

Peter Bhan Deng Ruot His Journey, His Story



You may know him as Peter Bhan or Bhan Ruot or recognize him for his warm smile. What you likely don't know is the story of his journey, from Ethiopia to a refugee camp in Kenya and, at last, to the United States. This was a journey filled with perils, challenges, and difficult decisions. This is Bhan's story, as told to Barbara Digges, Carol Khazai, and Phebe Packer, during a series of interviews in the summer of 2023. Bhan told us it was the first time he'd shared most of this since coming to America. Please, read on to learn Bhan's story.

Early Life

Peter Bhan Deng Ruot was born in 1987 in an Ethiopian village called Block 12. He was given the name Bhan, after his grandfather. *When I was in my mother's womb, my grandfather passed away. His name was Bhan. My Dad and Mom called me Bhan to remember my grandfather. Peter is my Christian name; it was given later.* The family were members of the Nuer tribe.¹

Bhan grew up with his Dad and Mom and four brothers. Other family members lived nearby. Bhan's father was a farmer who raised cattle for meat, milk, cheese, and butter. He also grew maize and sorghum. Bhan learned how to fish at a young age, first with a net from a canoe, and by age 8, he fished with a spear. He brought home the fish for his Mom to cook.



The structure on stilts is used to store grain and other food items. The larger structure is a typical Nuer dwelling.

While Bhan was young, he spent much time with his grandmother, Manytap. Her Christian name is Sarah and she was a Presbyterian Deaconess. She taught him the Commandments and took him to church. When Manytap and Bhan came home from church, his grandmother made him recite the commandments again before he could play. He learned "The church is good." Grandmother found out that a Presbyterian pastor was coming to their area and would be performing

¹ The **Nuer people** are a Nilotic ethnic group/tribe concentrated in the Greater Upper Nile region of South Sudan and in the Ethiopian region of Gambela. The Nuer people are pastoralists who herd cattle for a living.

baptisms. Bhan's parents, who were not baptized at the time, consented to his baptism; he was baptized in 1989. His parents were baptized in 1995.

Bhan's father did not want him to become a farmer; nor did he want Bhan to "get the mark"² He wanted something different and better for Bhan and his brother Buany. Dad hoped that one of the boys could take over maintaining the village's water supply since there was no one in their village to do that. A single tap in the village provided water for drinking, cooking, and bathing.

Dad sent Bhan and Buany, who was 4 years younger, to school in Itang, the closest town. The boys walked to and from school, an hour's walk each way. They attended half day sessions and were taught several subjects, including English. Fifty students attended the school, a mix of boys and girls.

Life continued in this manner most days, until one ill-fated late morning in 2005. There had been some trouble in the Block 12 village, violence; two people had been murdered. Members of Bhan's family were a target. On this morning at school, Bhan felt threatened, in fear for his life. He left his class, went to his brother's classroom, grabbed Buany by the hand and took off running, but not in the direction of home. The boys had only what they had worn to school and a little lunch money as they ran from Itang, without a goodbye to their parents. And so began a journey that would last both a month and a lifetime.

From Itang, Ethiopia to Kakuma, Kenya

We found ourselves on a road and were able to stop a vehicle. We told them we wanted to leave Itang because of trouble there. They took us a ways and then dropped us off. We continued walking and stopped vehicles to get a ride when we could. We passed through Gambela, headed for the refugee camp in Pugnido, Ethiopia. When we arrived in Pugnido, we were told we could not stay at the camp because we are from Ethiopia--the camp was for refugees who had left countries other than Ethiopia.

We left Pugnido, headed for Kenya. Many days we had no food or water. On some days we were able to get food in the villages we passed through. Sometimes we travelled alone, at other times with others we met on the road. We travelled through forest and desert. Often the roads were dirt with no vehicles. There were times the military escorted us for a few miles. Sometimes we slept

². The Nuer receive facial markings (called *gaar*) as part of their initiation into adulthood. The pattern of Nuer scarification varies within specific subgroups.

during the day and travelled at night, because it was cooler and safer from human and animal predators. Some days we had no food, other days we had to make a few biscuits last the day. Sometimes we found small berries along the roadside. We collected water from the rivers and lakes we passed.

