects of a client's health.

As a physiotherapist, my work in facilitating the healing process of survivors of torture and trauma is also integrative. My patients present a wide range of musculo-skeletal symptoms which are not isolated from other aspects of their psychological health or daily life. In addition I guide clients in making connections between their physical symptoms and psychological health.

Suffering is deeply imprinted in the body because the reactions involving the brain (sympathetic nervous system and hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal axis) spread throughout the body, and the body's stress mechanisms are activated when traumatic experiences threaten one's sense of safety, satisfaction and connection.

A loss of balance between the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system over time leads to illness. It is the cumulative negative experiences and the resultant negative emotions (fear, anger, sadness, etc.) that create this loss of balance. As a result, the immune system is weakened and a wide range of health problems ensue.

The physiological effects of stress typically constrict blood vessels and reduce blood flow to the soft tissues such as muscles, tendons and nerves. This process leads to a decrease in oxygen flow and to the build-up of pain-producing chemicals, causing muscle tension and subsequent pain.

As a physiotherapist, I use my skills to work on the body as a starting point, using the powerful tools of touch and movement to begin the work of healing. My goal is to align the three aspects of one's being: the physical, emotional and mental. Through the body, one can access the emotional and mental layers that contribute to illness.

THE MIND-BODY CONNECTION

For many clients, it is difficult to differentiate the physiological, emotional and mental layers of their traumatic experiences, so deep feelings of hurt and being wounded are usually expressed as aches and pains in the body.

In my physiotherapy sessions clients gain a clearer awareness of the body-mind connections, and thereby are able to better understand how to prevent and/or release pain. This understanding also allows them to work more effectively within their counselling-psychotherapy process. They can take the information to their counsellors, and the counsellors also receive feedback from me to further assist their clients.

A CASE STUDY

Muscle tension is a fundamental way in which the body traps emotional pain. One of my clients has headaches that both a clinical assessment and some discussions reveal are clearly related to mental tension and conflict.

I asked a few questions to my client that confirms this understanding:

What do you think has caused your headaches? I ask.

"I don't know for sure; but when I think too much, especially at night, I can't sleep and my head feels bad," he replies.

Can you tell me a little about those thoughts?

"I am nowhere. You know I can't go back to my country and I can't do anything here."

How does that make you feel?

"I don't know. What do you mean?"

Is it sadness, anger, or fear or something else? (I offer him some options, as he has difficulty identifying and naming his emotions. Many clients have difficulty distinguishing between feelings like anger and fear. They will generally say something like "I am tense".)

"Of course, I feel very upset. I am angry."

Where in the body do you feel the anger? The client notices that his body aches especially between his shoulder blades (mid-thoracic region) and his neck. The pain travels from there to his head, giving him vice-like headaches as the energy of anger rises from the thoracic region up the spine and across to the forehead.

Next, I begin to work on this area of the body and reflect back to him what I observe and feel through my touch. For example, I say: "Your muscles are tight in the areas where you describe the pain, especially on the right side. Can you feel it where my hands are? Do you also notice that your breathing is a little shallow, and that

you are quite tense around the shoulders?" I use a mirror as a tool for providing feedback, so that he can see directly how the body is held.

Using these cues, I then work on posture correction, relaxation and breathing (see Diagrams 1 and 2), and the use of touch to release muscle tension. After some time in this session, the muscles begin to relax. He is free of the headache, he feels more relaxed, but also more stirred up because he is noticing the effect of the anger on his body.

This constitutes the first step in guiding the client to link his emotions with sensations in the body.

The client was given homework, to keep a diary and notice more carefully the links between his thoughts, memories, emotions and his physical sensations. He is asked to identify the situations that trigger a rise in anger, and is invited to recognise the thoughts, beliefs and emotions that accompany the anger.

He is also asked to record the physical sensations that will accompany these and to locate them in his own body. The client's counsellor is informed of the process, so that she can then work more specifically with him on the psychological issues.

A week later, when the client returns for his second session, he says that whilst he experienced pain relief initially, his symptoms became worse the next day. Although they lessened a little during the week, the level of pain remained the same. He had not maintained his diary because he felt angry—angry that the pain had returned. He thought that if he wrote in his diary, he would feel more anger. He said, "My mind is bad."

The worsening of his symptoms is a common phenomenon, and indicates that with an initial release of the anger, as the muscles relax, he felt better and also was more in touch with his emotions, but when he judged himself severely for experiencing anger, his muscles locked again as it was unpleasant for him to experience the emotion of anger. So, he began to suppress it, as he believed it was wrong to feel anger. In suppressing emotions, his muscles became tenser and so did his experience of pain (see Diagram 3). This tension indicates the intra-psychic conflict between experiencing anger and suppressing it. I used this information to provide feedback to the client.

This formed the basis of the next stages of the healing process. In the third session, the client had filled his diary and noted some of the correlations between his anger and the physical pain (especially headaches). In order to further raise his awareness between the suppressed emotions and physical pain, I asked him, "What feels worse, the anger or the pain?" This was an important question, I also asked this to empower him to release the anger.

He responded, "They are both terrible, and I know that the pain is there because of the anger. I feel helpless. I can't change anything."

I said, "You have two options: You can trap the pain forever, because you can't find a solution to the anger, or you can allow the anger to be released in a safe way, with a combination of counselling and physiotherapy."

I began to work on his neck and upper back, gently releasing stiffness in the joints and muscles. At this point, he started to sob uncontrollably. He was able to release some of his deep-seated pain and sorrow, and on this occasion, he spoke of his feelings of guilt (which in due course will need to be addressed).

Emotional trauma gets trapped in the body, and it is often somatised in the form of chronic physical pain.v

The session ended with some gentle breathing and relaxation techniques, and he reported being free of headaches and back pain. He was keen to return the following week, and said that he would put into practise some of the exercises I had prescribed.

The brief therapeutic process that occurred so far in these sessions with the client reflected the interplay between the mind and the body. A reduction in muscle tension, and increased flexibility in the tissues of the cervical and thoracic regions, resulted in a subsequent reduction in headaches.

This appeared to be accompanied by a reduction in some of his rigid thought patterns that were locking in the emotion of anger in his body. The client is now more accepting of the anger, and feels it is safer to talk about it. He speaks about deeper aspects of his anger, such as rage, and he discusses it with his counsellor so that he can address it in a safe and appropriate manner.

Our clients at STARTTS have complex problems based on difficult trauma and torture histories. Their difficulties are further compounded by the re-settling process. For some, visa restrictions create uncertainty, insecurity and further distress.

An integrative approach that helps people build inner strengths and resources for self-care, despite unpredictable external circumstances, is essential in the process of trauma recovery.

A Summary of the Practical Aspects

Record a careful history and assess the physical symptoms to establish baseline measures (including their effect on daily function).

1. Make recommendations on other interventions that may be required.
    - In this case, he does need a medical review to assess the exact state of the hip to ensure that the plates are not causing pain.

2. Use various techniques to release pain and stiffness in the body as well as to promote relaxation (see Diagram 2). I aim to create an environment where the patient is more comfortable, physically and emotionally. When the body experiences a more pleasurable state, then it is easier to reach the 'mind'. Also, working on the body releases emotions that are blocked. Medical sciences, biomechanics, neuroscience and psychology inform my approach in the selection of the various techniques used.

3. Guide the patient to make the connections between his physical symptoms and psychological status, for example:
    a. By asking questions: What do you think has made the headaches worse in recent months?
    b. By getting him to keep a diary and observing the links between physical pain and the situations that contribute to the pain (including thoughts and feelings that arise as a result of the situations).
    c. By reflecting back and giving feedback on what I perceive (I am wary of imposing any interpretation on the patient).

