

Intercultural Human Rights Law Review

Volume 1

Article 8

2006

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Recommended Citation

Francis Bok, *Escape to Freedom: A Former Slave's Story*, 1 Intercultural Hum. Rts. L. Rev. 55 (2006).
Available at: <https://scholarship.stu.edu/ihrlr/vol1/iss1/8>

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ESCAPE TO FREEDOM: A FORMER SLAVE'S STORY

FRANCIS BOK*

I want to tell you that being here this morning has been life-changing for me. Not for what I have been through for ten years, but for what I have overcome by coming to this country, the United States of America, where I began a new life in a new home. Today, people like you changed my life once again, and I want to thank each and every one of you for being here, and particularly for having me and all the wonderful speakers you have brought here.

Now, before I begin to tell you the details of my slavery in my home country, Sudan, I would like to thank the people who really helped me to come here. I want to thank Michele Gillen for that commitment and willingness to stand in solidarity with those who are still with the monsters. Besides her, I want to thank the two ambassadors who have actually come a long way, one coming from Japan and one coming from Rome. I appreciate their willingness and commitment to stand with us - former victims and those who are still struggling who want to be free - in solidarity, and I thank you both.

It is a great honor and privilege to be a part of this program today. Not only am I going to be speaking to you on behalf of my own experiences, but I also speak on behalf of the southern Sudanese and western Sudanese in Darfur. People are still dying, and many have already been killed; two million have died in southern Sudan. More people than you know in Kosovo, Rwanda, Somalia, Bosnia, and Haiti combined. And yet, nothing has changed in my country. The violence still continues - even though I am sitting in freedom

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and comfort. Today, while I am at St. Thomas School of Law, people are still dying in my country. I thank you for trying to fight with us - because what I am going to tell you, what happened to me, will make me cry again.

I want to tell you this story. I was tearing up here when one of the victims was speaking, the one who was hiding. Maybe you didn't see me because you were behind me. When she was speaking, I was very upset. This made me go back to my experience when I was in captivity for ten years. It was a time when I was sent to go to the forest by myself, and that day my master told me, "Make sure those cows get water or don't come home." It was after the wet season, there is no water, and I was taking care of about one thousand cows by myself. I had to stand in line for three days, because there were so many people with animals. After I finished that day, I sat underneath a big tree by myself and cried. I asked myself a lot of questions; "Why is this happening to me? Why does it happen to other people?" I didn't come up with any solutions, but I forced myself to go after the cows and I brought them home, and even though I had spent three days, the master didn't say, "Thank you." Instead, he beat me because I had lost two cows. He beat me and threatened that if I attempted to do it again, he would shoot me.

This is not the whole story. The story began in 1986, when I was 7 years old. My mother came to me one evening while I was playing with my friends and my two sisters and said, "Francis, I want you to go to the local market to sell eggs and beans." I excused myself from my friends, and I said I wanted to go and do this. I was very excited to go to the market and meet with other playmates at the markets. I was also very excited to go out and do a favor for my mother. However, I didn't know that my life would change in the next two hours, or that I would not be coming back to see my family again. Indeed, I never came back. Today, I am 25, and this happened when I was 7 years old, in 1986.

After I had left and gone to the marketplace, the Arab police from Northern Sudan came and stormed my village. They captured all the families and put them in a big pile and burned them. My family was killed. I was sitting underneath the big tree with some other adults. The people I was sitting next to were talking. They said,

“We heard more shooting.” This is because the violence began immediately after we had left the village. Some of them also said that they had seen smoke, and they pointed toward the village.

I thought these people were talking of something that was not a big deal. When you are young, your attention is just on one or two things, and I was just too busy in the market. About ten minutes later I looked behind me, and I saw a lot of horsemen and camel men, and people walking with machine guns shooting. They rushed into the market and stormed it. The people looked alike. They were all dressed alike; they had their heads wrapped in cloth, and wore something we call *djellabah* - I don't know how you say it in English. They started shooting people. It was my first time, first time ever in my life to witness such violence. The thing that scared me most was that I had never, ever witnessed a dead person before, and now I saw a lot of people just being killed around me. I was very frightened. I stood up, and I tried to run. One of the horsemen ran after me, and grabbed my hands. He spoke to me in Arabic, which I didn't speak at that time. I was very scared when he was talking to me, not only by him, but by the big animal standing in front of me. I was not 6'5" at that time, I was young, and I was short. I was confused, and I could tell that everyone in the market was confused. I saw all these people destroying everything in the market, and they were stealing from the tables.

