

Address by

**Elizabeth Ho**, Director of the Hawke Centre and Deputy Chair of the Migrant Resource Centre of SA

At the opening of SA Refugee week and launch of biography of Ben Yengi by Sandra Lindemann - '**To the Beat of his own Drum**'.

*Kerry Packer Civic Gallery, Hawke Building  
15 June 2009*

Welcome all to the University of South Australia and the Hawke Centre.

May I add my recognition of the Kaurna people to those already expressed and also thank Hieu Van Le for being with us today....

I was trying to remember when I first became aware of Ben in the Adelaide environs.

I seem to recall it was when his groundbreaking work at the University of Adelaide in the Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music was being noted around town as a wonderful addition to the efforts to recognise the depth and complexity of the oldest continuous culture in the world. The culture which eighteenth and nineteenth century Europeans, bar a few, had nullified as they occupied land and pursued their dreams – many of them having been displaced over time from their own havens in the Northern hemisphere.

I also remember drums and this marvellous, joyous and insistent presence of a natural leader, determined to express his culture and share its richness with the whitefellas around him; a man always appealing to the commonality and the shared humanity of the throng and convincing in all of his efforts.

I also hold in my memory the power of the smile. Behind it much was going on. Making sure that you were comfortable, making sure that what he needed to express and have understood was transmitted, the urgency of his enthusiasm for life and the warmth of sincerity in his clasp.

But really I did not know Ben's story except in the most rudimentary of ways, and as an observer in the cocoon of a privileged and safe setting. While I was the Adelaide daughter of Liverpoolian parents who had themselves suffered the impact of World War One and the depression and survived through World War II and losing a child, they had afterwards given me the jewel of a safe and happy upbringing in a far corner of the earth.

I knew the costs of war but I did not understand the particular complexities of Sudanese politics, nor the foolishness of colonial line drawing on the maps of Africa that split whole communities and consigned the futures of their sons and daughters to constant turmoil in one fell stroke of the pen. For greed, or out of ignorance or for their own ease – whatever the reason – those decisions were disastrous in their reach and effect and Ben was one among many in the flock who was wounded by this scattergun approach of colonial lords.

Ben's story is rich in so many ways. Rich in its demonstration of the stupidity of war as it is in its revelations of personal determination and triumph. Working in a university I am particularly struck by the account of his quest to seek an education against the backdrop of a refugee existence that had few moments of stability, over several years.

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But his education was rich too.

A member of the Kuku division of the Bari tribe of southern Sudan, Ben spent his childhood years hunting with bows and arrows, tending his tribe's cattle and learning traditional drumming and drum-making. From the age of twelve, he attended Christian missionary schools and made good progress, but his education was interrupted by the outbreak of civil war when he was forced to flee the country. Once in exile, the quest for education became the driving force of his life. The fact that it was a young Adelaide student called Alan Hutton who sponsored his later *education and eventually supported him coming to Australia brought tears to my eyes when I read the full account in the book*, and Alan's actions ought to be a source of great pride to all South Australians.

This expose of Ben's life takes us through his life in Africa and Australia, pointing out the way in which Ben made the very best of the opportunities that he came across, including the period when 'multicultural' became the watchword for describing the new age of being Australian.

And in the 1990s, when issues concerning migrants and refugees were being hotly debated in Australia, Ben was again making his contribution, going straight to the heart of the matter by providing practical help for new arrivals as Chair of the Migrant Resource Centre of SA. The value of his work was recognised in 2001 when he was awarded the Order of Australia Medal for his services to migrants, multiculturalism and the arts, and again in 2003 when he was awarded the Centennial Medal for services to the community through refugee services. Ben himself is a living example of the valuable contributions that can be made by individual migrants and refugees in Australia.

In 2001 when our University announced that Nelson Mandela was to be international patron of the Hawke Centre it was Ben and his group who performed on the drums at the Town Hall and delivered the exuberance through music that we all felt about this wonderful news.

In August 2007, Ben, together with his wife, Emma and their two young children, relocated to Lijo where they will stay on and off for the next five years to oversee a range of KADI projects, including the establishment of modern communication systems, and the building of an education centre, an AIDS education and treatment centre and a general hospital. As well, Emma will oversee the establishment of an incorporated organisation called Circle of Trees, dedicated to the enhancement of the natural environment and the preservation of indigenous wildlife—particularly orphaned chimpanzees—in collaboration with the 'Roots and Shoots' program founded by primatologist, Jane Goodall. I encourage you to find out more about Kadi and to help Ben with his quest to give back to his birthplace and those in need.