Working with tension headaches

One of the main problems that this client reported was headaches. In order to ease his physical pain, I have used a list of the techniques specifically for him, and these are given below. (See Diagram 4 for the overall model of care used)

- Gentle mobilisations to the facet joints of the spine (areas that are tender and stiff are targeted, namely the cervical and thoracic vertebrae joints). These mobilisations are used to release pain and improve joint mobility.
- Soft tissue release of specific muscle groups to assist further in pain relief (e.g. trapezius, muscles of scalp).
- Musculo-skeletal dry needling (targets neuromuscular healing and release of energy blocks).
- Breathing exercises: to help anchor awareness in the present moment and as a tool for managing pain.
- Physiotherapy for other areas as appropriate (such as hip, lumbar spine), because the whole body is linked; a weak link affects the whole chain.
- Self-care techniques (use of heat pack, posture correction exercises, exercises to strengthen neck muscles, breathing/relaxation practice for home).

PHOTO: Courtesy of The Bread and Butter Project

AGENDA

Employment is crucial for healing, and settlement in a new country. ***SHEILA PHAM*** *reports on a seminar on employment and refugees.*

Generating Sustainable Employment for Refugees

The pathway that a person will take from landing on Australian soil to landing in a job has dramatically changed over the years, a reflection of both the widespread industrial changes that have occurred as well as changes in legislation and visa categories.

Nowadays the form of assistance provided to refugees and new migrants comes in many different forms: from financial support, to education programs around Australian workplace culture, right through to the direct provision of employment. Although all these programs aim to directly deal with this problem to varying degrees of success, they are all similarly driven by the core belief that employment is pivotal.

Employment is a significant challenge in the resettlement process of refugees, alongside the difficulties of acclimatising to a new culture and learning a new language. Undoubtedly, gaining employment is one of the greatest enablers to resettlement in countries like Australia; not only in terms of developing skills and ensuring financial stability, but also in shaping someone's identity and sense of purpose. Work provides social connections, and even more importantly, it can help produce a sense of belonging to a new place.

Given all of this, the focus of the STARTTS' Annual Community Development Seminar on 23 April 2015 was on generating sustainable employment for refugees. Three organisations were invited to present, alongside STARTTS, working across a number of sectors including agriculture, hospitality, food production and clothing. Some of the training programs were specifically about catering to a skills shortfall in Australia. These include more traditional forms of work, which have existed for decades, or even centuries. Other roles have arisen more recently to address the changing demands of the nation.

The organisations profiled below contrast with the work of STARTTS itself in this area. STARTTS runs a project that supports the growth of business ideas of our clients and is based on a model called Enterprise Facilitation. In a future edition of *Refugee Transitions,* we'll explore in-depth the work of STARTTS around enabling employment opportunities.

Sita Rai at Brown Brothers vineyard, Launceston, Tasmania. PHOTO: Courtesy of Bright Employment

BRIGHT EMPLOYMENT

Bright was established in October 2013 with the goal of "developing meaningful employment pathways for marginalised communities, including refugees and asylum seekers". This description was deliberately worded, as explained to the gathered audience at the seminar: "As a rule at Bright, we try not to use 'refugee'/'asylum seeker' as tags, and try to use 'migrant communities'. We see them as people; we don't think they need to carry a tag," said Tim Davies, CEO of Bright Employment.

Davies articulated that the agenda for the company, tackling skills shortfalls in agriculture (fruit and wine) and hospitality; the former in Tasmania involving some of Australia's best known brands, and the latter in Sydney involving many of the country's leading restaurants, hotels and catering companies.

Alongside the core business of employment, there is also the aim to address other relevant factors, such as the widespread perception that migrants do not integrate into mainstream Australian society as well as outright xenophobia and racism.

Davies argued that a great opportunity is being lost to invest in people who now call Australia home and in the process, forge stronger community ties. In addition, people are losing valuable existing skills, as is the case with communities like the Bhutanese and Hazara. However, they are being blocked at the entry level point by the huge influx of backpackers from the United Kingdom and other parts of Europe who are happy to undertake seasonal agricultural work in order to extend their visas.

Next year 200 students will graduate from the Bright Cooking School, which trains people in basic kitchen skills. There is also increasing support from the hospitality industry with a number of big players signing on as placement partners, willing to change their own practices to accommodate the needs of new migrants who may be struggling to adapt to Australian work culture and expectations.

The work of the agricultural arm is also promising, though Davies identified many challenges ahead. "To date we've secured work for more than 150 local Tasmanian refugees since we started. But the real challenge is the consistency of work. We have a group of 50-60 people who have been working for about 9-10 months a year, consistently through summer and winter. The hard part is trying to get more people through that consistency of work and keeping them through that bad cycle of just bouncing on and off welfare."

THE SOCIAL OUTFIT

In the heart of Sydney's inner west in Newtown is The Social Outfit. It's on the southern end of the King Street and the well-located shop is fitted out with plywood that provides a plain backdrop to the striking array of fashion items being sold.

Many of the items are in bold colours and prints; 60% of the fabrics used have been 'upcycled' from fashion industry donations. The resulting clothes and accessories are locally produced and ethically made.

Based on The Social Studio in Collingwood in Melbourne, The Social Outfit has been officially trading for around one year. As founder Jackie Ruddock said, "we believe in tapping into the rich creativity of the new migrant and refugee community, and we believe that this leads to empowerment and social inclusion."

The focus is on education, training and employment in the fashion industry, through clothing production, retail training, and design and marketing.

Similar to Bright Employment, the approach of the Social Outfit is about capitalising on the existing skills of emerging communities. As Ruddock explained, "Many migrant communities have rich histories in sewing, tailoring, tapestry, all of those kinds of things. And we seek to take those skills and give them back value straight away as people settle and learn other things."

A concept of adult education is a key premise to the work of this new social enterprise, understanding that some refugees may have received little formal education back in their countries of origin, and thus a supportive and enabling environment is needed to foster learning. "I think it's a really nice community hub environment, where people are encouraged to learn and to grow as they go along," said Ruddock.

Work provides social connections, and even more importantly, it can help produce a sense of belonging to a new place.

THE BREAD AND BUTTER PROJECT

The Bread and Butter Project is a wholesale artisan bakery located in Sydney that produces high quality bread, including artisan sourdough bread. It began around two years ago when Paul Allam, co-owner of Bourke Street Bakery, was contacted to help get a bakery up and running again in an abandoned bakery and orphanage in a refugee camp in Mae Sot. The Thai town is on the border with Burma and is known for its large population of Burmese refugees and migrants.

It was a life changing experience for Allam and his partner, Jessica Grynberg, and sowed the seeds for the project which aims to provide employment pathways for people from refugee backgrounds. In so doing, a current need is also fulfilled in the Australian labour market for qualified bakers.

The business has been developed using a social enterprise model, which means that all profits are reinvested into baker training and employment pathways, among other things. Its first round of fundraising raised 1.3million in seed capital to fund initial set up and wage costs for the training program. The biggest single source of funding was an Australian federal government social enterprise grant of $230,000.

"We know that there's lower workforce participation for people from refugee backgrounds compared to other migrant groups. And we know that a lot of work opportunities that are available are in the illegal economy where people are getting paid cash, no superannuation, not covered in terms of their safety and that is concerning," said Kayleigh Ellis, trainee support manager. "And we also know that historically migrants have done very well in the Australian hospitality industry."

A point of difference with The Bread and Butter project is that a huge amount of additional support is provided alongside the hands-on training program, with Ellis' role primarily dedicated to supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of trainees. This support also includes an ESL tutoring program delivered by skilled volunteers, which helps participants develop confidence to learn a raft of new skills to help them navigate Australian workplaces. R

DR KIRAN GREWAL, a senior research fellow at the Institute for Social Justice at the Australian Catholic University, conducted research on torture prevention. She writes about some of the findings.

Preventing Torture: From Norms To Reality

PHOTO: AMI VITALE

There have been many advances in recent years in the areas of international law prosecuting perpetrators of torture and in counselling and rehabilitation forsurvivors. However, sadly, the most vexed question of how to effectively prevent torture remains largely unanswered.

