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An American wedding, Sudanese style

By ERIK OLSON
THE CHRONICLE

CHEHALIS, Wash. -- It's a quarter past one, and Lola Toloba is beginning to panic. Why is the groom not here?

The bride, Toloba's adopted Sudanese daughter Rachel Kuir, had already arrived with her bridesmaids at the Chehalis United Methodist Church in time for the 1:30 wedding Saturday. The adopted mother of the Sudanese-born groom, Jean Wood, had arrived from Boulder, Colo. Guests were milling around the lobby of the red-brick church on Market Street in downtown Chehalis.

Why wasn't the groom, James Dau, there?

Now Toloba is on her cell phone in the church parking lot, talking with one of her adopted Sudanese sons. Why is James not here?

The answer: He can't yet leave his place in a room at Centralia College, five miles away, until the negotiations are complete, she was told.

That's right. On the day of the wedding, right up to the time of its scheduled start, the male family members of the bride and groom are still discussing the terms of the dowry.

In a clash between Americans' rigorous observance of the clock for weddings and the equally rigid Sudanese reverence for the tradition of premarital negotiation, the latter proved victorious.

The story of Rachel and James began at the Kakumar refugee camp in Kenya. They met at school there more than 10 years ago when they were just children. The camp is where thousands of South Sudanese refugees ended up after fleeing marauding militias who killed thousands and destroyed villages across the country.

James, who is about 26, is one of the "Lost Boys of Sudan" who traversed hundreds of miles of jungle to escape soldiers and wild animals after their home villages were raided and families were killed.

They're members of the Dinka tribe, known as much for their high-energy dancing celebrations as for their long, lanky bodies. Manute Bol, the second-tallest player in the history of the National Basketball Association at 7 feet 6 inches, is a member of the Dinka tribe, and most of the Sudanese at Saturday's wedding in Chehalis - both men and women - stood between six and six-and-a-half feet tall.

Like most of the Lost Boys, James doesn't know his exact age, but he was probably about five when his parents were killed. In fact, he saw his mother killed by soldiers, then hid in the bushes for three days before beginning his flight, according to his adopted mother, Wood, a retired teacher who has formed a nonprofit organization in Colorado to help Sudanese refugees.

Rachel, who is 22, came to the United States at the beginning of this decade as part of the wave of about

40 Sudanese children who came to live in Lewis County. She graduated from W.F. West High School, then studied for two years at Centralia College. She is one of the half-dozen or so Sudanese refugees who have lived with Toloba, who has also housed some of her brothers.

The bride and groom met young (by Western standards) and have never dated anyone else, but theirs is not an arranged marriage, according to both families.

"James said, 'I chose her, and she chose me,'" Wood said.

An hour has passed since the wedding was supposed to start. The organ player has stopped playing. Some of the guests, called to other events on the popular 7/7/07 wedding date, begin to leave.

Toloba enters the church foyer with the latest news. The wedding is postponed until 6 p.m., she says. She welcomes everyone to her home, located within walking distance, until then.

But wait, another cell phone rings. The negotiations are over, one of the Sudanese says. James is headed to the church, and he'll be here soon. Is the wedding on for this afternoon after all?

Five minutes later, a light-colored sedan arrives at the church carrying a group of young Sudanese men. James is inside, and he heads into the church to change clothes and prepare for the ceremony. The remaining guests head back to their seats. The organist begins playing music again.

Later, during the ceremony, the groom's brother, David, will apologize to the group for the delay. The men took their time, he said, because of the importance of the event for both families.

"This is the dream we've been planning for 10 years, not just 10 days," David said.

According to Dinka tradition, the families of the bride and groom will meet for days before the wedding, hashing out the payment given to the bride's family, usually in the form of cows.

But with the ceremony held half a world away, American dollars act as a substitute for bovine currency. In this case, a little more than \$20,000 is to be paid by the groom's family to the bride's, according to Atem Deng, a relative of Rachel's who lives in Grand Rapids, Mich.