On the way to the North, I witnessed one girl get shot because she was screaming that she had seen her mother and father get shot. When a militia man told her to stop crying and she couldn't stop, the guy just took her out of the group and shot her in the head. Just to make her quiet. On the way to the North, we were given out as slaves by militia men, and I was given to a guy named Giemma. When I first arrived at Giemma's he told the whole family to beat me, and his three children start beating me, and called on me “Abeed, Abeed!” Abeed means in Arabic “Black Slave.” That was my welcome. I was crying for the kids to stop beating me at first, but two or three minutes later I had stopped crying, but I was still very upset. Why? The three children were beating on me, and nobody helped me. Their mother and father, and some other girl were watching them, and they were not helping me. Where I came from,

when someone fights, the neighbors come and separate us from fighting. But in this case, no one was going to help me, and I knew they were not good people. I was also isolated from the family. My shelter was next to the animals. They told me to remain there by myself.

I noticed my master's wife didn't like me. Her name was Hawa. She came and stood in front of me and spoke in Arabic and said if her husband would allow it, she would shoot me. She warned me not to look at her while she was passing by. I had to look in different directions. To be honest with you, she never changed. She never had a conversation with me, and I always watched myself around her.

I was trained to take care of the goats. My master sent me to the forest with his son, who was about fifteen. He rode the horse, and I walked with the goats all day long. A couple of times, two or three goats went missing, and I was beaten. My master told me, if I didn't do my work well, he would kill me.

One day he took me to the neighbor's house, who had a slave. I remember that slave's name, his name was Barjok Barjok. This slave was from the Dinka tribe, the same tribe as I was. He was young, maybe two or three years older than I was at the time. He lost his left leg because the boy complained about doing work. He didn't want to take care of the cows, and he didn't want to do anything. So his master cut off his leg instead of killing him.

When I saw this boy, I said to myself, "No, I don't want this to happen to me." Because, I was a little boy - I was very active even when I was young - I had big dreams. I was a special kid to my father. From the eight children he had, he called me Muycharko, which means in English "Twelve Men." I used to say him, "I want to be like you one day, help people in the community because there is a lot of help the people in the community really need." So I didn't want to give up. I worked hard everyday, and I never attempted to make trouble - I always made sure all the goats were brought home.

And it didn't help either. I still got beat for no reason. I still got beat everyday, and I never asked my master why. Until one day, when I started to understand Arabic after nine months - they didn't

send me to school to learn Arabic, and they never talked to me, tutored me so I would be able to communicate with them very well, but I just focused and listened to them carefully when they spoke – one day when he came to me, my master gave me food to eat and before he returned, I asked him why he called me “Abeed,” “Black Slave.” I asked why he forced me to sleep with the animals, and why he would not love me. Because, truly, nobody loved me. Everyone needs love, and someone needs to love you. But what happened? He went back and grabbed his stick, and he beat me with the stick, and told me never ever to ask him that question again. Until he came back to me two days later and said “The reason we call you Abeed, Black Slave, and force you to sleep with the animals, is because you are an animal.” I wasn’t an animal, because I talked to him, and animals cannot talk. That made me very, very upset. Very upset! I didn’t show my emotion to him, but I decided, that I’m not going to stay here. I am not an animal, I am a human being.

I began living a double life with him. I worked hard, but I was planning to escape. It was a hard decision for me to make. I was 14 years old when I tried to escape for the first time. I failed in my first attempt. My master threatened me after he beat me. If I tried again, he would shoot me. But I did not give up. I said, “I would rather die than be a slave, because I have seen the way you treat me, and I have seen the way you treat other slaves.”