It is true that since the events of 9/11, and the subsequent War on Terror, the international consensus on the absolute prohibition of torture has come under attack. But setting aside this difficult political context, we know that even when everyone agrees in theory that torture is wrong, it still continues to happen in practice with shocking frequency.

So, why is it the case? Is it a sad fact of human existence that torture will continue? Are we willing to accept this? While many of us would argue no to the last question we are often silenced by both, the apparent universality and historical continuity of the problem. At the same time the first question – of why torture happens – is surprisingly often ignored by human-rights advocates.

All too often we either treat as homogenous what are in fact incredibly diverse practices or accept explanations that focus on individual actors rather than the larger institutional, social, political, economic and cultural contexts within which these individuals operate. It was to challenge these tendencies that, as part of a team of researchers from the University of Sydney; Colombo Centre for the Study of Human Rights (Sri Lanka); and Kathmandu School of Law (Nepal), I have spent the last three years researching and testing new approaches to preventing torture.

For the purposes of this article I will just use the term 'torture' as shorthand for all forms of torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. The project described in this article was funded by the European Commission, under the European Instrument for Human Rights and Democracy.

We sought to find out not only the current approaches to preventing torture but also what might be some of the reasons for torture and torture-permissive cultures existing within certain contexts.

As the lead field researcher this essentially means I have spent the last three years trying to get inside the head of a Sri Lankan or Nepali police officer to better understand how he or she views torture, why he or she may think it is appropriate, necessary or at least justifiable, and what might act or do, as incentives to encourage not to torture?

In this article I will present some reflections from the research. But first let me summarise the dominant existing approaches to torture prevention.

Boudhanath Stupa is the largest stupa in Nepal and the holiest Tibetan Buddhist temple outside Tibet. It is the centre of Tibetan culture in Kathmandu and rich in Buddhist symbolism. The stupa is located in the town of Boudha, on the eastern outskirts of Kathmandu. PHOTO: BEHIND LENS

Preventing torture: the current dominant approaches
In brief, up until now approaches to preventing torture and ill treatment have tended to focus on:

1) Lobbying states to ratify and abide by international human-rights treaties (in particular the ICCPR and the Convention against Torture)
2) Naming and shaming the perpetrators and governments (or others) that support them
3) Pushing for the implementation of international human-rights standards into domestic legal systems and where necessary reforming systems to ensure there is legal regulation and redress (so criminalisation and prosecution of perpetrators, establishing avenues for complaints and possible compensation
4) Awareness-raising (for state officials regarding their responsibilities, for potential and actual victims, so they are aware of their rights and for the community more generally, to build consensus and encourage action against the use of torture)
5) Monitoring places of detention to ensure international standards are being followed.

While these strategies have contributed something, each in their own way, towards the struggle against torture, most advocates working in this field also agree that we are in need of new approaches.

This is particularly so for addressing the 'supply' side of torture (ie. working with potential or actual perpetrators).

For me, this search for new approaches requires us first to explore some of the assumptions within existing strategies that often pass unnoticed but raise doubts about their potential effectiveness.

Do governments (or others) respond to shame?
While naming and shaming remains a dominant model for human-rights activism, the idea that this in itself is sufficient to lead to a complete change in policy and approach is idealistic to say the least.

We only need to look at the Australian government's attitude to being repeatedly named and shamed in relation to its treatment of refugees to see this. In the case of Sri Lanka, we have seen a growing belligerence in response to accusations by the international community of war crimes and other serious human-rights violations.

Not only has this not necessarily stopped these acts from taking place, it has made the position of survivors and human-rights activists within the country even more precarious. Are we right to think that governments will simply acceptit when they are told the actions of their officials are wrong? And what makes us think that even if they do accept this, they will respond in the ways we demand over other potential motivations for allowing 'business as usual'?

"The majority of torture that occurs pretty much everywhere in the world is not the high-end, politically motivated, regulated forms of systematised violence."

What do we do when there is no legal or political will to punish?
If all our strategies rely on external surveillance we are in fact left rather impotent in the face of a regime like the one in Sri Lanka (let's wait and see whether things change with the new government) who has already made it clear that there would be no genuine accountability efforts.

With torture, given that it is often used by states as a means of maintaining power and control, to focus on legal and political responses, essentially means we have to wait until there is a change of regime. Sadly dictators and authoritarian regimes often last a long time so, are we willing to simply tread water waiting for a more favourable climate and allow hundreds, or even thousands, to suffer in the meantime?

Is it really a lack of knowledge that leads people to violate other people's rights (and bodies) in such violent ways? Do they not know what they are doing is wrong?
During the research I was often told that the solution laid in more training and awareness-raising. One human-rights advocate even compared it to the ways in which mindsets have been changed around traffic regulations through the passing of laws and public awareness campaigns. For me this analogy does not make sense.

While laws and knowledge of these laws do have an impact on individual behaviour to a certain extent, are we really saying that we think the only reason people do not intentionally cause pain and suffering to others is because they have been taught that the law requires them not to?

And does knowing that the law prohibits certain actions necessarily override other motivating factors?If so, why do we still see acts that everyone know are crimes (such as theft, assault, murder) being committed?

Is punishment the answer?
Following on from the previous point, often the assertion that more education is needed is combined with the demand for accountability. This, it is claimed, will send a message of deterrence. Again, there is undoubtedly a case to be made that facing punishment can act as a deterrent in some cases.

At the same time, while it may only be the fine that stops me from driving 100 km/hour in a 60 km/hour zone (although that might also depend on how responsible a citizen I am), I am not convinced that it is only the threat of prison that stops me from assaulting my annoyingly loud neighbour.

Moreover, if punishment alone could guarantee compliance with norms and rules we would expect to see much less crime than we do, especially in states with effective criminal investigation and justice systems.

Even – to go back to the speeding example – the very real threat of a fine has not prevented me from, on occasion, driving too fast.

How do we deal with the fact that monitoring has simply led to more sophisticated methods that avoid detection?
In his 2007 book, *Torture and Democracy,* scholar Darius Rejali documented the ways in which torture practices have not necessarily died out as a result of states moving to become more democratic and apparently transparent regimes.

Rather the types of torture used have changed from the more obvious use of brute force to techniques that leave few if any visible traces and rely more on subtle, psychological forms of coercion and intimidation.

We found similarly in both Nepal and Sri Lanka that a greater fear of being monitored had led to police officers developing more easily disguised forms of torture but had not changed their attitudes regarding the appropriateness of its use.

Understanding Why Torture Happens

In examining and critiquing each of the existing strategies and the assumptions we saw underlying them, we found ourselves continually returning to one basic question: what do we assume about the reasons why torture is committed with these models for prevention?

Surprisingly, we found that in fact we have very little research that allows us to understand why different actors use, condone, or justify torture in different places at different times.

Therefore the idea behind our project was simple: if we know more about why people do it, we may find ways in which we might better stop them or at least create disincentives. Of course, one of these may well be an effective legal system that holds people to account.

Another may be a regime change away from a government or leadership that thinks it is acceptable to use violence against individuals. But these are not the only possibilities. Nor will they completely address all the possible causes.

It was in an effort to identify other possibilities and better ensure that the strategies that were being used in fact responded to the reason for the problem that we set out to do field research.

Through the examples of Nepali and Sri Lankan police officers, we sought to explore the various factors that might lead them to commit or at least condone the use of torture.

What we found was a range of factors: some fairly self-evident, others less so. For example, common reasons that emerged were:my boss tells me to; my colleagues are all doing it; I think it is the only option to solve my case/ensure justice; I am angry; I can get away with it. Many of these are perhaps what you might expect, if you really thought about it. But how do we then see the torture-prevention strategies used up until now addressing these reasons?

