

# THE EPISCOPAL UNIVERSITY:

## A NEW UNIVERSITY

### FOR SOUTH SUDAN & SUDAN

## My Journey from Sand to Apple

Growing up in the midst of civil conflict where there was no established education system, rather only pockets of 'village schools' which took place under trees and run by vernacular teachers, was fascinating but not always fun. It was a real challenge that required courage, dedication and determination.

I was fortunate enough to start school at age of 8 years old unlike my two older siblings; a sister and a brother, aged almost 14 and 11 years old when they started school with me. Because of the civil war they were unable to go to school earlier.

On my first day at school, all the students were made to stand in a line in the sun. We were divided into two separate groups to study either English and Arabic. I was upset that my siblings were assigned to the English group whereas I was separated from them into the Arabic group.

Both languages were foreign to us. My late parents did not speak Arabic nor English. They spoke Bari (our native language), but had no choice in the schooling of their children. In the West and other countries, parents can have a great deal of input into their children's' education. That wasn't the case for us those days.

I must also tell you that it wasn't just about language but also about religion and culture. Those of us who studied Arabic were exposed to Arab culture and Islamic religion



and were expected to convert to Islam. Those who studied in English were under the influence of Western culture and Christian religion, whilst maintaining their African beliefs.

This division in the classroom was a preview of what was coming, the split of the country into two Sudans. In North Sudan, all studies were carried out in Arabic and it became an Islamic state. South Sudan now has English as the main language of education and has become a secular state with Christianity as a major religion, alongside some African beliefs.

On the first day at school, I sat in the shade of a tree with my classmates. The teacher taught us our first Arabic letters on a freestanding blackboard. The letters looked like earthworms and made us all giggle. I was completely fascinated by the pronunciation and sound of Arabic consonants and vowels. It was fun and I loved it.

However, we did not have pencil nor paper to take notes. We copied everything into the sand with our finger, and the sand was wiped at the end of each class lesson. There were no textbooks for students and only one book for the teacher. Yet we were expected to memorize everything we had learnt in class. The exams were also written and marked on the sand.

My outdoor school was about 8 miles from home, a one-hour walk each way. I was lucky; some of us walked more than 12 miles. The classes started at 7:30am and finished at 2.30pm. Back home after another hour walk, it was time to take our family goats down to the river, which was another 2 hours away. By the time I got home the sun had set and there was no light by which to study. I had no packed lunch, only porridge to eat in the early morning, and sometimes nothing at all. There were no school lunches either. Often I prayed that there wouldn't be too much rainfall, because although we needed rain to have water and grow food, heavy rainfall meant classes would be suspended as the teachers and students had no shelter to study and it was too difficult to write on the sand.

Until I came to the UK in 1999 to do my undergraduate course that led to my PhD, I had never known or experienced anything else in my life other than the dangers of war and the pain of hunger, sometimes spending three to four days without a meal, surviving on eating some roots and leaves of wild plants.

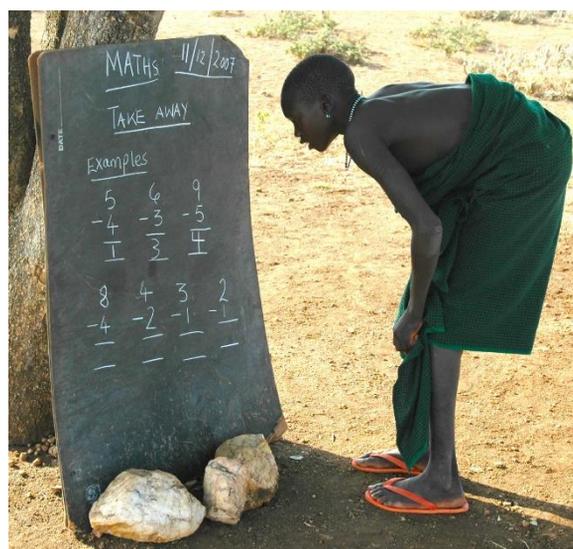
By contrast, my eldest son in England came home one day wondering why at lunchtime his friend was upset because his mother didn't put chocolate in his lunch box.

At the age of 10, I stopped writing in the sand. I was given a small piece of black slate and a piece of white chalk, but it was shared among the whole class. One lucky pupil got to take the slate home. The first time I ever wrote on a piece of paper was when I was 11 years old and was given an exercise book and pencil. My dream was to become a medical doctor but because of the long civil war and the collapse of the education

system in 1983, I couldn't pursue my dreams. But I became a doctor of theology instead.

The reason of telling you a bit of my early childhood schooling is to demonstrate why supporting TEU matters. As an Australian Democrat once said 'education is a necessity not a luxury.' It is 'a basic human right' for each child to have decent schooling. In the West and elsewhere, children enjoy universal education. They chose the type of university they want to go to and the subjects to study. They have mobile phones and computers. They can tweet and text or Skype and Whatsapp their friends and families, and can chose books they want to read from the library. Unfortunately, I didn't have any of these privileges growing up and so many South Sudanese children are still studying under trees and facing what I had to face many years ago.

I was lucky to have fellowship of Christian friends who were able to put hands deep into their pockets to sponsor my studies in the UK. But I am but one lucky person who, through God's grace, received such support.





Imagine hundreds of thousands of parents who can't afford to send their children abroad to study. Imagine only a few local universities to train teachers and civil servants who can develop our country. Imagine how steep the competition is to secure a place to study.

My story is a tale of someone who started writing on the sand and now does his work on an Apple MacBook computer. It is the journey "From Sand to Apple."

God's grace and mercy through the generosity of friends in the UK made it possible for me to fulfill my dream. I realize there are still unfinished tasks to do – a desire to share what I gained through education with people of both Sudans.

In 2014, I returned to South Sudan to help develop a university. In reality any person doing this kind of a project in the Western world would be paid well, live in good accommodation and have a car or a motorbike to travel when doing daily business. For my family and me, this has been a leap of faith, a true sacrifice. Maybe the story of Nehemiah in the Bible is worth a read. I still receive monthly wages of 4,800 South Sudanese Pounds, equivalent to £60. This is not enough to cover my daily

expenses in Juba let alone share it with the family back in the UK. I often travel on foot for important meetings and official duties and I share my accommodation with rats. Would this not be something worth support?

I would like to ask you to pray for my family and my ministry in South Sudan. As the author of Ecclesiastes says 'Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their labour' (Eccl.4: 9).

**Revd Dr. Joseph Bilal**  
Project Manager



Look out for our new website –  
coming soon!