I met four boys at the river where we took the cows to get water. When I greeted them in my native language, “Cheebak,” which means “Hello,” not one would respond to me, not one of them, until one of the boys walked towards me quickly and he pled with me, “Please, please, don’t ever say ‘Hello’ to us in Dinka when you see us, because we do not want any trouble.” I asked him, “What do you mean, what did I do?” He said, “We are not allowed to speak our native language here. Our masters don’t want that.” I said to him, “OK.” So, every time I saw him, I just said “Hello” in Arabic. That’s it. And that’s what I did, no matter how long we were going to be in this place, I was resigned to be a slave, who will never find freedom.

I struggled, and I tried to escape again just two days after the first attempt had failed. The first escape had failed because some-

body else saw me - not the master himself - and he dragged me back to the master and the master beat me. He said, "Don't do it again," and I did it again two days later. But when I ran away that time, the second time, it was four in the morning, I believe, and I thought everyone was sleeping - but he was watching me. He came after me with a curse, and he said, "Tonight will be your last day on the Earth." He tied me up and he beat me, real hard, he said "I am going to kill you tonight." But when he was speaking to me, as I was standing up there, I closed my eyes and I said, "God, please don't let him kill me. I love my parents, and I have hope for the future." He let me down until he looked at me a few hours later. He said if I tried to escape again, next time he would shoot me.

I waited for three more years, until I was seventeen years old. Finally I decided, "It is time to get away; it is time to do whatever it takes not to work for this person anymore." I was ready. My God was watching me, like he had been watching me for ten years. He delivered me safely, and I made my way to another town where I got into trouble with the local police. I didn't give up! I tried my best to get away from them. With the help of someone reaching out to Muslims, I made my way to freedom. The man paid for us, trying to help me make my way to the capital city of Sudan: Khartoum. This man - I will never forget what he did for me. I thank him every time I give a speech. I hope that one day he will be able to discover that I am the man he rescued. If it was not for him, I would still be a man in slavery, because I could not have found my way without his help.

When I went to Khartoum, I stayed in a refugees' camp. Some Sudanese helped me on the black market, and I made my way to Egypt. For my first two weeks in Egypt, I stayed in a church. I didn't know anybody to stay with, and I didn't have money. Egypt is such a big country, and you have to have money to live there. One day one of the guys that used to live in my town -- his name is Pyo -- invited me to stay with him. He had 13 children in a two-bedroom apartment in Cairo. When he invited me, he said, "I'd be happy to allow you to share the living room with my seven boys, but we do not have beds." But I didn't mind -- it felt like I was home with family. They comforted me. They showed me love. Pyo actually sent me to the U.N. office with his son who was about to come to Amer-

ica. Pyo's son had been accepted already, and he was just waiting for his departure to the United States.

I went to the U.N., and I told this story that I am telling you now. They basically told me that I was accepted, and that was very exciting. I thought that I was all set. But when I went there they disappointed me. They told me that I had to do another interview with the INS, and only this will guarantee that I get accepted to go to America. I waited for another year, and went back to do the interview once again. They guaranteed that I would be coming to America. My name came out sometime in August of 1999. Then I came to the United States. I didn't know anything, I had never spoken English before.

I came to Fargo, North Dakota this way. We took a non-stop plane from Cairo International Airport to JFK in New York, where they switched my plane over to Chicago. I was lost for about five or six hours at least, because they gave me a ticket and told me only to find my plane quickly. I asked, "Where is the gate, where is my plane going to take off?" I couldn't find it. I saw many "Fs," but not "F3." I walked to the food court, and I saw one African American guy who looked like I do – big. He was pushing a trash can. I handed him my ticket slip, and he tried to communicate with me, but it didn't work because I didn't speak the language. So he took my ticket and saw that I was looking for "F3." By the time he took me there, I had missed my plane twice. So I waited. I didn't mind. I was patient. I waited for three more hours, then they put me on another plane, and then another plane, and I went to Fargo.