For example, will telling someone it is against the law necessarily stop him or her from lashing out when he or she is frightened, stressed and/or angry? Will the threat of individual prosecutions help if the police officer is being told he or she will be sacked if he or she does not do as he or she is told?

It is thanks to these insights into the reasons behind torture that we were able to start thinking about other potential strategies for intervening.

Among other things, it supported the decision by various organisations (governmental and non-governmental) to increase investment in developing the investigative and other 'soft skills' of police officers.

In our own project we tried working with police officers on developing their inter-personal skills to help them cope better with conflict. We looked at techniques for de-escalating situations early on to avoid ending up in a place where the police officer felt compelled or justified to use violence.

Another strategy we tried was to workshop with police officers practical ways they might be able to resist pressure from their superiors or colleagues that would cause them the least risk.

There will of course always be those who stand up for what they know is right but it is unrealistic to expect us all to do this. Many (perhaps most?) of us will take the path of least resistance, even if that means going along with something we don't like. Therefore, rather than expecting police officers to automatically reject torture when those around, and above them are encouraging it, it may be more effective to instead help them think through ways they can resist more strategically.

Addressing the Torture Spectrum

Returning to our research, aside from what we expected to find, we were also presented with some surprising, but also potentially informative, justifications.

For example:

- it provides what is seen as an essential tool for disciplining 'wayward' society members and therefore is a social good;
- it responds to the expectations of society who want to see justice done quickly;
- it is less cruel than forcing someone through a slow and corrupt criminal justice system.

Indeed one of the most important findings of our research - and I was very pleased to have it confirmed by the former UN Special Rapporteur against Torture, Manfred Nowak, at a conference on the project held in Bangkok in September last year - is that "the majority of torture that occurs pretty much everywhere in the world is not the high-end, politically motivated, regulated forms of systematised violence. It is the far more banal everyday violence of policing or maintaining 'security."

Sadly the victims are also often the most forgotten - they are generally poor, socially excluded, or marginalised, with little social or political status or power. In Sri Lanka it may be trishaw drivers, sex workers and illegal liquor producers. In Nepal it may be street-kids and drug users.

"The more we create bogeymen and trade away our freedoms in the name of security, the more we run the risk of escalating violence in the long run."

Part of the reason why these individuals are targeted may be because there is little risk of sanctions, but it also points to a more complicated picture of torture than simply deviant security personnel, acting on behalf of evil governments to wipe out dissent. It also potentially suggests that we are all implicated in the perpetuation of torture.

Without a doubt there are certain institutional cultures that make torture more likely. Certainly militaries and to some extent police forces that see themselves as 'forces' often have cultures that allow them to dehumanise others (the 'enemy', the 'criminal') and this make them more amenable to using violence than other members of society might be.

However police and military personnel do not operate in a vacuum. Societal attitudes are also extremely influential.

In both, Sri Lanka and Nepal we found that punitive attitudes about justice, discipline and order, mean that ordinary people often tolerate quite high levels of everyday violence.

For example, the school teachers that we interviewed asserted the need for corporal punishment to ensure discipline in schools. Parents sometimes actively endorsed the use of violence as a means of ensuring their children would grow up to be responsible, law-abiding citizens. In this climate, is it unrealistic to think that police officers (or others) will be horrified by the idea of beating up a potential or actual criminal?

Meanwhile these punitive attitudes are only made worse in situations where there is a general feeling of threat, insecurity and fear. In Sri Lanka, the 30+ years of terrorism and counter-terrorism has had a huge effect on the public psyche. Citizens have become at best resigned and at worst desensitised to state violence trading their rights in favour of the promise of greater security.

Finally, torture is an extreme end of a continuum. As I mentioned above, people at all levels of society can be tortured. But the lower you are in social status, material wealth and access to power the higher the risk. While the concept of 'human dignity' is often invoked as the reason for why torture is wrong, we spend far too little time establishing what we mean by this term.

In fact I have found that 'dignity' is a highly contested concept and in some cases it has worked to justify torture: for example, in the form of disciplinary violence aimed at bringing those deemed to have lost their dignity (sex workers, thieves, drug users) back into the fold of 'respectable society'.

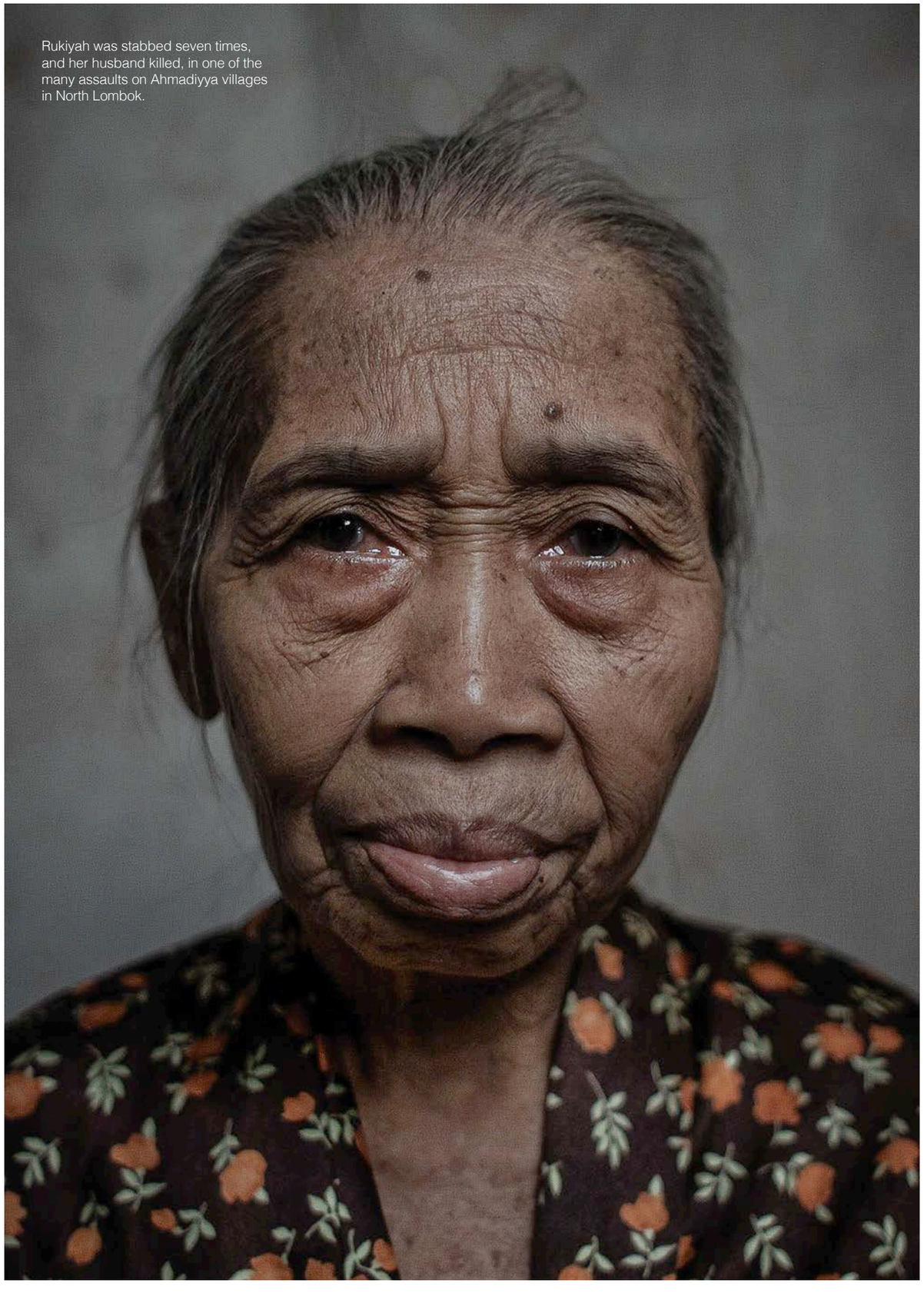
This means that rather than simply advocating for 'dignity', we need to do much more work exploring how different individuals and groups understand the concept to make sure it is in fact serving our aims.

