

REFUGE

Background

Ibrahim is a 45-year-old refugee from Ghana with advanced cancer of the kidney that had spread to his bones. Ibrahim migrated to the UK in the 1980s, as a part of a cohort of Ghanaians escaping political persecution. In Ibrahim's words "I was in trouble with the authorities. I knew if I didn't move out of the country I would either lose my peace or my life altogether". Life had not been easy for Ibrahim in the UK. He used to work long hours in a shop that he ran with his partner. He lost the business when he became ill. Ibrahim worried about the future of his partner and 16-month-old baby and how his extended family and two children in Ghana would survive after his death without his regular remittances.

This case story can be used to think about the complicated meanings of home for refugees as well as the practical, cultural and emotional circumstances and constraints that can be a part of end of life wishes and plans.

It had taken the doctors almost a year to find the cancer in his left kidney. When they had removed the diseased organ, Ibrahim had believed them that the cancer had gone. So it was a shock when six months later they found that it had spread to his bones. He chooses his words carefully. He is not sure why it turned out like this. Perhaps he should have asked more questions, insisted on other medical opinions?

"When you come here as a foreigner, you tend to think that you don't have that much choice. I mean, whatever you're presented with, you feel you must accept. Like even you guys who are born here, you can question things, you know, insist on your rights and all sorts of things. We can't do that. Back home if I'm faced with the same kind of doctors, my attitude towards them would be different."

These past weeks she had watched him trying to put things in order. He'd taken to writing lists on small blue-lined cards, left over from his ruined shop. There were lists of the bills to be paid, how much money should be sent to Ghana each month, what food they should buy for the week ahead. He seemed calm, thorough.

Only the nurses knew how Ibrahim would lie awake at night, unable to sleep, turning things around in his mind. How would they survive without him and without any money? What would happen to the baby? If the boy grew up here, his Ghanaianess would melt away. What would be left?

In was on one of those sleepless nights that the plan began to take form. He wanted to be buried in Ghana he told her. It had been impossible for him to return before. He would have endangered others. But despite everything, Ghana was still his home. If he could be buried there, it would give his baby a connection. He could go to the grave and be able to say, "There's my dad."

But it did not happen like that. There was no money to take him back to Ghana and the family needed to survive.

She often thinks about them. She has promised herself that she will visit Ghana one day.

Tutor Guide

You can use this story to:

- think about and discuss experiences of social pain among refugees
- encourage students to think beyond literal interpretations of end of life plans and to consider how the pain of social exclusion can be expressed in last wishes
- explore Ibrahim's ambivalent feelings of exile from and belonging to Ghana and how he tries to resolve these feelings in his burial plan
- talk about the emotional impact for professionals of witnessing social pain and unfulfilled end of life plans

Activity

Working in pairs or in a small group, ask participants the following questions:

Can you identify and describe how pain and loss are expressed in the story?

What are the different ways in which we can interpret Ibrahim's plan to be buried in Ghana?

In what ways might being a refugee affect the plan?

Who do you think the narrator is? What emotions is the narrator feeling? How might s/he be supported?

Comment

Ibrahim's story includes different types of social pain with different causes and histories. For example:

- his experience of diagnosis and feeling unable to question his doctors because he is a 'foreigner'
- his poverty, worries about money and the future financial security of his family
- his anxiety that his son will have no sense of his Ghanaian identity if he remains in the UK after Ibrahim's death

There are a number of ways of interpreting Ibrahim's wish to be buried in Ghana. It could be a part of Ibrahim's need to establish posthumous 'continuing bonds' between father and son and of trying to ensure a future connection to Ghana for his baby.

We could also see Ibrahim's wishes anthropologically, as shaped by cultural death rituals.

Might Ibrahim's fear that his son could 'melt away' in the UK be related to Ibrahim's difficult emotions and experiences of Ghana as a home? As a political refugee whose life was threatened in Ghana, Ibrahim was not able to visit the country. Might his burial plan be an expression of 'cultural bereavement'?

Cultural Bereavement: a definition

Eisenbruch has defined cultural bereavement as:

"...the experience of the uprooted person - or group - resulting from loss of social structures, cultural values and self-identity: the person - or group - continues to live in the past, is visited by supernatural forces from the past while asleep or awake, suffers feelings of guilt over abandoning culture and homeland, feels pain if memories of the past begin to fade, but finds constant images of the past (including traumatic images) intruding into daily life, yearns to complete obligations to the dead, and feels stricken by anxieties, morbid thoughts, and anger that mar the ability to get on with daily life."

Eisenbruch M. (1991) From post-traumatic stress disorder to cultural bereavement: diagnosis of Southeast Asian refugees. *Social Science and Medicine* 33, pp. 673-680.