I want to thank author of this book –To the Beat of his own Drum - Sandra Lindemann - for faithfully filling in the gaps that existed in my knowledge of Ben and his fascinating and worthwhile life in such an informative and sensitive way.

Sandra has been careful to reflect Ben in a very immediate and tangible fashion, and this is part of the strength of this book.

I suspect for many who have encountered Ben in their lifetimes, we have instinctively known that his lust for life and for connecting positively with those around him springs from a very deep place of facing difficulty, setbacks and suffering - Sandra has ably confirmed our suspicions.

Ben has received many forms of recognition for his contribution to his other home Australia. Perhaps none so great as being made an elder of the Pitjantjatjara people – and thus of one of the oldest surviving cultures in the world.

To understand his journey is to understand the journey of so many to this country, and why ....

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In SA Refugee Week I feel the best way we can now honour his achievements, is to understand our new refugees, and to find ways in our lives that we can honour their struggles and support them. That is why we are here today and why this book is being launched now.

Your reading of it will bring you to a deeper and wider level of understanding about the true nature of refugee experience and I commend it to you.

## **TO THE BEAT OF HIS OWN DRUM The Ben Yengi Story**

### **SYNOPSIS**

Ben Yengi is the founder of the Kajokeji Australian Development Initiative (KADI), an incorporated organisation established to support the rebuilding of his childhood village of Lijo in the Kajokeji region of South Sudan following the declaration of peace in the region. Ben has lived in Adelaide since his arrival as a student refugee in 1970 and he is well known in South Australia as a musician, a teacher, community leader and philanthropist.

A member of the Kuku division of the Bari tribe of southern Sudan, Ben spent his childhood years hunting with bows and arrows, tending his tribe's cattle and learning traditional drumming and drum-making. From the age of twelve, he attended Christian missionary schools and made good progress, but his education was interrupted by the outbreak of civil war when he was forced to flee the country. Once in exile, the quest for education became the driving force of his life.

When it seemed he could go no further, Ben took up a teaching position in Uganda. But he never lost sight of his dream of a university education. The opportunity came when he met a young Australian backpacker who offered to sponsor him to study in Australia. There he went on to fulfil his dream, completing both graduate and postgraduate degrees in Education.

Ben found a place for himself, not only within the white mainstream community, but also within the local urban Aboriginal community. When he later encountered the Pitjantjatjara speaking tribal people of outback Indulkana, they welcomed him warmly, ultimately recognising him as a tribal elder. As well, he became part of Adelaide's small but thriving multicultural arts community. But while he was happy to be accepted, Ben always retained his traditional tribal values, especially those concerned with equity and social justice. It was the strength of these values, coupled with skills gained through his experiences as a refugee, that enabled Ben to contribute to his new community in unique, sometimes surprising, always practical ways.

In the early 1970s, Ben was appointed to a practical role in a program concerned with the restoration and development of Aboriginal music. When, as part of the program, Pitjantjatjara tribal elders started coming to the city to present their music to Adelaide schoolchildren, it was Ben, with his reassuring and disarming smile, who met them at the bus stop and drove them around. When the first Aboriginal rock and roll bands began to emerge out of Adelaide, Ben was there again, giving encouragement and support. And when Aboriginal musicians began to travel further afield, to take their music to the world, it was Ben who made the bookings, organised itineraries, and sometimes even accompanied the musicians on their travels. He also took his band of African musicians into the outback to perform for the local people, and was later invited to participate in certain Pitjantjatjara ceremonies, an honour he greatly appreciated.

In the 1980s, as multiculturalism was beginning to evolve as a way of life in Australia, starting with an initial focus on cuisine and the arts, Ben was right there in the middle of it, proudly singing, dancing,

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playing his drums, a lively example and advocate. He opened Adelaide's first African restaurant and featured prominently in the exciting and colourful cultural music festivals that were the forerunners of such popular contemporary events as WOMADelaide.

And in the 1990s, when issues concerning migrants and refugees were being hotly debated in Australia, Ben was again making his contribution, going straight to the heart of the matter by providing practical help for new arrivals. The value of his work was recognised in 2001 when he was awarded the Order of Australia Medal for his services to migrants, multiculturalism and the arts, and again in 2003 when he was awarded the Centennial Medal for services to the community through refugee services. Ben himself is a living example of the valuable contributions that can be made by individual migrants and refugees in Australia.

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There is much to do but, with the help of his family, friends and supporters, Ben will tackle it with his usual energy and enthusiasm. As he continues on his journey through life, Ben Yengi sets goals and makes choices according to his long held traditional tribal values. He moves at his own pace and to his own rhythm, travelling always to the beat of his own drum.

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