These findings are important not just for what they might tell us about torture in Sri Lanka and Nepal but also more generally about the conditions within which torture can flourish.

For example, the Sri Lankan experience in particular should provide a warning to all of us living in this era of terror threats and strong-arm government responses. The more we create bogeymen and trade away our freedoms in the name of security, the more we run the risk of escalating violence in the long run. At this point it may seem that the violence is safely confined to potential or actual terrorists, and does not affect us 'ordinary citizens' but we should not be confident that it will always remain so.

Finally, if we accept that torture is only the most extreme demonstration of where processes of discrimination and dehumanisation lead us, then to prevent it also requires us addressing much more mundane but equally pernicious forms of prejudice, discrimination and inequality.

This means that beyond simply punishing individual acts of torture, we need to much more seriously commit to addressing the structural and symbolic violence that makes certain individuals seem less worthy of protection,and certain lives less valuable than others. In this we all have a responsibility. R



Rukiyah was stabbed seven times, and her husband killed, in one of the many assaults on Ahmadiyya villages in North Lombok.

HUMAN RIGHTS

*For five years photographer **DWIANTO WIBOWO** has documented the plight of a small religious minority in Indonesia, trapped 'in transit' after being forced from their homes almost a decade ago.*

Transito: Refugees in their Own Land

By Richard Walker and Dwianto Wibowo

There are few who know about the plight of the Ahmadiyya, who are persecuted in their home countries for their religious beliefs. Fewer still know about those Ahmadiyya displaced from their traditional villages in Lombok, Indonesia, and now living in poverty in the 'Wisma Transito' shelter. But photographer Dwianto Wibowo has been working for three years to document the situation of the residents of Transito and their ongoing struggle for a safe future.

The Ahmadiyya are a religious group who consider themselves Muslims. However, many mainstream Muslim groups reject Ahmadi beliefs and consider them outside accepted Islamic practices.Some go so far as calling them heretical.

For this reason Ahmadiyyas have faced persecution around the world since the movement's inception in the late 19th century, and it was religious persecution that forced the current residents of Transito out of their homes and into the camp.

On 4 February 2006, a local religious leader incited people to attack houses belonging to Ahmadiyya in the small village of Ketapang. While this was not the first attack, it was one of the worst. The mob carried machetes, threw stones at residents and set fire to houses. Many houses were burned, their occupants forced from the village and all their property destroyed or stolen. Dozens of police were present, but did little to intervene. The families fled to a makeshift shelter in Mataram, which became the Wisma Transito.

Around 34 Ahmadiyya families are now facing an uncertain future in Transito. Until recently the Ahmadis were living in severe poverty. However, while life is by no means easy, Dwianto says there have been some improvements in the camp recently.

Electricity and water supplies, which were often cut by the authorities, have been largely restored, and some Transito residents have started farming on land belonging to their relatives, although the threat of persecution and violence is ever-present.

This small group of Ahmadiyya are forgotten and alone. Without the efforts of people like Dwianto Wibowo, their plight may have gone entirely unreported. But for the people in the camp, having their story heard is not enough. Despite numerous attempts to seek a resolution with local authorities, they remain in limbo and their hopes are fading. "To be honest, we can't stand anymore to live in [the] camp", says resident Bashirudin. "Initially, we asked for replacement of assets to the state and justice for the incidents; now we just hope for freedom and security".

For now, the residents of Wisma Transito are safe, as long as they remain inside the confines of the camp. Hope for the restoration of a peaceful and free life remains, but no one can say when this hope might be realised, and the immediate future of the residents is uncertain. Even the name itself seems a cruel joke, as if they are in transit. In reality - at least for now - there is nowhere else for them to go. R

Suhaenah rests next to one of the makeshift rooms of Transito camp.

Hariyani cooks in the emergency kitchen, constructed with woven bamboo and with a wood stove. A few families own a gas or traditional stove and have their own cooking cubicles.

Asisudin shows off his baby pigeon on the streets of Transito camp. Some of the residents entertain themselves with raising pigeons and other hobbies.

PHOTO: SMALL RED GIRL

HEALTH

From Little Things Big Things Grow

Many refugees are resettling in regional areas. ***SUSAN CUNNINGHAM,*** *facilitator of Families in Cultural Transition writes about refugees in the Riverina.*

Leeton is a rural town in the Riverina area of southern NSW, home to a population of 11,000, including around 60 Afghan men, the majority of whom are Hazara.

In Refugee Week 2014, Leeton was declared a Refugee Welcome Zone by the Shire Council, and the story behind the proclamation involves many Leeton residents, including a courageous mayor and a Hazara refugee who has made Leeton his home.

Afghan men have been coming to Leeton since the early 2000s and most have found regular employment in the town's meatworks. They are a small but visible minority in a town steeped in its agricultural roots. Locals had started to engage informally with some of the men, but it was a STARTTS program that helped the men find a new level of trust and friendship in the town.

Welcome to Leeton Day, April 2014 PHOTO: Courtesy of Leeton Shire Council

"The proclamation of the Refugee Welcome Zone by Leeton Shire Council means Leeton joins hundreds of other local government areas to welcome refugees to their regions. It is an acknowledgement that the Afghan men have a contribution to make to the social and economic life of this town."

Families in Cultural Transition (FICT), a foundation program of STARTTS, helps refugees with their settlement during the period of cultural transition. It allows participants the space and time in a group setting to discuss the practical and emotional issues they are facing, facilitated in their community language. People from refugee backgrounds who speak English and their community language, and who have knowledge of their community, are recruited to be trained as bi-cultural facilitators to run this program.

Abdullah Nazari, one of only a couple of Afghan men in Leeton who speaks English, was recruited to join the FICT training that STARTTS ran in Wagga Wagga in February 2014. He moved to Leeton in 2013 where he heard work was available, and soon ended up working in the local meatworks and as an interpreter for his fellow Afghans. His English skills were honed working as an interpreter for the US army in Afghanistan, where his bravery was recognised by a top ranking Colonel in a New York Times article.

Abdullah, the only Afghan among the group in Wagga Wagga trained to run FICT, was keen to return home to Leeton and start a FICT group. He had an enthusiastic response from the men with whom he spoke and a group of 14 men joined the program held at the Leeton library every Saturday for nine weeks.

To ensure that the men had a variety of perspectives, Abdullah invited guest speakers to some of the sessions. Abdullah had been introduced to the Leeton Mayor, Paul Maytom, by STARTTS counsellor Jeanette Ninnis and local TAFE teacher Susie Rowe, and he invited Councillor Maytom to the group to explain Australia's political system and the democratic process.

Having met the men and heard about some of their needs, Councillor Maytom returned to visit the group most Saturdays, often joining them for lunch after the session. His approach is a practical one. Having had a long life of work and public service, he wanted to offer assistance to the men to make them feel valued by the community.

All but two of the men in the FICT group have families in Afghanistan or Pakistan. Most have permanent residency and are waiting to get their citizenship. This will allow them to apply for a passport, visit their families back home, and begin the process of applying for them to come to Australia.

Meanwhile they endeavour to provide emotional and financial support to their wives and children from afar. Those with families in Pakistan can use the internet to talk face-to-face while those with families in Afghanistan rely on phone calls. For each man it is a painful waiting time with little certainty about eventual reunion with his family.

The FICT discussions aimed to address some of these concerns by acknowledging the trauma that the men have suffered in their home country and on their journey to Australia, but also to provide hope for the future.

STARTTS Counsellor Jeanette Ninnis had been providing outreach counselling services to some of the Afghan men and was aware of the difficulties that they were facing, being apart from their families. She ran a session for the men to help them deal with grief and loss and to acknowledge their strength in their roles as fathers.