In the cafeteria at the college, two long tables - one with a white tablecloth, the other red - have been pulled facing each other. This is so the family of the bride and the family of the groom can sit facing each other. About eight men sit directly behind the table, while about a dozen more sit in the back. The men speak almost entirely in their native Dinka tongue.

The negotiations are about more than just money and property, especially because the bride's parents are still in Sudan, Deng said. According to their culture, the bride's family is giving away something precious, and they must make certain the groom's family is equally serious about caring for her after marriage, he said.

Also, because the families are so spread among the United States and Sudan, the men have had fewer opportunities to negotiate, hence the delay, Deng said.

Some of the women, though, think the time for talking is over. Rebecca Mabior, who is related to the bride by marriage, met and married her husband in Missouri, agreed that the talks are important because of what the wedding represents.

"It's like the relationship between the two families," Mabior, who works as a nurse in Missouri, said.

However, Mabior said, the time for talking usually ends once the day for celebration begins.

"It's the wedding day," she said.

It's 3:15 p.m. Bride, groom and wedding party have gathered outside on Market Street to walk up the stairs into the chapel. From here, it's a short, American-Christian style wedding, with a little Sudanese sprinkled in.

As the party prepares to enter the church, Mabior lets out a high-pitched whoop, and the other Sudanese women respond. It's called "zagruda," in Dinka terms, and she says she unleashes the call when she feels inspired.

"It's a happiness sound. Only women do it," Mabior explained.

About 70 people were inside the church, the majority of whom were Sudanese. The moment must be kept for posterity, so an impromptu paparazzi of a half-dozen Sudanese men capture James and Rachel's every move with digital cameras, even standing behind the altar for a good shot.

Adopted mothers Toloba and Wood sit next to each other. The stress has left Toloba, and she sits happily watching the first of her adopted children walk down the aisle.

Each of the families stands up front to say a few words. When it's Toloba's turn, she brings a special gift. It's a wooden cross she brought from the Kakumar Refugee Camp when she visited last year. It's a gift from Rachel's birth mother, who still lives in Africa and who wanted to give her daughter something special on her wedding day.

Adopted mother and daughter then embrace, and "zagruda" cries echo through the room.

And in little more than 25 minutes, it's over. James and Rachel are married.

The reception is held back at the student union building at Centralia College, the site of the negotiations. Upon arriving, the Sudanese women almost immediately begin dancing. In the front corridor, outside the admissions office, they clap and sing in their native tongue as they march in a circle.

At one point, Toloba joins the group, and the other American guests watch with interest. Rachel and James sit in the corner, tired from the day's events.

The only people missing are the Sudanese men.

They've returned to the negotiating table, even though the nuptials have been spoken. Now the men must discuss where to go from here, according to Peter Atem, Rachel's uncle, who lived with Toloba.

If the couple encounter problems, the family must decide how they are to be handled, Atem said. The two clans are joining with this wedding, and it's important they understand each other, he explained.

So the men keep talking, and the women keep dancing.

Despite the hitches and delays during the first wedding of a local Sudanese refugee in Lewis County,

most in attendance were glad to take in the unique cultural celebration.

"This was the highlight of my summer. It was great," friend Karen Ford of Steilacoom told Toloba as she left the college.

Pastor Tom Eberle said it was among the most interesting he's ever performed.

"I've done them on mountain tops and other places, but never one with this degree of spontaneity," Eberle said.

A black stretch limousine arrived at the side door of the building at around 7 p.m. to take the young couple away to start their married life together. James is studying biology at Colorado University in Boulder, and he said they plan to move there for now. They'll probably go back to visit the refugee camp or Sudan some time, he said, but he has no plans now to move there permanently.

Almost all of the guests have left for home, including Toloba. Wood is just saying goodbye to James. Some of the remaining bridesmaids, such as younger sister, Rebecca Kuir, have almost no energy left after a week's worth of cooking and caring for the 20-some guests at Toloba's home.

Some of the women, Rebecca Kuir included, haven't gone to bed for a few nights over the last week, and she said they are tired and ready to go home.

But in the other room, the Sudanese men - groom's family on one side, bride's on the other - continue discussing their plans for James and Rachel's future.

Information from: The Chronicle, <http://www.chronline.com>