**The Art of Inclusion Episode 1 – Fair Gone**

**Speakers: Andrew Maxwell, Nyadol Nyuon, Tim Soutphommasane**

**FULL TRANSCRIPT**

Nyadol: I was getting towards the end of my high school education and I thought well if I don't get out of here there's just not many options and I really wanted to pursue further studies. I was quite excited to come and I just remember praying each night and just negotiating with God. I would be like, “Well if I make it to Australia I promise I'll be a good Christian, and I promise I'll always listen to mum”. And I made all these promises in exchange that if I ever make it to Australia, you know, God will never regret it because I'm going to take every opportunity.

Andrew: This is Nyadol Nuyan talking about her dream of rising from the hardship that marked her early life. Like she said, she wants to be a good Christian, listen to her mum, and take every opportunity that comes her way. But here's the thing, Nyadol is a member of Australia's South Sudanese community and if you've been following the news lately, well you’ll know it’s at the centre of the African gangs’ narrative. A community full of crime, chaos, and people on the wrong side of the law, right?

I'm Andrew Maxwell and I would like to acknowledge and pay my respects to the traditional custodians of this land. To the elders past, present and their descendants on whose country this recording is taking place. This is the Art of Inclusion, a podcast from Diversity Council Australia or DCA. In this six-part series, we peer into the lives of fascinating people whose stories shed light on the wider social issues facing Australia today. We flipped the script on who we include, who we don't, and how we can all do better. In this episode we follow Nyadol Nuyan, a softly spoken Sudanese born woman with a story that might just make you reconsider what you think you know about African Australians.

Nyadol: I was actually born in a refugee camp in [unclear 00:02:04] and at some point, I'm not sure when, I got separated from my mother and I ended up with family members and extended family members in Kakuma refugee camp. Kakuma is in the Northern part of Kenya, did most of my primary school in Kakuma and a little bit out of Kakuma in a place called Lodwar which is about an hour out of Kakuma and then a while after that I ended up living in Nairobi the capital for a while, but then returned to Kakuma when my father was killed in 1996. So when my dad was killed there, it was hard to sustain the family that was in Nairobi because everybody depended on him. By that time my mum was in Ethiopia with the rest of my family and so she had to come and take me because the whole family was kind of separated.

So the first time I'd seen her I think was just shortly after my dad had passed away so when I first saw her she was crying, I mean she cried and I can remember vividly the scene. Like she had me and she was on her knees in the dirt just crying. I remember I think after that going back to school and working really hard and I remember actually scoring a perfect score in English. I remember, and I think that's probably one of the things that I identify strongly as getting from my mum that sense that education is extremely important.

Andrew: This commitment to education and learning English paid off. After gaining sponsorship through a family member in 2005, Nyadol finally made it to Australian shores as a refugee but there were challenges.

Nyadol: There's just expectations that kid that came from a refugee or a migrant background wouldn't be able to excel in certain things. So there was already assumptions about how well I could do in certain subjects, what subject I should be allowed to study for example. And I was actively encouraged to not do certain subjects because there are things, you know, some teachers assumed that I would struggle. I just recall towards the end of my year 12 just feeling a sense of defeat. I just gave up, I thought oh maybe they're right, maybe, you know, I really can't do this.

Andrew: Hello I'm Andrew Maxwell from Diversity Council Australia I'm here to see Tim Soutphommasane.

Tim: Let's think of what we mean by multiculturalism.

Andrew: Tim Soutphommasane, political philosopher, race expert and outgoing race discrimination commissioner.

Tim: We're very comfortable and relaxed about our diversity if we're talking about foods and lifestyle. That's what multiculturalism means for so many of us. If that's all that diversity means then we're not going to get very far. So the challenge here is to move beyond food and festival, to think of whether we are living up to our values as a society that's committed to equality and the fair go. That equality and that commitment to fairness should be translated in how we give opportunities to those from different cultural backgrounds in the workplace and whether they have the right prospects for success in their professional and working lives.

Nyadol: I think that's the problem about terms like integration and assimilation. The African gang one is a clear example where because people happen to look like me commit crimes therefore people who happen to look like me are likely to commit crimes are un-Australian we don't get the protection that are guaranteed in some of the assumptions and principles we hold. Like the idea that, you know, we treat people as individuals for example, and everybody should be punished individually, when we shouldn't collectively. It is as if to be embraced to be Australian you constantly have to be perfect, you have to be succeeding, you constantly have to be grateful.

Tim: We've seen a more challenging environment merge in the last few years. We have seen the rise of far-right political movements across the world, the election of Donald Trump as president, we've seen the UK vote to leave the European Union on the back of a referendum campaign that essentially turned the question into a referendum about immigration.

Andrew: In 2011, Nyadol travelled to South Sudan to vote in a national referendum on the country's independence. It was here she felt the long arm of the law tapping her on the shoulder.

Nyadol: My little sister calls me and she says, you crazy woman, you actually got in to Melbourne Uni. I remember just jumping up and down and all I could remember was neighbours peeping through their doors, like window looking at this 6 foot woman, jumping up and down and screaming at the top of her lungs, because I always wanted to do law and I remember when I was 14 in Kakuma actually saying "I'm going to be a lawyer."

Andrew: Today Nyadol is an advocate and associate at a prominent Melbourne law firm. Hers is at the brush with the law the media tend to report.

So now that we've met Nyadol, where does she fit into the scary stuff you see on the nightly news?

Tim: It's been concerning to see the public commentary about so-called African youth crime crisis in particular in Melbourne and the South Sudanese community being singled out in much of that commentary and debate. The statistics don't appear to support any objective crisis occurring.

