



P.O.V.'s "Rain in a Dry Land"

By Anne Makepeace

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Filmmaker's Statement

A front page *New York Times* article on March 12, 2003 inspired me with a passionate commitment to make this documentary. I immediately began working with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees, the State Department, and the Joint Voluntary Agencies to make this project happen. After eight months, I was finally able to convince IOM to schedule families slated for Springfield, Mass., and Atlanta in the same Cultural Orientation class in Kenya so that there would be a pool of people to choose from during the first shoot. With a grant from the Ceil and Michael Pulitzer Foundation, I took a crew of three people to Kenya in January 2004. The crew consisted of Joan Churchill on camera, her husband, Alan Barker, on sound, and Dina Hossain as associate producer. Joan's son Barney Broomfield volunteered and shot second-unit footage.

After a somewhat rocky beginning at the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, the Somali Bantu community welcomed us and gave us complete access to everything in the camp. We were fortunate to find two families, one bound for Atlanta and the other for Springfield, Mass., who were eager to participate and who were very much at ease in front of the camera. We filmed them for two weeks in their homes, in adult literacy classes, in soccer games, healing dances, and in their Cultural Orientation class. We also filmed them telling harrowing stories of murder and rape in Somalia, and talking about their hopes for America. These people are heart-breakingly beautiful, completely open to the filming process, surprisingly natural in front of the camera, and eager to participate.

In late February I received the news that the families were about to come to America. This was a difficult moment. Reaching into savings and calling in favors, I flew to Nairobi on March 6, 2004, and met up with Barney Broomfield, who had shot second camera in January. We filmed the refugees' last three days in Kakuma, including Aden and Madina's wild nighttime departure, party lit by Coleman lanterns and the headlights of a security-patrol jeep, Arbai's more stately departure dance, and poignant goodbyes to relatives and friends they may never see again.

We flew with Aden and Madina's family to Nairobi, filming their flight and first experience of a modern city in a disjointed way to reflect the refugees' amazement and disorientation. On March 17 we boarded a charter of 300 Somali Bantu refugees and filmed the family's flight to America. They weathered the trip amazingly well, and were very excited when they saw the frozen mainland of North America.

Joan Churchill met us at Newark airport to take over the shooting for the next two weeks. We filmed the five-hour limousine ride to Hartford, where the refugees were met by Somali staff members from Jewish Family Services and taken to temporary housing in Springfield provided by a Catholic church – a wonderfully diverse scene of Muslims sponsored by a Jewish organization staying in a former nunnery. The refugees were happy to be in America, despite freezing temperatures, strange food, inexplicable canned goods and kitchen apparatus, and confusing interactions with neighbors.



In early April, Joan and I flew to Atlanta to meet Arbai's family as they landed from Nairobi. They spent their first week at the home of evangelical Presbyterians, another unique experience. We filmed Arbai, her daughters, and the Somali translator in an intense discussion of female genital mutilation, an unfortunate cultural practice of the Somali Bantu, which is illegal here.

Later that month, I returned to Springfield to film the children's first school days. The younger ones immediately found American friends, while the older boys stayed close to their two Somali Bantu classmates, unsure of how to connect to the other students. Their English as a Second Language (ESL) class was especially lively, with refugees and immigrants from Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Bosnia. These classmates are potentially a rich source of friendships for the boys, and of stories for the documentary.

With grants from the Sundance Documentary Fund, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and ITVS, we continued to film with the families in Springfield and Atlanta through September 2005, capturing moments of struggle and difficulty as well as humor and poignancy as they navigated their way in this strange new land. Aden, a farmer in Somalia, finally got a job as a landscaper and carpenter; and Arbai, through a Goodwill Industries training program, is now working as a janitor at the Georgia State Archives. The younger children are doing well in school, as is Sahara, Arbai's wild daughter, while the Springfield schools have failed Aden and Madina's teenage boys, dashing their hopes for an education.

Our last shoot in Springfield was the naming ceremony of Aden and Madina's first-born American child, Jahora Aden Kabir, a joyful moment of celebration. In September, the beautiful wedding that Arbai gave her daughter Khadija, was a wildly colorful affirmation of family bonds and culture.

— Anne Makepeace