We were captured in South Sudan, close to the border with Kenya.³ Our captors were government officials. We told them we want to go to Kenya. When the officials demanded our “documents” we explained we have no documents; “We ran from our country because they were going to kill.” The officials said they could not transport us to the refugee camp in Kenya; however, they found a civilian who could drive us to the UNHCR⁴ camp in Kakuma, Kenya.

When they arrived at the Kakuma Refugee Camp, the boys had been on the road for nearly a month, travelling at least 614 km as the crow flies.⁵ They had avoided being robbed, killed, or turned back, the fate of many. As part of the camp’s intake processing Bhan was provided with a ration card and birthdate. Bhan knew only his birth year, 1987, which was the year of a great flood in their village. The UNHCR assigned a birthday of January 1st, as was the custom when a refugee didn't know their date of birth.

Bhan and Buany were assigned their own living quarters. The women who cooked for them lived in an adjacent area.

Life in the Kakuma, Kenya Refugee Camp 6

The boys attended school for a half day. They continued to study English and learned Arabic and Kiswahili (Swahili), since there were refugees in the camp who spoke those languages. Some subjects were mandatory, e.g. religion, history, mathematics, and biology. Bhan usually chose humanity classes for his elective classes.



³ Formerly part of Sudan. South Sudan did not become a country until 2011.

⁴ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is the United Nations agency mandated to lead and co-ordinate international action to protect and provide humanitarian assistance to refugees.

⁵ 614 km is 382 miles; this is equivalent to the distance between Phoenix and Los Angeles.

⁶ Kakuma refugee camp is located in remote northwestern Kenya. The camp was established in 1992 to provide humanitarian aid to the “Lost Boys of Sudan” and other unaccompanied minors who had fled the war in Sudan. Kakuma means “nowhere” in Swahili. The camp covers six square miles and is home to over 200,000 people (source: UNHCR, March 2023) from 19 countries, including South Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia. Almost 60% of the residents are children.

Each ethnic community occupies a separate and somewhat discrete location. Each neighborhood has built its own market stands, coffee shops, library, and places of worship.

Afternoons were used for studying, playing sports, or watching sports competitions. Residents returned to their living quarters by 6:30 pm and the camp became quiet. This was a safety measure to protect themselves from raids by gangs from the town of Kakuma. There were ongoing tensions between the refugees and the local community that sometimes resulted in violence. One evening, armed intruders broke into Bhan's residence, demanding money. A neighbor who came to help them was wounded by gunfire. Although Bhan and his brother were not injured, the intruders took all their clothing.

On Fridays, camp residents gathered at one of the ten churches in the camp for prayers. Bhan and Buany attended the Presbyterian church and were members of that church's choir, which rehearsed on Saturdays. There were a children's/youth choir, a women's choir and a male choir. When the three choirs were combined, more than 150 singers lifted their voices in song. Bhan held the position of Choir Captain from 2006 to 2018.

The choir was accompanied by drums; however, the Presbyterian congregation desired a piano, for which there were no funds. Over several years congregation members raised money, sometimes selling their rations so they could contribute. Eventually there was enough money for a piano which was ordered and arrived from Nairobi. Several other congregations in the camp also obtained a piano. Nairobi sent an individual who taught piano to several camp residents so there would be a local accompanist for the choirs. When the pianist was unable to attend the service, the choirs reverted to drums for their accompaniment.



Kakuma 1 combined choirs of youth, women, and men.

Initially, rations were distributed twice a month; distribution was cut back to monthly in 2008. These rations usually consisted of sorghum, rice, beans, maize, and vegetable oil; on rare occasions there was an allowance for purchasing fruit and vegetables from the camp markets. Often the rations were insufficient to last the time between distribution, so meals would be cut back to just once a day. Some weeks there were days without any food. Firewood was not available in the camp, so when it was needed for cooking, it was purchased from the locals.