When I got to Fargo, in the airport, I saw a Somalian guy who was working with Lutheran Social Services - he sponsored me. They had been waiting all day long. He was so tired, and he said to me something in Arabic, and I greeted him back, and I was continuing to talk to him in Arabic and he said, "No, I am sorry I am not from Sudan, and I don't speak Arabic - I am not Arabic - I am from Somalia." Then I got confused, and I said, "How am I to communicate with these people?" He took me to the apartment that Lutheran Social Services had rented for me. He gave me a tour of the apartment and then left. But as soon as he left, I retook the tour for myself and sat in my bedroom and I took a deep breath and said, "Wow,

I am about to enjoy this wealth of freedom in America; it will be nothing like when I used to be with my family. Nobody will force me to do something that I do not want to do.”

But immediately something else came to my mind. Before I spent a night in the United States, I said to myself, “What about those that are still in my position?” What about kids who are still slaves, women who are still slaves in Sudan? Those like Barjok Barjok, the slave that I mentioned before. He lost his left leg because he complained about the work that he did.

For ten years I used to lay awake at night, and wonder who was going to come and free me. Nobody came. I was strong enough not to give up. That is why I made my way to this country - to be a free man. I promised myself from Day One in America that I would do something, one day, for those people who are still there. At that time, I did not know what I was going to do for them.

I did not like my apartment. It was too cold, and I had never been in a place with so much snow. That’s true, I complained everyday because when someone came to bring me something, I would speak in Arabic sometimes, and they did not. There was no way for me to communicate with them. I was in an apartment by myself and I did not speak the language, and they did not speak Arabic or Dinka -- my native language. They knew that I was not happy, so they hired someone from Iraq, he was Kurdish. This guy came and said, “You know, the people of Lutheran Social Services want me to ask you, why are you not happy?” I said, “I can’t tell you here. Take me to the offices and I will tell them while you translate.” He took me to the Lutheran offices, and at first I told them that “I want to thank Barry Nelson, who is my sponsor. I want to thank Lutheran Social Services for sponsoring me to come to Fargo, and everything they had done for me, but I am not happy. I am not happy because I have been by myself for ten years, lonely - and now again I am lonely. I don’t speak the language, and it is hard when I go out and meet with other people.” I did not like American meals. I was complaining about everything, and they were laughing at me, like you are doing now. It is a funny story now, after being in this country much longer. They advised me to make a choice to either move to Iowa or Texas.

Their reason was because there are about five or six thousand South Sudanese living in Des Moines, and a similar number in Texas. I told them I would like to go to Iowa. When I got there, there was a family that I knew, who used to live in my building in Cairo. They invited me to stay with them, and they found me a job with the same company that they work with. I was planning to save up some money so that I could go to school. I was 21 years old, and had never been to school in my life.

One day I got a phone call, from a man named Dr. Charles Jacobs, who is the president and co-founder of the American Anti-Slavery Group in Boston. He actually heard about me from one of the South Sudanese who helped me in Egypt. Dr. Charles Jacobs is the man who became committed when he learned that you could buy a slave back in Sudan for \$35 U.S. dollars, which is less than buying a VCR. He actually started this organization out of his own pocket. He did a brilliant job, and is a businessman. He asked me to speak out. He told me he speaks now at synagogues, because he is Jewish, and to Christian churches, and on TV and radio. But I did not agree with Charles. I said, "I am not a slave anymore, and I do not want to talk about what happened to me. I am in a free country and I am working two jobs. I do not want to revisit what happened to me and what is going on around the country." But Charles didn't listen. He kept trying for months.

For several months he courted the family I stayed with, until one day I decided to take his call. I know he is not going to understand me, since I do not speak English well. However, he convinced me to come to Boston and see him.

When I came to Boston and went to the American Anti-Slavery group offices in downtown Boston, there was something that immediately changed my mind. I saw the pictures taken of Southern Sudan by a group called Christian Solidarity International, or CSI. They are a group of Christians who decided to go and buy slaves back. When I talked to Charles Jacobs, he mentioned that these people were enslaved not far from where my ancestors had been enslaved in Egypt. Charles also mentioned that 27 million people are still slaves around the world. I told him if these people are still en-

slaved, I know what a slave looks like, and how they feel. I was there for ten years, and my people are still there. Why don't I do something? I thanked Dr. Charles Jacobs for what he had already done, and for what he still continues doing. I promised him that I would quit my jobs immediately.