Other guest speakers discussed the expectations of parenting and child-raising in Australia, the Australian schooling system, and the opportunities for young people to study and work. The men had many questions about the educational opportunities that existed here for their children and how they might prepare them for joining them here.

The FICT group also showed the men that there were people in Leeton genuinely interested in helping them to learn English, understand more about Australian culture and way of life, and to navigate the immigration system.

Around the same time TAFE teacher Susie Rowe established a tutor program, in which interested locals were trained as tutors to teach English and matched up with Afghan men and other refugees keen to learn. As well as their regular tutoring meetings, held in a coffee shop or the local park, some tutors invited the men to join them at family and sporting events.

The bonds of friendship developed in this program are increasing the English skills and local knowledge of the Afghan men, and enriching the tutors' understanding of the backgrounds and cultures of these men in their community.

Councillor Maytom emphasises the importance of the relationships he has developed with the men as being for the "long term" and he acknowledges the FICT program as a catalyst that provided him with a deeper understanding of the practical and emotional needs of the Afghan men.

Councillor Maytom continues to make himself available to the men, has helped them with visa and citizenship issues, and has facilitated invitations for the men to speak to the local Rotary club and schools. He describes his support, and that of a growing group of people, as "working below the headlines" – as day-to-day relationship building that increases the social capital of the town.

The Leeton Multicultural Group (LMG) was established in 2014 by Councillor Maytom and Susie Rowe and was set up to ensurethe sustainability of the commitment to help these men, here without their families, settle in Leeton.

Establishing the LMG helped to build community support for refugees in the town and Leeton's celebration of Refugee Week, Harmony Day, Australia Day and a host of local events has provided the opportunity for the Afghan men to feel part of the life of the town.

As the first of these, Refugee Week 2014 was a celebratory occasion in Leeton. The men from the FICT group were presented with a certificate to acknowledge their participation. Abdullah, the FICT facilitator, was presented with a STARTTS Humanitarian Award, having been nominated by STARTTS staff in acknowledgement of his outstanding work in connecting his fellow Afghans with the Leeton community. Locals joined the Afghan men and other refugees for lunch and the day finished with a football game and many photos being taken.

The proclamation of the Refugee Welcome Zone by Leeton Shire Council means Leeton joins hundreds of other local government areas to welcome refugees to their regions. It is an acknowledgement that the Afghan men have a contribution to make to the social and economic life of this town. The Mayor is hopeful that these men will continue to make Leeton their home and, in time, be able to bring their families to join them. ℟

Football has played a major role in the recovery of refugees and in connecting with their new culture, writes STARTTS project officer ***SHAUN NEMORIN.***

The Game that Brings the World Together

I'm the son of immigrants from Mauritius and sport has come to mean so much to me, in particular football. My mother had the insight to first encourage my father to pursue his passion. That passion was perhaps an odd one: football refereeing. From the age of four, when I was old enough, I would accompany him around Sydney while he officiated for the NSW State Football (then Soccer) League. What I was not entirely conscious of at the time was how the world citizen inside him - and by extension, myself - was awakened by the cultural diversity of the football leagues of NSW in the 1970s and 1980s. What we were a part of was arguably one the most significant examples of community development in Australia's history: the establishment of these community-based sporting institutions was largely initiated by ethnic communities.

Communities self-identified that football was what would galvanise the interests of their constituents. What ensued from the 1950s and 1960s from migrant and refugee communities in Australia was a unique model, which was unprecedented globally. It was community-driven, and they used their own resources. But they had to do this because no funding body would support a sport for, as goes the title of Johnny Warren's famous book, "sheilas, wogs and poofters".

As these entities grew, they became sustainable through businesses and supporting clubs. Social clubs provided a space for people to meet and connect. The psychosocial benefits gained from those activities cannot be underestimated, especially for traumatised communities.

Why is it that people relate so intimately to the game of football? Maybe it's because it's a game where the best team does not always win and the referees often seem not to get it quite right, which can add to the injustice.

Having worked alongside refugee communities both at home and abroad over the last 13 years, I can see why people resonate with the drama of football. Yet despite injustices, you come back the following week in the hope that hard work and merit may be rewarded. When it does, you go home with that warm feeling of justice... until it doesn't.

I grew up in Sydney's northwest, which was largely white, middle-class and Christian, so accompanying my father felt like going on holidays every week: new cultures, new religions, new languages. I always felt included due to a mutual connection through sport.

It was a model that was replicated all over Sydney, and spread throughout the entire country. The forging of connections through football could be thought of as a form of 'social capital', and its influence on communities is most profound when these relationships are among heterogeneous groups.

When people from diverse backgrounds connect, a greater range of associations and opportunities are created for the broader community. Thus bridging social capital is not only essential for enhancing social inclusion but also for improving an entire community's ability to develop.

For me, Australia's multiculturalism was a given. I grew up in an environment where, for the most part, communities embraced one another andthrough the refereeing fraternity, my father's peers included people from Jewish, Italian, Lebanese, Greek, Yugoslavian, Maltese and Chilean backgrounds.

His greetings would easily alternate between 'Shalom' to 'As-Salaam-Alaikum'. He would often go out of his way to emphasise that he was amongst friends. The unconscious things we process throughout our lives can be the most profound. The things we observe through mentors or environments but take for granted because we simply do not know anything else.

Looking back, it is like I learnt my skills of conflict resolution, cultural competence and effective group facilitation through those NSW football referees. These often new migrants used attitude and courage to facilitate potentially aggressive environments when their language skills or physical presence were not automatically commanding.

Although the dominant narrative in Australia is that the ethnic-based clubs model gave rise to conflict, having either personally played or witnessed thousands of matches, I can count on one hand the instances where I observed overt racism.

In fact, I would even argue that the model seemed to be a buffer against more systemic examples of intercommunal conflict. Of the few well-documented incidents of football rioting in Australia, the narrative fails to address or understand the nature of intergenerational trauma and the way communities may have an inability to simply "let things go" once they arrive in Australia.

Author and psychiatrist Judith Herman writes that traumatic events have primary effects not only on the psychological structures of the self but also on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community.

She also writes that the fundamental stages to recovery from the erosion of trust and community breakdown are establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community. Community football clubs became institutions that assisted in such recovery processes.


LAMBERT PARK - LEICHHARDT 1981

Sadly, the sporting system of today is now much more top-down, outside-funded and reliant on moneymen. They are no longer community owned. What individual communities once did themselves, through volunteering and through donations, are now reliant on government grants or corporate backing.

Now there are more financial hurdles for parents than ever before to support their children to have the opportunity for proper sporting participation. With the disparities in income and peripheral costs involved, the inability to participate due to lack of funds is a very real prospect for some families.

To address these challenges, STARTTS has been implementing Sporting Linx since 2013. It is a bio-psychosocial, sports-based intervention targeting refugee youth in high schools across western Sydney and uses sports as a tool to enhance inclusivity and increase self-esteem.

Targeting students from refugee and non-refugee backgrounds alike, it adopts sports coaching sessions from industry professionals with specific attention placed on fostering teamwork and sportsmanship, while also encouraging participants to improve their connections to one another. Addressing self-esteem among young people through communication, sharing and support, are all essential elements in building social capital.

For as long as I can remember, Dad would start any speech about my life with, "We put Shaun in sports..." I would always feel uneasy with this comment. As if games should command such an important role in one's life...but it turned out to be unexpectedly true.

From Beijing to Timbuktu, I have used sport as a psychosocial tool to alleviate stress and trauma, to mitigate dropping-out in schools, to decrease recruitment into armed radical groups, and often as a way to build peace between ethnically divided communities, and help prevent sexual and gender-based violence.