While in the camp, both boys obtained high school diplomas. Bhan began working while he was still in high school. He was selected to his community's shelter committee, an unpaid position. This entailed walking through the

community to identify houses that had collapsed and then filing a written report so that repairs could begin. He held various other jobs in the camp village—some volunteer, some paid, i.e., community health promoter, translator, outreach for IRC⁷, a nursing assistant in the IRC camp emergency room and hospital, for which he was paid the equivalent of \$50 USD per month. He assisted with connecting pregnant women and malnourished children with available camp resources. Later a group of Presbyterian women sponsored Bhan so that he could study theology in the city of Lokichogio. Buany became a teacher.

Bhan and his brother Buany lived in the Kakuma camp for many years, not knowing if and when they would be relocated or where they might be sent. *In 2017 my brother and I were notified that the process was beginning to determine if we would emigrate. We wrote application forms, had interviews, underwent medical examinations, and had several shots. Afterwards we were notified that we had been approved to go to America, to the city of Phoenix. I had heard about the United States but didn't know Phoenix. I believed I would have a secure life in America, continue my education, and find work.*

Family

Bhan and Buany weren't able to send a message to their parents when they fled from the school or when they were on the road to Kenya. Months and then years passed without contact. Their parents believed that both boys were no longer alive. The Red Cross in 2009 asked the boys where their parents had lived. Since it had been 4 years, they weren't certain if their parents still lived near Itang. The boys were asked to write a letter which would pass through many hands in hopes of reaching their parents in Itang. Months went by, with no word from the parents. Then one day, their neighbor's phone rang. (The boys had no phone, but they had included their neighbor's phone number in their letter.) Bhan and Buany were summoned to their neighbor's---it was their parents on the phone line! Bhan spoke first and then handed the phone to Buany, who broke down in tears at hearing his mother's voice. *Why are you crying? Aren't you a man? I am a man; I am crying because I am so very happy.* Despite staying in contact with their parents after this, the boys did not see their parents again for several more years, Bhan in 2022, Buany in 2023.

In 2012, a young lady, Nyakona, arrived at the camp, from South Sudan. She was also of the Nuer tribe. Her Christian name was Rebecca. The two young people became friends and then began a committed relationship. Several months later,

⁷ International Rescue Committee is a global humanitarian aid, relief, and development nongovernmental organization (NGO)

Nyakona told Bhan she was leaving the camp to return to living with her parents. Unbeknownst to Bhan, Nyakona was expecting their child.

Nyakona informed her parents of her pregnancy and named Bhan the father. Her parents knew Bhan's parents; the three travelled to Ethiopia to meet with them. Bhan's Dad asked Nyakona if she loved Bhan; she replied that she did. Both sets of parents agreed that the relationship was "good." Bhan's Dad gave Nyakona's father several head of cattle as payment towards the dowry. In return her parents "gave" Nyakona to Bhan's family; she remained with his parents when her parents returned to South Sudan. This exchange, a dowry for a bride, symbolizes a non-civil marriage in the Nuer culture. Nyakona and Bhan's daughter was born in March 2013. Over the next few years, Bhan was able to pay for Nyakona to visit Kakuma. During one visit, they were united in marriage in the camp. A son was born to them in 2016. Nyakona was expecting another child when Bhan and his brother were approved to emigrate to the U.S.

A group of Presbyterian ladies in the camp were especially supportive to Bhan and his family. The women considered Bhan "our son." The women often provided food and cooked for them. They looked after his wife and child when Bhan went to the religious school in another town. When it was known that Bhan would be going to the U.S, before their third child was born, the women provided many items that a mother and new baby would need.

Bhan was torn. Should he stay in Kenya with his wife and children and be there for the birth of his third child? Staying would mean he might never have another opportunity to go; if he declined to go, Buany would have to remain in Kenya also. Should he go and later bring his family to America for a better life---more opportunities for education, jobs, safety, a family home? Bhan believes that God guided him to chose to GO at this time.

Bhan and Nyakona's third child, a son, was born in 2019. He was given the name Tesloach, which means "happiness", because there was much joy that his father Bhan had safely arrived in the United States.

