

A DREAM FOR THE NUBA: THE BISHOP MUBARAK SCHOLARSHIP FUND FOR NUBA WOMEN. Lillian Craig Harris.

In 1996 when my husband was British Ambassador to Sudan we travelled to the Nuba Mountains of South Kordofan with Bishop Kurkeil Mubarak Khamis of the Episcopal Church of Sudan. During the past nearly 20 years of civil war, half the Nuba population of some two million people had been killed or displaced. Land confiscations, collection of people into "peace villages" and the total collapse of the education system added to the miseries of great poverty and hunger.

Bishop Mubarak had in his youth been a champion of Nuba wrestling and was very popular among his people. As we journeyed from El Obeid south to Kadugli, capital of the Nuba Mountains, and then back, visiting village after ruined village, his great concern for the people was evident. When people heard our vehicles coming they ran from their huts into the rakuuba which served as a church and waited for us, singing loudly. It didn't matter that some were Christians, some Muslims and some followers of traditional religions. All welcomed us.

The Nuba are like that. They understand that religion should not be a cause for arguments but rather for working together to help others. In fact, Muslims and Christians live happily together in many Nuba families. Often after the meeting there would be dancing. The Nuba are like that, too, I discovered. Whether they are happy, angry, hungry or heartbroken they express themselves through dancing.

During that week of travel with Bishop Mubarak we met hundreds of ragged, sickly people, mostly women and children. The men were either dead or off fighting. Yet we still also found great hospitality and kindness in the typical Sudanese manner. And everywhere we listened to life stories filled with terrible pain and suffering.

Bishop Mubarak wisely recognised that if I could connect with the Nuba women in their suffering, I would never be able to forget them. So at the village of Delami he ordered me to speak to them and afterwards they came up one by one and hugged me as we all wept. I felt terrible because there was very little I could do to help them. I couldn't stop the war or change the conditions under which they lived. I could not bring back their dead husbands and fathers. Sadly, I returned to Khartoum.

A few months later Bishop Mubarak died of cancer in Khartoum and I decided to use his name to set up a scholarship fund for Nuba women, perhaps 90 percent of whom are illiterate. Education was what the displaced Nuba women living in squatter settlements around Khartoum told me they needed most "so that we can be able to help ourselves". The Bishop Mubarak Scholarship Fund for Nuba Women [BMF] started in 1996 paying tuition for two young Nuba women at Ahfad University in Omdurman. Growth has been

very rapid as Sudanese Muslims and Christians work together to build peace through education.

Ceasefire in the Nuba Mountains since 2002 has given new opportunity to the Bishop Mubarak Fund. By April there will be 30 BMF university graduates, many of whom hope to return to the Nuba Mountains as teachers. From June BMF will be running 30 women's literacy classes in the Khartoum area and in South Kordofan. By July BMF will have nearly 150 BMF scholars at university in Sudan, both Nuba and other displaced Sudanese. And in this coming year BMF will pay the salaries of more than 60 teachers in basic self-help schools for the displaced. Sometimes the offer of teachers salaries in a Nuba village has even contributed to start up of a school under a tree while the mothers hurry to build a straw shelter as a classroom!

BMF is also setting up an AIDS Orphans Scholarship Project and is working with Sudanese doctors in Khartoum on a plan to upgrade medical training in South Kordofan. Meanwhile BMF's sister charity Together for Sudan, which I also direct, is supporting education by providing school breakfasts, solar lighting panels, eye glasses and medicines.

Working now in London to raise money for the Bishop Mubarak Fund and Together for Sudan, I am amazed by all this. For the rest of my life I shall be deeply grateful to Bishop Mubarak for his dream that the Nuba people could be helped to help themselves. Like the old song says, "You got to have a dream! If you don't have a dream, how you going to have a dream come true?" Visit our website at www.bishopmubarakfund.org.uk!