In lieu of funding or local capacity, I would bring lots of footballs to humanitarian emergencies. I think Dad would be proud of that. ꟿ

PHOTO: Jennifer Herron

AGENDA

JENNIFER HERRON is a social worker, teacher and traveller. She shares with us some of her experiences travelling through the Caucasus.

Travels in Georgia

It took eight hours by train from Zugdidi, east to the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi. I was with Jane, an English woman.

While waiting for the train to leave I popped into a little cafe on the platform for a Turkish coffee and found the proprietor doing business accounts with an abacus. We travelled in first class for which we had to fork out AU$6. It turns out first class is primarily about being in air-conditioning. The carriage was one of those ridiculous designs where every third seat is windowless.

The air-conditioning didn't work very well. Jane, being far less passive than me, went around opening all the windows. At one point she struggled with a woman over the opening of the window and it was amusing. No doubt the locals were thinking 'pesky foreigners' whereas I was thinking "don't blame me". Although I would much prefer to have the windows open I would never insist on it against the wishes of the locals.

The landscape changed over a few hundred kilometres, from fertile plains to a dry landscape, with bare smooth mountains often topped by a decaying castle, mottled with caves or 'cave cities', albeit always with a rushing river at the base of the valley.

I later visited one of the cave cities, Uplistsikhe, an important political and religious pre-Christian centre existing between the 5th century BC and 1st century AD, with temples primarily dedicated to the sun goddess. After the Arabs invaded Tbilisi in AD 645, it became the residence of the Christian kings of Kartli. There is not much left now, but it is in a beautiful location overlooking a valley with a full river.

In Tbilisi, I am staying with a mother and daughter in a charming old flat with a parquet floor, antique furniture, icons, paintings and various interesting paraphernalia. They design and make clothes and lecture in design. Medea, the mother, has a mop of black hair and is full of tales about Georgian history and spirituality. She does not speak English but Keti, the daughter, does a good job of translating.

This morning, after I washed my hair, Medea appeared with her authentic Soviet hairdryer brought back from the Soviet Union by her husband in 1977. A highly sought-after object no doubt. It is stored in its original attractive cardboard box labelled with Cyrillic script, and consists of a square pink and white plastic box which, when plugged into an electric socket, generates the warm air which flows down a blue material pipe joined to a head piece, like a shower cap which is placed over the head. It was very effective, simple, hardy; a thing of the past, good simple technology.

She also took care of my spiritual needs. Prior to a late breakfast she presented me with some holy bread and holy water, and along with breakfast, an appropriately small but lovely glass of blow-your-head-off raki, a Turkish alcoholic drink that she had made from walnuts. She always prays before eating, which is not unusual in itself, but Keti says that she believes that praying before eating also assists in lessening the negative effects of chemicals in the food.

Medea also communicated her fascination and love for the three ancient Georgian scripts. There is one that is used primarily for religious purposes and each letter not only has a unique meaning in itself – for example it is a symbol of God, or eternity, or the tree of life – but it has numerical meanings and can be used to represent sound, when used in a combination of letters.

The symbol for the cycle of life is the swastika. I had not realised that this symbol was associated with the Georgian religious script. I am not sure how it ties into the use of the same symbol in India and Nepal. The Nazis used the symbol but with the arms pointing in a different direction.

I have not been able to grasp the concept of the Kabbalah, but the Georgian Kabbalah responds to the Georgian alphabet. Georgians have a prediction from the 10th century: "During the second coming the Lord will judge the world in the Georgian language".Consequently the Georgian language is believed to be the language of Judgement Day and also the language of the 'first principle' as everyone and everything in this world returns to its origins.

The beginning of everything is in the Georgian gene, Georgian language and Georgian alphabet. Thus Georgian is seen as the original language of the world. I suspect that the Assyrians believe the same about Aramaic or Syriac, and the Muslims about Arabic.

Tbilisi is cold and rainy. It gives me an excuse to lie in bed in the mornings and gaze through my window at the leafy tree, and listen to the distinctive sound of

"Prior to a late breakfast she presented me with some holy bread and holy water, and along with breakfast an appropriately small but lovely glass of blow-your-head-off raki."

car tyres rasping over the cobble stones below. I have lost my energy and have to stop moving for a while; travelling takes its toll. Fortunately my Airbnb hosts love hanging around in their dressing gowns until late in the day, so we are kindred spirits.

One day I managed to drag myself out of the flat by 2pm or so, having set myself the goal of visiting a place called Mtatsminda Park on the top of a mountain overlooking the city. It costs 35 cents to take Bus 124 along a winding road up to the park. A funicular railway, built in 1905, leads from the top down to the centre of the city.

The park was a pleasant surprise, being a fun park with bizarre and large other-worldly characters moulded from concrete. There were fun park rides, including an 'extreme zone', which I avoided, and a huge Ferris wheel soaring out of the trees on the edge of the mountain. It seems that every self-respecting city must now have a Ferris wheel gracing its skyline.

The park is also set in attractive gardens and a desirable place for wedding parties to be photographed. Lots of young women totter dangerously up and down paths on ridiculous shoes.

I really miss the cay bahcesis (tea gardens) in Turkey. The Turkish know how to appreciate a beautiful or historic site by putting a tea garden on the site in a tasteful way. It is challenging to find an attractive place to have a drink in Georgia, apart from a park bench in a lovely park but at the moment it is raining so that is not such a pleasant option.

Minutes later I have found myself overlooking the city in probably one of the most expensive restaurants in Tbilisi, where a glass of good wine costs 12 lari, or about AU$7; at least the khinkali, dumplings filled with meat and spices, are only 50 cents each. I can sit here on a terrace overlooking the city, wrapped in a blanket and write.

I've been checking the Internet about Georgians in Australia. They are rare creatures here. There are 489 according to the 2011 Census.Perhaps many may have listed their country of birth as the USSR.

I visit Prospero's Books, a lovely bookshop with lots of interesting books in English, which is situated under the Canadian Consulate and beside the British Council. I read a rather poor English-language newspaper called *The Messenger.*

There is a new president, Giorgi Margvelashvili. He has been in government for the last few months. He leads a coalition government called the Georgian Dream. He replaced Mikheil Saakashvili, who was in government for about 10 years or so, and is reported to have made some significant achievements such as turning around the lawless and violent society that existed during the 1990s, replacing virtually the entire police force and attacking crime and corruption head on. However, he involved Georgia in a disastrous war with South Ossetia and no doubt became power hungry and grandiose after being in power.

Apparently there is a dispute between the president and prime minister about who will be attending the UN Climate Change conference. The current president also apparently will not be moving into the new 26 million lari (about AU$15 million) presidential palace, the building of which commenced under the former president; he is happy with the old one.

I am enraged by the huge wastage of public money on frivolous grandiose projects, especially when there is so much poverty and crumbling infrastructure in Georgia that needs ongoing investment.

The paper reports that Russia and Georgia have resumed regular flights between the two countries, suspended since 2008, at the time of the South Ossetia conflict. The United Arab Emirates are set to increase investment in the energy and transport sector in Georgia.

PHOTO: Jennifer Herron

I visit the national museum, which was once a seminary where Stalin was studying for the priesthood until he was expelled for revolutionary activities. Now, according to the rules of entry, "internally displaced and socially unprotected people" - perhaps those who have missed out on the expected benefits of the newish free-range capitalism - can get in for free, instead of the five lari (about AU$3) that others pay. No doubt they will be flocking in hordes.

The treasury of the museum has beautifully displayed gold jewellery and objects from the Kolkheti or Colchis region on the eastern coast of the Black Sea, a region which in antiquity was home to the well-developed Bronze Age culture, known as the Colchian culture. The Colchian late Bronze Age (15th to 8th century BC) saw the development of significant skills in the smelting and casting of metals. The word "kheti" comes from the Georgian word "khe" which means tree, which is mythologically associated with the tree of life.