Life in Phoenix

My brother and I arrived in Phoenix in December 2018. Lutheran Social Services assisted us with housing, social services, and job recommendations. We found work cleaning rental cars near the airport. It was difficult to work during the day and attend school in the evening. We did not know Phoenix well, had no car, and used the



Bhan attends ELL classes several days a week at the Hope Center.

bus. Sometimes the bus did not run at the hours we needed for school. After a few months, Covid came; our hours at the car rental were cut and would not be enough to pay our rent. So we got a second job working for Sky Chef at the airport. Because many flights stopped during Covid, this job was also part-time.

After several months, my brother and I were able to get jobs in a group home, where we took care of the disabled residents. This was full-time work and allowed time to go to school. My brother and I still work in a group home for developmentally disabled persons.

I talked with friends who had been in refugee camp with me who were living in the Midwest. They wanted me to relocate from Phoenix to where they were. I said, "No no, Phoenix is good for me; Phoenix is my home."

My neighbor taught me how to drive. I practiced with him by driving in South Mountain Park. The twisty roads and little traffic made this a good place to learn. I also took some professional driver's training before I got my license.

In 2022, Bhan was able to see his family, including his wife, children, and parents during a trip to Africa. Earlier this year, Buany made a visit his Mom in Ethiopia. It was the first time they had seen each other since that day in 2005 when they escaped from the school.

Bhan has met and conquered many challenges in Phoenix. He is employed, has learned to drive, owns a car, attends English classes three times a week, has connected with the South Sudanese community here and has continued his Presbyterian worship and affiliation. These connections are what led him to the South Sudanese New Life Presbyterian Fellowship⁸ at Orangewood, where he has a leadership role.

Bhan is grateful for the friendship he has with fellow refugee Gach Kur. It is Gach who invited Bhan to come to Orangewood. Both men are members of the New Life Presbyterian Fellowship and the original Orangewood congregation. They usually attend both services on Sunday. Gach assisted Bhan in acclimating to life in Phoenix, introducing him to ethnic businesses and with managing job changes. Recently Gach came to Bhan's rescue when Bhan's car wouldn't start during the heat of the day. Gach was able to quickly diagnose



Bhan and Gach

⁸ Formerly known as the Nile Congregation

that a dead battery was the problem.

Bhiran shared that his greatest challenge is his family being far away. His three children spent little or no time living in the camp. In 1922 Bhan visited his family, who had relocated to Kampala, Uganda, where the cost of living is less and educational opportunities are better. He could have remained in Africa with them. But he is adamant the better life for all of them is here in the United States. He hopes and plans for his children and wife to join him here someday. ED Note: During our interviews, Bhan shared a perfectly printed letter, in English, from his daughter. He also showed us the image (on his phone) of her report card--all A's. She wants to become a doctor.

Bhan intends to become a U.S, citizen. He plans to submit his application in December and hopes that he will be scheduled to take the Citizenship Test soon after.⁹ He also hopes to attend college and become certified in a health care field.

Faith

Bhan is a man of strong Christian faith. He is certain that God led and protected him and his brother. God connected them with good people on their journey from Ethiopia to Kenya and eventually to the safety, freedom, and opportunity that he has found in America. He knows that God has guided him through each of the many challenges he has faced and difficult decisions he has made and that God will continue to do so.

His Presbyterian roots are deep. It is important to Bhan that he and Nyakona are joined formally in marriage in a Presbyterian church, both in Africa and here at Orangewood. His grandmother advised him at a young age. "When there is a Presbyterian Church, don't leave it." Bhan is adamant that he will die a Presbyterian. In a recent phone conversation with his grandmother, he told her about the "elders" he has become friends with at Orangewood. She responded by telling him, "Wherever you go, you will meet people of God. Stay with them."

Bhan asks us to pray that his grandmother, Sarah Manytap, returns to good health. Let us also pray that Bhan can become a U.S. citizen and reunite with his wife and children, here, in Phoenix.

⁹ In order to apply for U.S. citizenship, the candidate must be a Lawful Permanent Resident of the U.S. for at least 5 years before applying.

Bhan and Buany's Journey from Ethiopia to Kenya in 2005 as described July 2023

Map created by Barbara Digges