My first speech was in a black church in Roxbury called Southern Baptist Church. I spoke there and my speech was covered by several newspapers. Previously, Charles told me that we were going to Washington D.C. to speak to Congress. I said to Charles that I would, and went to Congress and spoke. I didn't tell the story the way I'm telling it to you. I said a few words, thanked Charles, the Congress, and the media – those who are willing to cover this story. When I came back, Charles printed my story on the website so that people could invite me to speak. I want to tell you that I have already spoken to middle schools, high schools, colleges, and universities across America. I have also spoken in Christian churches, Jewish synagogues, community centers, TV shows, and radio talk shows all over America. I have also had opportunity to tell my story live in community supported events like the one here at St. Thomas University.

I have had the opportunity to speak to members of Congress, and share my concerns with them. I was even invited to the White House on September 4th, 2001, when President Bush was sending a special envoy to Northern Sudan, and had the opportunity to meet with him and Colin Powell. I turned to Colin Powell and I said, "I want to come to you first because you have the duty to help my people – you have ancestors in Africa, and this is your duty to help us; the people are dying in Sudan, they are your brothers and sisters." He shook my hand, and he said, "Francis, we are willing to do more in this."

I was lucky enough to get re-invited to the White House in 2002, when the Sudan Peace Act was passed. When President Bush spoke after he signed the bill, I stood up quickly. I stood next to him and said, "President Bush, I want to thank you personally, and I want to thank you on behalf of the South Sudanese." I mentioned to him that if the women and children knew today in Sudan that you signed a law for them, their sad faces would light up with hope. I asked him

to please continue to help my people, and told him that two million of my people have been killed, including my friends, my mother, my father, and my two sisters. He turned to me and said, "Francis, I want to thank you, this is my second time seeing you, and I hope this morning that you will believe it for your people." And, he said to me, "We will not allow this enemy to kill these good citizens." He said, "It is an honor for me and the American people to stand with you, and we will help you."

Although my story is very long, there are many other survivors and experts here who can tell you more. I am not speaking as an expert but as a survivor. I am telling you my experiences of being an ex-slave. The book I have written, *ESCAPE FROM SLAVERY: THE TRUE STORY OF MY TEN YEARS IN CAPTIVITY – AND MY JOURNEY TO FREEDOM IN AMERICA*, will tell you in more detail the story of my struggle. I want to thank you once again for standing in solidarity with those who are still slaves.

Ultimately, this movement is about human potential. It is about the potential for those enslaved to be all that they can be - to be with their parents, to go to school, and to contribute to this society. And I really thank you for standing, and for recognizing, and I hope this conference today will be a wake-up-call for those who are sleeping and do not know. I hope it will be a wake-up call for those who do not even know what to do with the freedom that they have. When I came to this country, I asked myself, "What good is my freedom, if my people are still dying? What good is my freedom, if my people are still enslaved?" I want you to ask yourselves the same question. What good is your freedom, if it is not used to help other people who do not live with freedom?

I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I thank you on behalf of all slaves around the world – not only Sudan. I thank you, also, on behalf of the American Anti-Slavery Group. I have been looking forward for some time to meet a group like you, and talk to you. This is the right moment. This is the moment we give our day when we are supposed to do other things in order to talk about this issue, because it is an important issue. Try to walk away from this conference with something - something that will inspire you, something that will encourage you to begin opposition. I am here because

this situation hurts me, and that is why I risked my life. This is not a fun job. I left Boston on Monday traveling to Los Angeles to speak in California at the State University. Then I left from there to Walla Walla to speak at Whitman College. And I left there at 6:30 a.m. Pacific Time yesterday and I got here at 9:30 p.m. last night - to speak at this conference because I never get tired, and I will never get tired until the day I see all the people are free.