Kolkheti was rich with gold, silver and iron and the Greeks dedicated it to the story about the quest of the Argonauts for the Golden Fleece. Recent archaeological excavations have revealed more evidence about the actual existence of the civilisation on which the Argonauts tale is based.

Much of the golden jewellery was found in burial sites. It is incredible to think that such beautiful objects are buried with their rich owners. It is fortunate for those of us who live 2500 years later.

The museum also has a collection of remarkable Qajar Iranian paintings from the late 18th century and early 19th century. Qajar art refers to the art, architecture, and art-forms of the Qajar dynasty of the late Persian Empire, which lasted from 1781 to 1925. The roots of traditional Qajar painting can be found in the style of painting that arose during the preceding Safavid empire. During this time, there was a great deal of European influence on Persian culture, especially in the arts of the royal and noble classes.

European art was undergoing a period of realism and this can be seen in the depiction of objects especially by Qajar artists. According to Wikipedia, heavy application of paint and dark, rich, saturated colours are elements of Qajar painting that owe their influences directly to the European style.

Stretching north of Tbilisi the Georgian Military

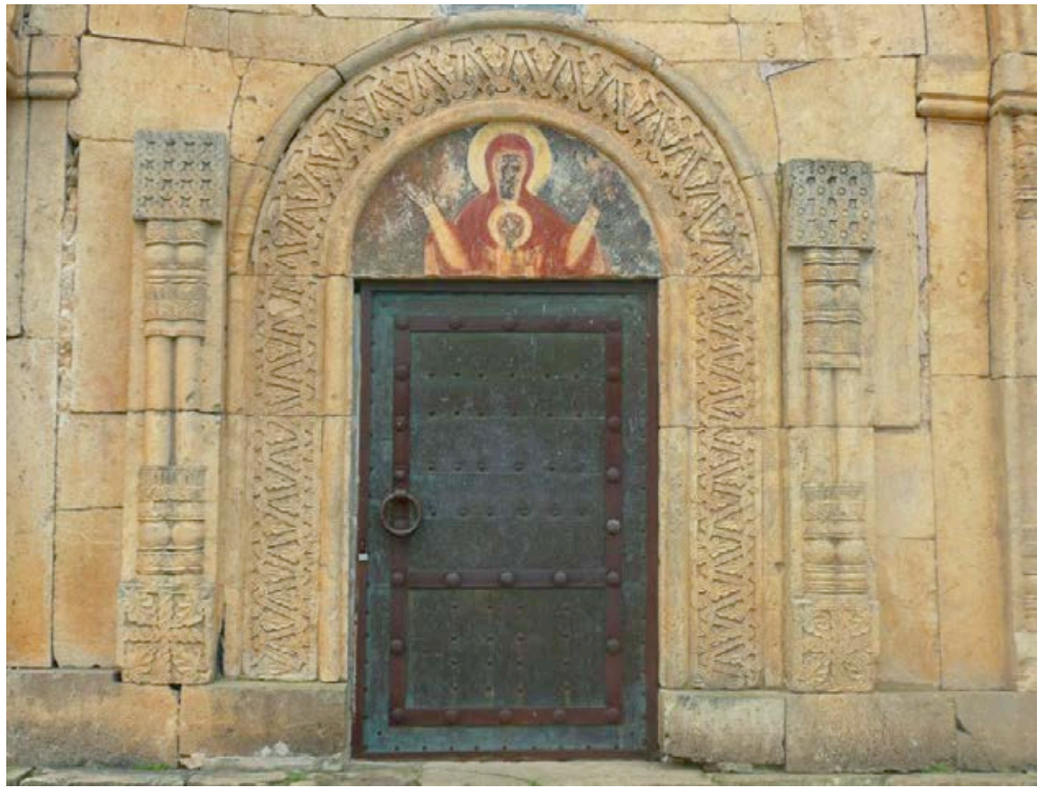


PHOTO: Jennifer Herron

PHOTO: Jennifer Herron

Highway connects Georgia and the Federation of Russian republics, the nearest being Chechnya. It was cut through the mountainous terrain when Russia invaded the Caucasus in the 19th century. It reaches its highest point at Jvari Pass at 2379 metres, part of the Southern Caucasus mountain range.

I took a day trip to visit the 14th century Tsminda Sameba church which is perched on top of a little mountain that is dwarfed by the mighty Mount Kazbegi, a snow-capped colossus of a mountain. Unfortunately Mount Kazbegi was covered with clouds when we reached the church after a jeep climbed up muddy roads past miserable looking climbers sloshing upwards through the mud for two hours.

Apparently the Soviets, with their talent for ugliness, built a cable car up to the church but the locals destroyed it. The other mountains alone were worth the trip along the wondrous valleys and past salty mineral mountain springs.

In winter, the highway is covered in two metres of snow but it is always open due to its strategic importance. On the day of our trip there had been a rock fall at some point and there appeared to be over a hundred huge trucks lined up beside the road waiting for the rock fall to be cleared.

On the way back the tour group stopped for a Georgian banquet. In the Georgian tradition there was red wine and vodka and everyone had to make a toast. It was an interesting process as toast making inevitably means that people will make statements about what is meaningful to them.

There was a diverse group - Polish, Ukrainian, Belarusians, Dutch and me. Russian was the common language, except for me and the Dutchman, but he could speak Polish as he has a Polish wife. As per usual I am shamefully monolingual. Most of the toasts were around the topic of tolerance and peace amongst peoples. Travellers are sometimes forced to take a default stance of goodwill towards each other and local people.

Driving back from Kazbegi we passed a road sign that indicated the road to Yerevan, Baku and Tehran. It is exciting to be so close to all these exotic locations - Armenia, Azerbaijan and Iran respectively, though the sign indicated that Tehran is 1269 kilometres away. Not that close but not that far either. Slowly, piece by piece, the Caucasian jigsaw puzzle of culture, history and interactive influences begins to fall into place for me.

The last evening in Tbilisi, I bought a ticket for the Tbilisi symphony orchestra in the Djansug Kakhidze Tbilisi Centre for Music and Culture. I had no idea what was being played but the music was divine. A female Georgian solo pianist played a grand piano which rose from a pit in the front of the stage. I now notice Georgian piano players all over the place on classical iTunes sites. Their names end in 'ili' or 'adze'.

During a pre-concert dinner, I savoured my last khinkali - dumplings. I know how to eat them now, with fingers and without using knives to open them as it has the effect of losing the bouillabaisse juice trapped in the pastry bag. They must be eaten together with cold semi-sweet red Georgian wine.

Georgia is a great country for vegetarians as it has many distinct and tasty vegetarian dishes with beans and walnuts, eggplant and walnuts, spinach and walnuts, salads, and dumplings with potato, cheese and mushrooms inside. There are also various types of cheese and pickles, and wheat and corn bread.

I like the lack of tipping culture in this country - I think it is dignified. In fact my bill at the restaurant came to 21 lari (about $12), and I left 23 lari, the waitress says: "But it is only 21 lari!". In the museums there are guides that are paid to be guides. In general they are excellent, and they never hang around expecting a tip.

I have mastered the metro which is fabulous running every four minutes. Built in 1965 it has a severe, sombre Soviet socialist aesthetic which I love - simple red or white marble and clean lines with a minimum of decoration. It is easy to get around at any time of day and runs until midnight.

My local metro is Rustaveli Square, named after Rustaveli the poet, it has fountains, a statue of Rustaveli, street dogs romping around, gypsy kids, young want-to-be punks, old women selling balloons and plastic junk, and a rundown terrace cafe.

I have become fond of this country and its people who go about their difficult lives in an unpretentious and dignified manner. It is hard to say goodbye. R

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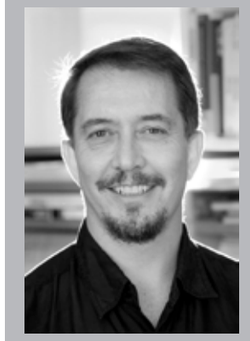

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