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MOVIE REVIEW | 'LOST BOYS OF SUDAN'

Coping in a Land That's Not Quite Heaven

By ELVIS MITCHELL

When one of the hopeful teenagers of "[Lost Boys of Sudan](#)," speaking about his coming trip to America, says that "the journey is like you are going to heaven," your heart sinks. But in this tidy and fascinating documentary, making its New York premiere today at Film Forum, the accretions of small defeats recorded by the intelligent filmmakers Megan Mylan and Jon Shenk don't sap the will of the young African refugees transplanted to the United States to make a better life.

"You are the future of Sudan," the boys are told as they prepare in 2001 to leave their homeland, where they were orphaned by the country's long-running civil war.

The film, which primarily follows two boys, Peter and Santino, over the course of a year, doesn't make us dread that the expected heaven may not materialize. Instead we wonder what kind of futures the "future of Sudan" will find when they arrive at their destinations: Nebraska, North Dakota and, for Peter and Santino, what Santino terms "a land called Hawston." That's Houston, whose vast sprawl gives another meaning to the title. "They called us lost boys because they found us without parents," Peter says, and the relocation strands them again.

At its core "Lost Boys of Sudan" is about coping with loneliness, as alienation increases and the two try to stay afloat. Hearing them joke about customs they can no longer observe — like the familiar touching that is considered homosexual behavior in America — underscores the spiritual distance between America and Africa.

Peter, Santino and other boys in the group selected by the United Nations and the State Department to come to the United States learn that there's no room for the communal thinking that has helped them survive the slaughters in Sudan. They become trapped in the minimum-wage trenches, trying to pay rent and to send money home. "American money has become so sweet to us," Peter says ruefully. They also become ensnared in American ways: after five months both wear the baggy jeans they were warned about back home, the trappings of bad men.

The nearly unlimited access the directors have to the lives of their subjects intensifies the narrative, allowing us to drift along in the swells and eddies of Peter's and Santino's time in the United States. The filmmakers don't shy away from touchy issues, like the schism between the Sudanese and American blacks.

At one point Santino admits to his shame about the darkness of his skin, which gets him ridiculed. He ponders this while waiting for a bus in Houston, something that allows a lot

of time for thinking. And while speaking with a white church worker, the Sudanese teenagers talk about how being robbed by American blacks has made them wary, a stereotype she vainly tries to combat. At the very least, the film will leave you questioning what "African-American" means.

"Lost Boys of Sudan" subtly provides a sense of what its subjects have traded — sacrificed really — to come to America. Peter eventually goes to Kansas to finish his education. The hollows of his cheeks fill in, testimony to Americans' constant eating, and Santino's ready smile becomes obviously less eager after a while.

We get to know them and are pulled so completely into their day-to-day struggles that it's only when a high school newspaper reporter questions Peter, who talks about having been without parents since he was 4, that we remember that this boy — who works full time, attends high school and a basketball camp — is only 17.

Getting an audience so caught up is no small feat; it is a tribute to the directors' storytelling. And though that early reference to heaven on earth — hovering and poised to be contradicted — is answered by the end of "Lost Boys of Sudan," by then the film has earned the right to do so.

LOST BOYS OF SUDAN

Produced and directed by Megan Mylan and Jon Shenk; in English, Dinka, Arabic and Swahili, with English subtitles; director of photography, Mr. Shenk; edited by Kim Roberts and Mark Becker; released by Shadow Distribution. At the Film Forum, 209 West Houston Street, west of Sixth Avenue, South Village. Running time: 87 minutes. This film is not rated.