This has got all the hallmarks of panic and anxiety that has accompanied just about every wave of refugee resettlement in Australia. You can go back even further and think about the reception that refugees from Europe would have received in the 1950s and 60s. I would encourage people to think about how quickly the transformation occurred for Italian and Greek migrants or for Vietnamese refugees in Australia. But also remember that it's not good enough to believe that there must be a rite of initiation where every new arrival group has to cop a baptism of fire.

Andrew: Just imagine for a minute picking up a paper and seeing yourself as some kind of demon, criminal, deviant. Nyadol doesn't have to imagine.

Nyadol: You know as a black woman that some of the men, a lot of the thing has just been purely racist, you know, for them, they’re just like whatever for me I'm a black bitch. There is a secondary element to it as well. Being called ugly and fat, we see why men from your community go and marry other people because look at you, who would want to marry someone like you. It's actually quite heavy, I mean I remember the first time since coming to Australia after I'd given a speech at a rally looking around to make sure that I wasn't being followed.

Some of the hate that was directed towards me and online made me question my own safety, made me feel concerned for my safety. Just being a little bit more conscious of my environment particularly when I was with my daughter, just making sure, because you never know. I mean, someone that hasn't really met you is ready to go online and threaten to kill you.

Words are important, we know that as a fact, words are so important. When we use words in a particular way or a combination of words in a particular way, we're trying to create a particular image or send a particular message. That for someone who is just writing a paper cannot take into account the consequences that flow through the Sudanese community. For the African communities, the consequences of heightened discrimination at workplaces for example. The harassment we get on the street because people treat Sudanese or Africans as a lump, a single group because of those kind of terminologies and the hate it can generate.

Andrew: For Nyadol, what is it like to live between cultures?

Nyadol: I came back and I landed at Melbourne Airport. I think for the first time I'm actually travelling on an Australian passport and the lady at the airport said "welcome home." I remember feeling a sense of yes, this is actually home I'm so glad to be back in Melbourne and to go back to my bed and the security and the comfort because there is this kind of freedom and this kind of self expression that I could only really exercise here. I remember shortly after that comment "welcome home" and the happiness of finally having a home, feeling a sense of betrayal as well because I felt wow, just how can this feel like home so soon.

I mean my father died fighting for an entirely different country and my mum dedicated most of her childhood to political process in South Sudan and to now for this to feel home, and it felt as if I had betrayed my own history.

Andrew: In Australia, where almost half of our population were born overseas or had parents born overseas, we have an opportunity. Start conversations away from headlines and enjoy one of the most ethnically diverse populations in the world. Here's Tim again.

Tim: We should do diversity better not only because it's the morally right thing to do or because there's a civic purpose behind it. We should just be doing it because it's the smart thing to do and there’s a payoff for anyone who's serious about getting their organisation and their teams to perform better. We know there are studies that have been done which clearly demonstrate that having diversity in your decision-making teams or in your executive teams will make a material difference to your performance or at least there's a very strong correlation between diversity and performance.

McKinsey have done two studies on this. The first study a few years ago found that the top 25% of international companies ranked on racial diversity were 35% more likely to outperform the national mean on profitability. They did this exercise again and they found that there was a 33% greater likelihood with the top quartile of companies on racial diversity.

Andrew: So how can we do cultural diversity better?

Tim: Look conversations are really important, how you talk about difference is crucial. The first thing that I would suggest people who are serious about this issue think about is moving beyond colour blindness or difference blindness. This is the response that a lot of people have to ethnic and racial difference. They will say, well why do we need to talk about people's differences when at the end of the day we all bleed the same colour and we're all human beings. Race after all is a social construct, it doesn't have any biological validity. If anything, we should just have a colour blind approach and that will ensure that progress will happen.

Now I think the reality is colour blindness is a luxury that some might have which others do not. Some might be able to go and live their lives without thinking that colour matters. But if you are a member of a racial ethnic minority then you can't choose to believe that race or colour doesn't matter at all.

My second suggestion would be around listening to people's lived experience. That people give some pause when they are confronted with a different set of life experiences or hear a perspective they’re not familiar with. You can always learn something from even the most simple conversations with others. Once you appreciate people's history or perspectives you might come to evaluate or assess someone in a different way.

Andrew: And what about Nyadol’s own work as an advocate for cultural diversity?

Nyadol: It's about the question of the dignity of who you are as a human being, the dignity of your community and people who look like you. In the context of a history that has always demeaned, devalued black, brown, and non-white people. It's a very hard, hard one. I feel maybe there's a duty not just as a Sudanese, not just as black person, we should stand up for what is right, but also because I think I'm Australian. This is my country too.

Multiculturalism is not something that you can take for granted, it's something I think we all collectively continue working at.

Andrew: I'm your host Andrew Maxwell and this has been a podcast from DCA. Produced by Andrea Maltman, and executive produced by Lisa Annese with contributions from Catherine Petterson, DCA's communications director.

You can keep the conversation going by reaching out on our Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter pages. If you like what you heard, subscribe to future episodes of the Art of Inclusion, either from the DCA website, dca.org.au, or from your favourite podcast player. On our website you can access related DCA research, knowledge programs, and synopsis reports on a range of topics including cracking the glass cultural ceiling, unconscious bias, leading in the Asian century and words at work. Thanks for listening and I'll catch you in the next episode when this happens.

Teaser: I'm not sure if I remember the very first time I accessed the men's bathroom, but I can remember the times that I accessed the men's bathroom and it's again a little bit like that feeling like you're a spy. You know, what’s the etiquette? How do I navigate kind of the space and being really acutely conscious of the “I’m going to get sprung”.

**END OF TRANSCRIPT**